

1           **Recommended Proposed Social Statement for ELCA Churchwide Assembly '25 action**

2  
3    *A social statement on:*

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

5  
6    *[Note to reader: This is NOT official ELCA teaching but has been recommended by the Church Council*  
7    *for adoption by the 2025 Churchwide Assembly. The annotated guide to content here allows readers*  
8    *to move easily to specific topics if they wish. It is not a summary of each article or of the whole. The*  
9    *items in yellow highlight indicate internal links that are intended but not yet inserted.*

10  
11                   **An Annotated Guide to Content**

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

13  
14    **Introduction**

15    **Article 1** “Your will be done on earth as in heaven.” These familiar words from the Lord’s Prayer remind  
16    Christians that God is at work in caring for all creation, and they call us to strive to understand and join in  
17    that work. This social statement provides a comprehensive Lutheran view of civic life toward that  
18    purpose. [Page 6]

19  
20    **Section I. Foundational Teaching: God Acts for the Well-being of All Through Civic Life**

21    **Article 2** The Scriptures teach that all power arises from God and that God’s purpose is *shalom*, the well-  
22    being of all creation. For human beings, this means that all our activity is accountable to God’s power  
23    and purpose and that no earthly power should replace God as the aim of our trust and worship. [Page 6]

24    **Article 3** From the first chapters of Genesis onward, the Scriptures make clear that all human beings bear  
25    the image of God, which includes being social and political creatures. For civic life, this means that all  
26    people are called to participate in God’s work of fostering the well-being of creation through social and  
27    political communities. [Page 7]

28    **Article 4** The Scriptures teach that human sin warps the image of God that every human bears. Human  
29    sin includes distorting God’s gift of society through individual practices, institutions, and systems so that  
30    they are not used for the common good of all neighbors. [Page 8]

31    **Article 5** Lutherans teach that, as God comes to us, humans come to know both their sin and God’s  
32    many, many gifts. What does this mean for us as Christians? God’s response to sin includes the gifts of  
33    Law (God’s directives) and Gospel (God’s grace revealed in Christ), which are both strategies God uses to  
34    seek the well-being of humanity and all creation. [Page 9]

35    **Article 6** People of faith approach the present world with trust in God and, at the same time, with  
36    measured realism and humility about human efforts to create a just society. God’s people live in the  
37    “now but not yet” of God’s reign and know that no person, community, or society is without sin. For civic  
38    life, this means that Christians are called to both engage in bringing about a better world and be vigilant  
39    in regard to any earthly arrangement. [Page 10]

40    **Article 7** Christians and Christian church structures, too, are subject to sin and, too often, have failed to  
41    prioritize efforts toward the common social good. For our participation in civic life at this time, this  
42    means that Christ’s church should acknowledge the need to repent for the harm caused by past and  
43    present action or inaction and should strive to take appropriate actions today. Such accountability is an  
44    important condition of striving toward the common good and the well-being of creation. [Page 11]

45 **Article 8** God provides an abundance of human capacities such as reason, imagination, experience, and  
46 emotion for use toward seeking healthy civic life. We are to use these through communal discernment to  
47 determine what will further the well-being of society here and now. [Page 11]

48 **Article 9** The gifts of God for the good of civic life are available to all people, and the Scriptures  
49 accordingly instruct all to do justice and to walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). Christians do not have  
50 privileged knowledge about civic life but rely on good reasoning and welcome the good ideas and  
51 contributions of all people who seek to bring about well-being in society. [Page 12]

## 52

### 53 **Section II. God Calls All People to Robust Civic Participation**

54 **Article 10** Civic life includes all activities and institutions enabling life in public community, from the local  
55 to the international. Our church affirms that anyone contributing to a community's well-being through  
56 civic participation is using gifts provided by God, knowingly or not. The ELCA celebrates the many ways in  
57 which God calls people into lives of service for the good of the community. [Page 13]

58 **Article 11** The ELCA affirms that civic service is a valued and dignified way to carry out God's calling. This  
59 means that the public's default stance toward those engaged in public service should be one of respect  
60 but also that civic leaders and officials are accountable for the ways they fail to work for the good of all.  
61 [Page 14]

62 **Article 12** The church's worshiping assemblies are rooted in Word and Sacrament. Worship, from  
63 gathering to sending, prepares and encourages us to join God's activity in civic life. [Page 14]

64 **Article 13** Religious traditions can offer gifts of vision and compassion sorely needed in contemporary  
65 civic life but can also be unproductively divisive, even damaging. This means that religious people must  
66 discern carefully how best to engage in civic life to promote justice and reconciliation. [Page 15]

67 **Article 14** Our church teaches that there is no person for whom Christ did not die and that, in baptism,  
68 Christians are made one people in Christ. This means that we should seek to create Christian  
69 communities of moral discernment even when, and especially when, we have disagreements. [Page 15]

70 **Article 15** The ELCA has a long-standing commitment to engage civic life through its members,  
71 congregations, synods, the churchwide organization, and church-related institutions. Foundational  
72 aspects of what that means were addressed initially in the social statement *The Church in Society: A*  
73 *Lutheran Perspective* (1991). [Page 16]

74 **Article 16** The Scriptures teach that following Jesus includes a prophetic dimension, which lifts up a  
75 vision of social well-being. This means Christians are to act in civic life for the benefit of the neighbor,  
76 especially our marginalized or oppressed neighbors. We should evaluate actions and policies according  
77 to whether they best serve the needs of these neighbors as a guide to determining the common good.  
78 [Page 16]

79 **Article 17** The varied forms of advocacy discussed in this article, including faith-based organizing, can  
80 play a transformative role in a polarized political world by bringing people together in discernment and  
81 action for the common good. [Page 17]

82 **Article 18** The Lutheran tradition teaches that God creates humans as political beings and that political  
83 authority is, in principle, God's gift. This church believes that political decisions must be guided by well-  
84 considered ethics. "Politics," properly understood, means negotiating how the benefits, burdens, rights,  
85 and responsibilities of living in a society are shared. Politics and ethics are necessarily related. Ethics  
86 discerns; politics implements. [Page 18]

87 **Article 19** Jesus was not political in the sense of affiliating with a particular political party or ideology. At  
88 the same time, when Christians affirm that "Jesus is Lord" (Romans 10:9), it is a political as well as a  
89 theological claim. This affirmation pulls Christians into civic and political life as Jesus was, so that they  
90 might love and serve neighbor justice. At the same time, Jesus is Lord means Christians cannot give their  
91 primary loyalty to *any* government, nation, civic order, or individuals. [Page 19]

92 **Article 20** Baptism includes a commitment to participate in civic life. The public role of rostered ministers  
93 in the church produces unique opportunities and challenges for their civic leadership and participation.  
94 This article provides guiding reflections as they seek to live out their calling. [Page 19]  
95

### 96 **Section III. Assessing the U.S. Constitutional Form of Government**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

123 **Article 28** The U.S. sovereign is not “we the Christians” but “we the people.” The U.S. governing  
124 structure and authority is not fundamentally Christian in origin, structure, or intent. [Page 27]  
125

### 126 **Section IV. Religion and the First Amendment**

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

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

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

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

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

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

145  
146 **Section V. Constructive Relationships Between Religious Organizations and Political Authority**

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

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

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

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

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

169  
170 **Section VI. Selected Contemporary Concerns in Civic Life**

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

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

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

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

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

188 ensuring that all voices are heard, which strengthens democracy. New legislation is needed for these  
189 purposes. [Page 40]

190 **Article 44** Governmental policies can harm or promote the well-being of society and creation. Public  
191 servants, citizens, and residents have a duty to ensure that government remains true to its purpose of  
192 fostering civic well-being. This statement identifies principles for and questions to be asked of laws,  
193 regulations, and policies toward that end. [Page 42]

194 **Article 45** The U.S. government's relationships with the nation's unincorporated territories and with the  
195 District of Columbia are complex and problematic. These problems stem, significantly, from a legacy of  
196 colonialism and issues of economic exploitation, lack of self-determination, and racism. The principle of  
197 mutual self-determination requires listening as a first step toward justice and healing. [Page 42]

198 **Article 46** The ELCA laments the past and continuing mistreatment of American Indian, Alaska Native and  
199 Native Hawaiian people, which often has included explicitly Christian justification. This social statement  
200 calls for increased advocacy toward tribal sovereignty, self-determination, just policy for treaty rights,  
201 and the exercise of religious liberty. [Page 43]

202 **Article 47** Comprehensive civics education is critical to healthy civic life. The ELCA calls for a renewed  
203 emphasis on civic education that includes a full rendering of the United States' successes and failures,  
204 abuses and aspirations. [Page 45]

205 **Article 48** The ELCA urges vigorous civic engagement for the public good as a responsibility of all U.S.  
206 residents *and* as one of our Christian callings. [Page 45]

207

## 208 **Conclusion**

209 **Article 49** May God's Word and Sacraments empower all people in this church to seek the well-being of  
210 the neighbor through active and faithful participation in civic life. [Page 46]

211

212 **Glossary** [Page 46]

213

214 **Implementing Resolutions** [Page 51]

215 *A social statement on*

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

217 Terms underlined in the text are defined in the glossary.

218  
219  
220

### 221 **Introduction**

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

227

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

233

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

239

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

246

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

248

249 **Article 2** The Scriptures tell us that “the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it” (Psalm 24:1) and reveal  
250 God’s tender care for all creation (Psalm 145:15). In the Scriptures, the Hebrew word shalom<sup>3</sup> epitomizes  
251 the rich fullness of that loving aim of the Creator for all creation. *Shalom* describes God’s intention in

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<sup>1</sup> 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.”

<sup>2</sup> ELCA social teaching documents can be found at [elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements](http://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.”

<sup>3</sup> 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.

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

256  
257 The ELCA witnesses to the Holy Trinity in the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, whose power is  
258 expressed in offering abundant life now and eternally. We teach that God is all-powerful in that only  
259 God is the source of *all* power. God’s power alone brings forth and sustains the universe, redeems the  
260 sinner, and promises creation’s ultimate fulfillment.

261  
262 In God’s activity toward the well-being of all, we encounter a use of power that is unlike many human  
263 practices of power (Matthew 20:25-26). God is sovereign, but God’s sovereignty gives power to  
264 creatures rather than deprives them of it. In contrast to the usual political “zero-sum” understanding of  
265 power, God gives freely, sharing abundantly without loss. God’s sovereign power produces human  
266 power; it does not diminish it. However, humans are given their power in order to serve God, creation,  
267 and their fellow humans (articles xx, 22).

268  
269 God’s power is often hidden from human view and experienced in varied and surprising ways that can  
270 be beautiful or painful. Sometimes God’s power is experienced as disruption and judgment. It can be  
271 experienced as the tearing down of human structures and of misplaced values (Jeremiah 6:14).

272  
273 This is described by Martin Luther’s teaching about the struggles of faith and the “theology of the cross.”  
274 Whereas human beings expect domination, God’s power appears in weakness (1 Corinthians 1:25).  
275 When we are overly confident, God unsettles our presumptions. In the light of faith, we are empowered  
276 to see the future of God’s fulfillment, and we see that God’s purpose and power always move toward  
277 the divine promise of the well-being of all people.

278  
279 At the end of the Lord’s Prayer, we affirm that “the power, the honor and the glory are yours.” Not ours!  
280 When Christians forget that all power belongs to God and God’s purpose, they risk creating idols. These  
281 include wealth, country, race, party, gender, class, and ideology. God’s power in Jesus Christ redirects  
282 forgiven ones from such idolatry and reshapes the way we use the power entrusted to us.

283  
284 This church bears witness to God’s purpose and power in the world. We teach that human civic activity  
285 and political power are sustained by divine power and can be evaluated ethically by God’s intention that  
286 humans use, increase, and share such power so that human structures and systems serve the well-being  
287 of all with good order and justice.<sup>4</sup>

288  
289 **Article 3** The Scriptures teach that God creates human beings in God’s image, in the *imago dei* (Genesis  
290 1:27). This image is God’s gift, which means that every human being has inherent dignity and agency and  
291 a vocation to share God’s work toward the well-being of creation.<sup>5</sup> From the beginning, the Scriptures  
292 depict the human vocation as a shared activity in tending gardens, tilling soil, and building communities.  
293 These activities require cooperation, conversation, and social coordination. This church celebrates that  
294 God creates human beings as relational beings who live in social and political communities.

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<sup>4</sup> The Augsburg Confession, XVI, BC 2000, 48.

<sup>5</sup> 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](http://www.elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements).

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

299  
300 The Christian faith sees God’s power and purpose specifically revealed in the ministry, death, and  
301 resurrection of Jesus. There is no neighbor, no enemy, no politician for whom Christ did not die. The  
302 Christian practice of baptism affirms this ongoing work of Christ and its connection to the human  
303 vocation. This church teaches that “the gifts of the Spirit form and transform the people of God for  
304 discipleship in daily life.”<sup>6</sup> The baptismal liturgy includes commitments to “serve all people, following the  
305 example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.”<sup>7</sup>

306  
307 Correctly understood as a calling to serve the well-being of all, human vocation does not invite  
308 arrogance or misplaced pride, nor does it represent one’s domination of others. This vocation is lived  
309 out in the basic structures of social life as places of responsibility. Lutheran theology has referred to  
310 these places of responsibility by various terms such as “three estates,” “orderings,” and “mandates.”  
311 The point is that God acts through the basic structures of government, church, family, and economy,  
312 and that humans have varied responsibilities in each.

313  
314 All people depend upon these social structures of communal life because they provide scaffolds or sites  
315 for growth and responsibility. Because these are dynamic, the precise form, arrangement, and values  
316 vary across time and place, and they are open to ongoing revision and change.

317  
318 Within these places of responsibility, the Lutheran tradition speaks of all humans as serving in civic life  
319 as “channels of God’s work.”<sup>8</sup> God intends that humans should use their knowledge, wisdom, and power  
320 to foster the common good. When that is done by institutions through policies and regulations, or by  
321 individuals in acts of caring, humans are fulfilling their vocation to serve God’s activity in the world.

322  
323 **Article 4** God’s intention for joyous well-being is too often not enacted or experienced in the world.  
324 Many religious traditions discuss this human brokenness and disorder. The Lutheran tradition speaks of  
325 sin in various ways but fundamentally understands sin to be the condition of human existence in which  
326 we fail to love and trust God above all else. Martin Luther understood sin to be an excessive focus on  
327 the self at the expense of the neighbor.<sup>9</sup> Human sin distorts a right relationship with God and others,  
328 damaging the well-being that God intends for all creation.

329  
330 The pervasiveness and complexity of sin that damages human well-being must be recognized. Sin is  
331 present in our constant unwillingness to accept our human vocation to serve as creatures created by  
332 God. Sin can also take the insidious form of self-denial and a lack of self-love. This happens when, for  
333 example, a person diminishes their own contributions to human life or denies that they possess the  
334 ability, dignity, and value of any human being created in God’s image.

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

<sup>7</sup> “Affirmation of Baptism” in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Pew Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 236, hereafter referred to as “ELW.”

<sup>8</sup> The traditional Lutheran term for this was “masks of God,” but today that term suggests duplicity and passivity.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

335  
336 Sin is expressed both personally and collectively, which means that social and political institutions are  
337 bound in sin just as individuals are. There are a great many examples of this in civic life.

338  
339 It is sin when the power in social structures, such as government, is distorted so that it is not used for  
340 the common good of neighbors and creation (Matthew 22:36-40). For instance, the individual  
341 domination of one person by another became multiplied in the social structure of slavery, which was  
342 supported by laws, policies, religious beliefs, and cultural practices in the United States. Such systemic  
343 sins are particularly horrendous because the things done and left undone dramatically deepen the  
344 oppression of other people.

345  
346 It is sin when civic or political power is used at the expense of others. One group's self-interest cannot  
347 justify denying the humanity or dignity of others. The need for order does not justify subjugation, denial  
348 of power, marginalization, or tyranny. The need for government cannot justify the idolatrous worship of  
349 a nation.

350  
351 It also is sin when human beings completely avoid civic life and thereby do not work to serve neighbor  
352 justice through it.

353  
354 At the same time, it is sin when we support leaders who put their own power and self-interest above the  
355 needs of their constituents. It is sin when we uncritically support a member of a political party because  
356 of party affiliation or for our own personal gain. It is sin when we demonize others' motives while  
357 glorifying and sanctifying our own.

358  
359 **Article 5** Lutherans teach that people of faith come to know both sin and God's grace as God comes to  
360 us. In Christ, God reveals and gives God's divine self to restore or foster right relationships with God,  
361 with neighbors, and with our very selves. The Scriptures teach about two different strategies God uses  
362 to achieve this, and Lutherans call these "Law" and "Gospel."

363  
364 This church understands the Law (God's directives) and the Gospel (God's promises in Christ) together  
365 as expressing the living Word of God for human life and well-being. The Law addresses our relationships  
366 and actions to others in this mortal life and to God, whom we are to worship. The Gospel, by contrast,  
367 proclaims God's relationship and merciful action to us from now into eternity.

368  
369 God uses the Law to sustain life and the good of all through different functions or uses.<sup>10</sup> The civil use  
370 (first use) of the Law is to govern our behavior toward one another in human communities. In contrast,  
371 the theological use of the Law accuses and convicts human beings of sinfulness, even when a wrong is  
372 allowed by a government's law or not covered by human laws. God's directives (God's Law) are realistic  
373 about human beings. They reveal the corruption of many human motives, drive people to contrition,  
374 and prepare them for repentance.

375

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<sup>10</sup> 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.

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

381  
382 The Lutheran tradition commonly describes God’s use of these two strategies, Law and Gospel, with the  
383 analogy of God’s two-handed reign.<sup>11</sup> Through God’s “left-hand reign,” God’s power acts through the  
384 Law to curb, restrain, and lead people toward goodness and justice. Through God’s “right-hand reign,”  
385 God’s power acts through the Gospel to draw, transform, and re-create people in heart, mind, and soul.  
386 Both “hands” serve God’s intent to bring a rightly ordered life of peace and the common good.

387  
388 Though distinct in function and purpose, the Law and the Gospel are not independent, and both flow  
389 from God’s power and for God’s purposes. God’s left-hand reign should not be identified solely with  
390 political authority or the state. God’s directives encompass culture, family, economics, and all aspects of  
391 daily life.

392  
393 There is a substantive discussion of the appropriate interaction of these two strategies in the ELCA social  
394 message “Government and Civic Engagement: Discipleship in Democracy”  
395 ([www.elca.org/socialmessages](http://www.elca.org/socialmessages), p. 4). The dangers of misuse are also described there. Misuse includes  
396 believing that God’s two strategies are unrelated, that civic life and government are not God’s concern,  
397 or that a particular nation, political strategy, or civil institution is identified with God’s will or God’s  
398 kingdom.<sup>12</sup>

399  
400 **Article 6** While God’s people are called to do justice and love kindness (Micah 6:8), it is not always clear  
401 what that means in any particular situation. God’s people approach the present world with  
402 watchfulness—that is, with abounding trust in God’s reign and future and, at the same time, with  
403 measured realism and humility about human efforts, always fallible, to create a just society.

404  
405 Through faith, God’s church already takes part in the coming reign of God, announced by and embodied  
406 in Jesus. As the social statement *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective* explains, “[The church]  
407 still awaits the resurrection of the dead and the fulfillment of the whole creation in God’s promised  
408 future. In this time of ‘now ... not yet,’ the Church lives in two ages—the present age and the age to  
409 come.” In this sense, “the Church is ‘in’ the world but not ‘from’ the world.”<sup>13</sup>

410  
411 Christians are simultaneously involved in God’s work in the here-and-now and also in God’s eternal  
412 work. It is unavoidable that Christians live in the here-and-now, with all its questions, ambiguities, and  
413 tensions. Some of those ways should be affirmed as better expressions of good than others and as more  
414 productive means toward creating well-being.

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<sup>11</sup> 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).

<sup>12</sup> “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](http://www.elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-messages).

<sup>13</sup> 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](http://www.elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements).

415  
416 Neither the Law nor the Gospel allows the church to accommodate easily the ways civic life often  
417 unfolds. The presence and promise of God’s reign make the church inevitably restless and discontented  
418 with society’s continued brokenness and violence. We are called to work for a better world. This means  
419 we should support and commend civic and political efforts that bring greater measures of order, justice,  
420 and harmony. However, even those best efforts inevitably require revision and, within God’s activity,  
421 improvement. Christians are simultaneously people of hope and courage, realism and restlessness.

422  
423 **Article 7** Since the Reformation, many of the historically dominant expressions of Lutheran theology and  
424 church structures have, despite some important exceptions, failed to make a priority of seeking the civic  
425 common good. The confessions commend civic good as “the righteousness of reason.” They teach that  
426 “God requires the righteousness of reason ... [and willingly should give it] the praises it deserves for our  
427 corrupt nature has no greater good than this.”<sup>14</sup> They note that God even honors it with temporal  
428 rewards.

429  
430 A desire to avoid “works righteousness” too often excused Lutherans for passivity and the failure to act  
431 in the public arena. We have not always acted to hold governments or each other accountable. An  
432 understandable desire for security and order has led many to remain complacent or even to support  
433 oppressive regimes and systems. At other times, some Lutherans have exhibited triumphalism or  
434 intolerance in taking political action.

435  
436 This church acknowledges these past failures and is committed to renewed actions that turn toward  
437 holding civic leaders and those in positions of political authority accountable. Under normal  
438 circumstances, acting for accountability means making use of the tools of the U.S. democratic process.  
439 The concept of the consent of the governed implies an ongoing relationship between those in positions  
440 of authority and their constituents. Those in authority owe an account of how they are using that  
441 authority and the resources that have been entrusted to them.

442  
443 On occasion, holding those in authority to account may call for engaging in nonviolent public protests. In  
444 some instances, acts of nonviolent civil disobedience may be justifiable.<sup>15</sup> Even when use of these tools  
445 is necessary, such actions must always be guided by an ethic of love and a spirit of upbuilding the  
446 common good.

447  
448 **Article 8** God provides multiple tools for striving toward social well-being. Because the Scriptures are the  
449 norm for faith and life, all Christian efforts are judged according to its central proclamation. The  
450 Lutheran theological tradition also looks to the insights from writings in the Book of Concord as faithful,  
451 if historically conditioned, interpretations of the Scriptures.<sup>16</sup>

452  
453 Our church teaches that God also provides human reason as a gift to be used for seeking justice and  
454 social harmony. Lutherans have sometimes used the language of “natural law” to describe the shared  
455 values and ends that are given by God to direct all human beings, individually and collectively.

456

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<sup>14</sup> BC 2000, Apology, Article IV, 22-24, BC 2000, 124.

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

<sup>16</sup> The “Continuing Resolutions” section in the ELCA constitution calls Unaltered Augsburg Confession a “true witness” to the Scriptures (CBCR 2.05).

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

461  
462 However, the character of natural law has been misunderstood and has too often been weaponized  
463 against people deemed different, especially already marginalized and oppressed groups. This has been  
464 done by picking particular laws from the Scriptures and imposing them on others. This view misuses the  
465 function of Law in the Scriptures. Natural law is not a set of specific rules or unchanging social mores.  
466 The rightful attention to shared human principles can be only one part of the ongoing work of  
467 communal deliberation and conversation.

468  
469 The Lutheran tradition appreciates human capacities as God’s gifts. These include, for example, reason,  
470 emotion, experience, imagination, scientific fields of study .The Lutheran approach to thinking about  
471 civic life, then, employs principles of ethics and political concepts such as mutual self-determination and  
472 the common good. The Lutheran tradition recognizes that all human efforts are dimmed and distorted  
473 by sin. Nevertheless, these tools provide a common basis for Christians to work with others of goodwill  
474 toward the well-being of society.

475  
476 The social teachings of this church are normed by the Scriptures and seek to employ the many gifts of  
477 human capacities to address contemporary social life. While official teachings govern and guide this  
478 church’s positions on social questions, Lutherans recognize the possibility for continued rethinking and  
479 reconsideration through discernment as a community together.<sup>18</sup>

480  
481 **Article 9** As Lutherans participate in civic life in order to seek the well-being of all, we recognize that this  
482 work is neither unique to nor possessed by Christians alone. To “walk humbly” with God (Micah 6:8)  
483 must include seeking out the sound ideas, values, and contributions of all people, regardless of their  
484 religious tradition or worldview. The good of all must be discerned in common.<sup>19</sup>

485  
486 Christians, as individuals or as the body of Christ in the world, have no guaranteed higher or better  
487 reasoning than people of other religions or worldviews. This means that Lutherans reject the claim,  
488 explicit or assumed by some, that Christians have revealed knowledge or unique insight into civic and  
489 political matters.

490  
491 This does not mean that Christians have no contributions to make or that they should avoid drawing  
492 from their tradition, teaching, or faith language in speaking of public matters. God’s grace, received in  
493 faith, empowers people to hear and act in cooperation with their neighbors for the common good. A  
494 sense of God’s calling sharpens commitment to human dignity because we understand that all are  
495 created in God’s image. It awakens a sense of God’s biblical call for justice and peace.

496  
497 The good news of Jesus changes hearts for compassion and care. Liberated from sin and the burden of  
498 seeking eternal salvation through our own efforts, we can join God’s efforts to create and re-create the

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<sup>17</sup> Large Catechism, third article of the Creed, Article 3, para. 67, BC 2000, 492.

<sup>18</sup> “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](http://www.elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/addressing-social-concerns).

<sup>19</sup> See “A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment” (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2019),  
[www.elca.org/ecumenical](http://www.elca.org/ecumenical).

499 institutions and communities of human social life. Sin remains, but Lutherans call upon the Scriptures,  
500 find aid in their theological heritage, and use human capacities and practices of discernment to seek the  
501 means to participate wisely and critically in the civic life God intends. Our baptismal vocation to serve  
502 God and neighbor is lived out with others in society as channels of God’s work in civic places of  
503 responsibility.  
504

## 505 **II. God Calls All People to Robust Civic Participation**

506  
507 **Article 10** The Lord’s prayer “Your will be done on earth as in heaven” refers to the entire scope of God’s  
508 will for creation. Yet it certainly includes that aspect of life in society that describes activities and  
509 institutions related to public life, from one’s neighborhood to national and international affairs.  
510 Participation in civic life comes in many shapes and sizes. A few examples include coaching soccer at a  
511 community center, attending parent-teacher association meetings, participating in peaceful  
512 demonstrations, volunteering one’s business acumen for a community development initiative, engaging  
513 in political activity, and participating in international “sister city” programs.  
514

515 The social fabric of a society depends upon such prudent, vigorous, and broad participation in civic life.  
516 Such participation is a medium through which people deepen relationships, create opportunities, and  
517 hold one another accountable for public life. This makes the decline of civic participation in the United  
518 States at this time, in community organizations for example, especially troubling.<sup>20</sup>  
519

520 Our church affirms the Lutheran teaching that anyone who seeks the community’s well-being through  
521 civic participation is, knowingly or not, using the capacities God provides. There is no single or required  
522 way to live this out. The Christian faith celebrates the multitude of ways that God calls people into lives  
523 of service and community for the sake of the common good.  
524

525 This statement assumes and draws upon elements of social teaching that relate to civic life found in  
526 previous ELCA statements and messages.<sup>21</sup> The particular calling to be an active and informed citizen in  
527 relation to political life is most fully articulated in the social message “Government and Civic  
528 Engagement: Discipleship in a Democracy.”<sup>22</sup> It affirms, for example, the need to pray for civic and  
529 political leaders (1 Timothy 2:1-2), the responsibility to vote, the importance of being active in the  
530 political sphere, and the need for collective action toward fair and compassionate government.  
531

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

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<sup>20</sup> 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/](http://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](http://encyclopedia.uia.org/en/problem/decline-civic-participation), accessed October 24, 2023.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, *The Church in Society*, which sets the foundation; [elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements](http://elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements).

<sup>22</sup> “Government and Civic Engagement,” [elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements](http://elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements).

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

539  
540 Civil service is often lifted up on the national stage, but this church encourages all people to explore  
541 service at state, county, and municipal levels, including volunteer service on boards, agencies, and  
542 committees. It is critical to encourage and guide youth and young adults in this church to consider taking  
543 up such places of responsibility.

544  
545 Christians are encouraged to take an initial stance of respect for neighbors who work in civil service at all  
546 levels—local, state, and national—and under the three branches of government. Unfortunately, in this  
547 society, there is a common caricature of government workers as lazy, incompetent, or troublesome  
548 bureaucrats. This image is grossly misleading. It misrepresents the complexities of civic service, including  
549 in government. From a Christian perspective, such caricature violates the Eighth Commandment, that is,  
550 bearing false witness against another.

551  
552 Civic employees and volunteers, however, are not above reproach, and they may and do fail in their  
553 responsibilities. Nevertheless, the default stance toward them should be dignity and respect, not slander  
554 or suspicion. Not honoring local trash collectors, postal workers, or county officials for their good work is  
555 one way in which we fail to see their labor and service as God does.

556  
557 At the same time, members of the public are expected to hold these civic servants and government  
558 officials accountable. Civic servants should do their jobs with integrity and fairness and in ways that  
559 serve the common good. Government institutions, programs, and policies must be held to high  
560 standards as a sign of their importance and impact. Courts must apply the law in accordance with  
561 precedent and with fairness, equality, and impartiality to preserve public trust. We should judge  
562 individual cases of failure carefully, avoiding generalizations that are unfair and that fail to help identify  
563 areas where improvement is genuinely needed.

564  
565 **Article 12** Congregations, synod-authorized ministries, campus ministries, and other recognized  
566 worshiping assemblies are centers to support civic participation precisely because they are to be  
567 grounded in the living Word of God’s Law and Gospel. Rooted in Word and Sacrament, almost  
568 everything in worship, from the gathering to the sending, prepares us to join God’s activity in civic life.  
569 The dynamic movement of the liturgy allows Christians to rest in God’s mercy and be restored in hope  
570 but, at every turn, prepares them to be sent forth into the world to work for the community’s good,  
571 both locally and beyond.

572  
573 There are many examples. Besides preaching, the church’s prayers lift up social concerns and ask  
574 guidance for those in authority (1 Timothy 2:1). The peace of Christ is a sign of our unity in God and a  
575 reminder that we are sent to share this experience of peace with the world. The offering is collected to  
576 support the assembly and to share with other people in need, locally and around the globe.

577  
578 There are many types of worshiping communities. They may be based locally or draw from broad  
579 regions. In all cases, as expressed in the ELCA constitution and social teaching, this church expects that  
580 each worshiping community will be engaged in forms of active civic participation as one element of life  
581 in Christ’s church. This is one vital way in which God’s people serve neighbors in human society.

582  
583 **Article 13** Religious communities and organizations must discern when and how to constructively  
584 engage in civic life. Religions can create divisions in civic life or contribute to mending the social fabric

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

588  
589 The Scriptures, echoed by the ELCA constitution and our church’s social teaching, lift up a moral vision  
590 for civic life that reflects both the depth of sin in human fallenness and the heights of hope in God’s  
591 redemption. This church’s moral vision does not mean we expect to create God’s kingdom on earth—  
592 only God can do that. However, this moral vision does give witness to the biblical idea of God’s intention  
593 for *shalom* and thereby encourages us to stand for both justice and reconciliation in this time of  
594 divisiveness and acrimony.

595  
596 This moral vision is held in tension with the realism of human nature’s fallenness but reminds us that all  
597 human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. The moral vision also reminds us that,  
598 contrary to common assumptions and painful actions in civic life, all stand equally before God. There is  
599 no neighbor or stranger, no political ally or opponent for whom Christ did not die. As a community of  
600 inclusion, as a people of every race and tongue (Acts 2, Revelation 7:9), we are drawn by our civic  
601 engagement into wider inclusion. We are drawn into action so that all people may experience dignity  
602 and mutual self-determination.

603  
604 The ELCA, as a member of Christ’s church, has long committed itself to reconciliation and healing in  
605 communities and civic life.<sup>23</sup> This church, at every level, is called to respond with compassion and  
606 imagination, drawing from experience and innovating new ways to address civic challenges.

607  
608 For example, social ministries in the community are a means of civic participation and are widely  
609 affirmed by this church. Care facilities, food pantries, housing programs, and refugee resettlement  
610 efforts are but a few examples of responses found in individual congregations or in ministries affiliated  
611 with Lutheran Services in America. This church has a responsibility, working with all people of goodwill,  
612 to mediate conflict and to advocate just and peaceful resolutions while supporting institutions and  
613 policies that seek the well-being and power of all.

614  
615 **Article 14** Discerning the best course of action requires considering many different facets of any  
616 situation. Because we recognize that every person is one for whom Christ died, this church has a special  
617 responsibility to seek to provide safe spaces for challenging conversations. A safe space does not mean a  
618 space where all agree. The responsibility for safe space means providing space where all are honored  
619 and valued regardless of what they believe. This is true even as worshiping communities disagree or  
620 struggle together to discern the common good.

621  
622 In the contemporary polarized social environment, the practice of communal moral discernment is an  
623 evangelical witness to God’s intention that humans respect others and to the good use of reason.  
624 Fulfilling a wide spectrum of callings and coming from a diversity of experiences, Christians will often  
625 disagree passionately on social questions. Yet because they share common convictions of faith, they are  
626 free, indeed obligated, to deliberate together on the challenges they face in the world. This is especially  
627 true when consensus is difficult or not reached. United in baptism with Christ and all believers,  
628 Christians are empowered to welcome and celebrate their diversity and to remain in conversation.

629

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<sup>23</sup> *The Church in Society*, 4, [elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements](http://elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements).

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

635

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

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

650

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

657

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

662

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

667

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

672

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<sup>24</sup> *The Church in Society*, 8-9, contains the full list; see [elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements](http://elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements).

<sup>25</sup> *The Church in Society*, 4, [elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements](http://elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements).

<sup>26</sup> *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).

673 Theologically it is important to recognize that the exertion of social power when addressing or  
674 challenging civic life is part of this church’s work under the Law, the left-hand reign of God (articles 5 and  
675 20). Though the church’s message of the Gospel is sure, we cannot know what the outcomes of exerting  
676 social power in public actions will be. We must consistently evaluate whether neighbor justice,  
677 especially for the marginalized, is being served by the prophetic presence of this church.  
678

679 **Article 17** Faith-based advocacy is one way to work toward a civic life that better reflects God’s vision  
680 for a more just and reconciled world. Advocacy comes in many forms, from institution-based efforts to  
681 more local practices sometimes called “faith-based organizing.”<sup>27</sup> At whatever level, it often means  
682 pressing civic leaders or public-policy makers to respect the needs and dignity of all people and our  
683 common home, with special care for the vulnerable. Advocacy comes from the Latin *vocare* (to call), the  
684 root word for both “voice” and “vocation.”  
685

686 Advocacy at whatever level can be a stewardship of the ELCA’s voice and is grounded in the ELCA’s  
687 constitution, which directs the ELCA to:<sup>28</sup>

- 688 • Empower members to engage with systems and processes to promote the well-being of the  
689 human community and creation in the public square, local and federal government, and the  
690 international community.
- 691 • Advance justice in response to human suffering, marginalization, and exclusion.
- 692 • Promote equality, justice, and respect for the value of every person to reduce the systemic  
693 injustices impacting communities and societies.
- 694 • Exercise corporate social responsibility through environmental, social, and justice principles to  
695 create a just and sustainable society.  
696

697 The ELCA’s corporate witness is governed by ELCA social teaching,<sup>29</sup> and advocacy occurs in both  
698 domestic and global accompaniment with people and communities. Likewise, this corporate witness is  
699 enriched and strengthened through ecumenical and interreligious collaboration.<sup>30</sup> The united witness of  
700 the faith community builds and depends upon relationships of trust and communal discernment.  
701

702 Faith-based organizing at the local level is born from relationships of service and solidarity. It is an  
703 expression of both individual discipleship and our life in community together. It grows most forcefully  
704 out of ministries among people and communities that have been denied their human dignity or are  
705 seeking greater justice. It supports and amplifies these voices. Though sometimes forms of advocacy are  
706 described as providing “a voice for the voiceless,” we must be careful to identify and support  
707 opportunities for people to speak for themselves.<sup>31</sup>  
708

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<sup>27</sup> For more on ELCA faith-based organizing, see [www.elca.org/our-work/publicly-engaged-church/organizing-for-mission/upcoming-events](http://www.elca.org/our-work/publicly-engaged-church/organizing-for-mission/upcoming-events).

<sup>28</sup> ELCA Constitution 16.12.D21, 118.

<sup>29</sup> 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](http://elca.org/our-work/publicly-engaged-church).

<sup>30</sup> 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](http://www.elca.org/ecumenical).

<sup>31</sup> 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).

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

714  
715 Using the trust of one-to-one relationships, faith-based organizers seek to spur action by building  
716 coalitions mostly in local contexts. Faith-based community organizing roots itself in shared values and  
717 commitments, in congregations and in other institutions, often across denominations and religious  
718 boundaries. Faith-informed advocacy can play a transformative role in a polarized political world by  
719 bringing people together to work toward the common good in the public square.

720  
721 **Article 18** Ethical discernment and action to love and serve the neighbor through civic life have multiple  
722 facets. One vital facet is participation in government and politics, which are essential dimensions of civic  
723 life. Civic life and service are not equal to government and political activity, but when rightly understood  
724 and practiced, political activity is necessary and good. It is important, then, to distinguish between ethics  
725 and politics, and this church teaches that civic or political concerns should be guided by ethical teaching.

726  
727 Ethics involves careful discernment about what is right, good, or fitting. It asks what we ought to do or  
728 not do, what we should value or not value, and who we should be or not be within community. In other  
729 words, ethics seeks to reflect on what we will seek to be and do to form a community of well-being.  
730 ELCA social statements are ethical documents that provide this church's teaching for addressing such  
731 topics, which include civic and political life.

732  
733 The word "politics" (*polis* is Greek for "the people") often is used today to express disgust with dishonest  
734 practices, grabs for exclusive control, lies, and deceptions. It is used to describe authority being used in a  
735 sinful way. Such practices are sinful and are real dangers that this society must confront. However, the  
736 Lutheran tradition teaches that God creates humans as political beings and is the creator and ultimate  
737 source of the political sphere.

738  
739 "Politics," then, as used in this statement, describes a necessary and positive aspect of human life. It  
740 describes negotiating how the benefits, burdens, rights, and responsibilities of living in a society are  
741 shared. Politics, in this sense, happens whenever two or more people are gathered to live in community  
742 together. This includes life in the family and the church! Politics describes the activity in which each  
743 person's interests and the well-being of the community are navigated and negotiated. Politics is a good  
744 and, in fact, essential dimension of human well-being.

745  
746 Politics is always complicated and messy because it involves diplomacy, compromise, ambiguity,  
747 persuasion, and decision. The reality is that living in community requires negotiations, sometimes  
748 scrappy ones, about the ongoing (re)distribution of resources, rights, responsibilities, opportunity, and  
749 access for all members of society as needed to form a healthy community. It includes legislation,  
750 enforcement, judicial evaluation, community planning and organization, advocacy, and distribution of  
751 goods and services (such as postal delivery, overseas aid, etc.).

752  
753 Politics and ethics are necessarily related. Ethics discerns; politics implements. For example, ethics  
754 presents the principle of self-determination as a primary value of a healthy political community.  
755 Government and political activity can be evaluated by how well they foster mutual self-determination  
756 for each community in a society and whether power is available to and produced for all members of that

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

758

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

765

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

771

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

777

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

782

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

790

791 **Article 20** All the baptized must wrestle with the relationship between their faith, the church, and civic  
792 life as they live out their responsibilities to “care for others and the world God made, and work for  
793 justice and peace.”<sup>33</sup> This church’s involvement in civic life is primarily borne out in the lives of its  
794 members as they embody discipleship in their communities and relationships. Consistent with the  
795 testimony of the Scriptures and the Lutheran tradition, the ELCA is clear in its teaching that all Christians  
796 share in the calling to civic and political participation. This church strongly affirms this shared calling of  
797 all the baptized.

798

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

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<sup>32</sup> “Government and Civic Engagement,” 9-13, [elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements](http://elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements).

<sup>33</sup> *ELW*, 228. These are two of the responsibilities entrusted to the baptized.

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

805  
806 Rostered ministers are entrusted with proclamation of Christ’s gracious and redemptive work, with the  
807 public ministry of the Word. In this they are called to proclaim both Law and Gospel. They provide  
808 biblical, theological, and spiritual care and moral guidance through preaching, prayer, teaching,  
809 advocacy, accompaniment, and service. This living Word, through the power of the Holy Spirit, can  
810 transform lives as Christ begins to take shape in people of faith.

811  
812 In terms of God’s Law, Lutheran theology teaches (Article 5) that its theological use (second use)  
813 convicts us of our sins, and that includes naming participation in social and structural evils. Preaching  
814 and teaching the civil use (first use) focuses on questions about whether a society—individually and  
815 corporately—is failing to achieve the well-being of all. In terms of Gospel, God’s love frees us from the  
816 fear of death and condemnation so that we might serve the neighbor, including through civic  
817 participation.

818  
819 In rostered ministry, deacons, pastors, and bishops are expected to connect the Christian faith with  
820 contemporary issues, and theology with life. The ELCA’s model constitution for congregations states that  
821 they are “to speak publicly to the world in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, advocating dignity,  
822 justice, and equity for all people.”<sup>34</sup>

823  
824 They, therefore, have the responsibility to represent a church community’s life experiences and  
825 perspectives, woven together with their leadership experiences and training. This makes their work  
826 political, as was true of Jesus (Article xx). It does not license partisanship, for example, in telling  
827 members which candidates or political parties to vote for or belong to (see Article xx).

828  
829 Even as the opportunities and responsibilities of rostered ministry are a blessing, the office of preaching  
830 presents genuine earthly challenges because of its dual character. Therefore, ministers in the church  
831 wrestle with several dangers that are made all the more complicated because of increasing political  
832 polarization (articles xx and xx).

833  
834 On the one hand, in their proper work, ministers can be tempted to forget that theirs is an office of the  
835 Word, instituted by God for the specific purpose of cultivating faith.<sup>35</sup> This work occurs through the  
836 proclamation of the forgiveness of sin and the promise of eternal life in the death and resurrection of  
837 Jesus Christ. They, likewise, can be tempted to neglect their role to admonish and exhort toward Christ’s  
838 way of life. If this proper role is forgotten or neglected, ministers fail to discharge the ministry that is  
839 unique to the church.

840  
841 On the other hand, in their significant work (alien work) of ministry to address public issues, there are  
842 dangers of both pride and despair. On the one side, ministers can be tempted by presumption, a  
843 certainty that would claim too much knowledge, religious righteousness, or authority in speaking to civic

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<sup>34</sup> Model Congregation Constitution C9.23; this wording is found in the purpose statements of all three expressions of the ELCA.

<sup>35</sup> The Augsburg Confession, V, teaches that the office is instituted by God “so that we may obtain faith.” BC 2000, 41.

844 and political issues.<sup>36</sup> On the other side is the temptation toward resignation or quietism, such that  
845 complacency replaces courage and commitment.

846  
847 Despite these challenges, this church holds that rostered ministers are charged to speak on public issues  
848 faithfully, bound by Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions and governed by ELCA official social  
849 teaching. They are representatives of this church and of their church communities. This charge is  
850 especially critical when the political climate has made it increasingly difficult for the church to live out its  
851 “prophetic presence.” That is, this church holds that it has an “obligation to name and denounce the  
852 idols before which people bow, to identify the power of sin present in social structures, and to advocate  
853 in hope with poor and powerless people.”<sup>37</sup>

854  
855 Rostered ministers should take seriously the broader context and community setting in offering  
856 guidance and discernment as they work together with their church communities to determine how to  
857 participate in civic life. Rostered ministers need to have a deep understanding of their community and  
858 give priority to relationships of mutual understanding even while asking probing and challenging  
859 questions. They are accountable to the wider church and the church communities they serve in a way  
860 that prioritizes serving in love over being served.

861  
862 At the same time, rostered ministers need the love and care of the communities they serve. Participants  
863 in our church communities have a responsibility to faithfully hear, respect, and support their rostered  
864 leaders as they appropriately discern how to address public issues. Such responsibility in the mutuality  
865 of Christian love calls for Spirit-led counsel, challenge, encouragement, and care of rostered ministers as  
866 they seek to fulfill their public role in both church and society. Participants must keep in mind that  
867 rostered leaders face particular risks if they belong to historically marginalized communities or serve in  
868 uncomfortable contexts. The community should be intentional in providing care for their safety and  
869 well-being.

870  
871 The Christian Church’s faith and baptismal calling remind both lay and rostered ministers of our  
872 fundamental unity in the life, resurrection, and eternal promises of Christ. Living out this unity in word  
873 and deed is a shared responsibility between rostered and lay people.

874

### 875 **III. Assessing the U.S. Constitutional Form of Government**

876

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

883

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

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<sup>36</sup> 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.

<sup>37</sup> *The Church in Society*, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Apology, XVI, BC 2000, 231.

887  
888 Such discernment about political authority reaches as far back as the Reformation, as evident in Luther's  
889 catechisms and many writings of the reformers.<sup>39</sup> The Large Catechism says, "It would therefore be  
890 fitting if the coat of arms of every upright prince were emblazoned with a loaf of bread instead of a lion  
891 or a wreath of rue [a medicinal herb], or if a loaf of bread were stamped on coins."<sup>40</sup> Rather than  
892 conquering more land or gaining more wealth, the role of government should be focused on ensuring  
893 that each person receives all the necessities for daily well-being.

894  
895 Because government is an indispensable structure of society, Lutherans historically have granted respect  
896 and obedience to good civil authorities and institutions, in line with Romans 13. At the same time, the  
897 Lutheran tradition also maintains that there is a responsibility to assess and call individuals and  
898 institutions to account. The Lutheran heritage contains examples of leaders denouncing the misuse of  
899 those institutions and also cooperating with them toward the common good. How power is understood  
900 and used is key to this assessment.

901  
902 **Article 22** Human social life is an arena of multiple forms of power. This church teaches that an essential  
903 assessment of any use of power, whether in law, policy, or action, is whether it extends God's power for  
904 people and groups. This assessment is especially important with respect to those who have been denied  
905 power historically or marginalized by social systems.

906  
907 As the Creator of all that is, God *is* sovereign. But God's sovereignty brings forth creatures who are not  
908 God, giving them power and sustenance. God's power creates creatures' power rather than depriving  
909 them of it (Article xx). Divine, self-giving power is always and everywhere plural. That is, divine power  
910 produces not one center of power but multiple transmissions of power.

911  
912 That view of power is central to the Lutheran notion of justification by grace alone (Article 5). God's  
913 declaration of justification is God's sovereign act, but that sovereign act is communicated to us through  
914 faith. On earth, the point and power of justification is to fulfill and heal sinners through faith, i.e. to give  
915 sinners power to become what they were created to be. God's sovereign act is the beginning "moment"  
916 of power but is not fulfilled power.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, the power of the Lord's Supper for Luther *is* the healing  
917 and strengthening of the recipient.

918  
919 God's dominion satisfies the needs of every living creature (Psalm 145). Divine power is not the usual  
920 political model of power. The common political understanding equates power with the ability to control  
921 and dominate. It is nonplural; that is, it seeks more for itself and less for others. This is the type of power  
922 referred to by the famous maxim "power corrupts." This distorted power of domination and control

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<sup>39</sup> 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.

<sup>40</sup> Large Catechism, Lord's Prayer, IV, para. 75, BC 2000, 450.

<sup>41</sup> 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.

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

925  
926 As such, all power can be assessed by its adherence to the divine creative and self-giving purpose. It can  
927 be assessed by the extent to which power is distorted and misused for the sake of domination and  
928 exploitation. This is true whether in government, civic interaction, organized religion, business, law  
929 enforcement, or the family.

930  
931 To the extent that human power is directed solely or primarily toward the control or domination of  
932 others, it is a sinful distortion of God’s power. It is sin when power, which is meant to fulfill other  
933 creatures, is used instead to destroy the independent power of others, intentionally or unintentionally.  
934 Power exercised as domination hollows out those who are subject to it, whereas those in control lose  
935 the vitality that allows them to adapt.

936  
937 Like all power, governmental power is good in principle but subject to systemic distortions and sinful  
938 impulses. This statement discusses systemic distortions in several places (articles 4 and xx). Those in  
939 government, like all people, are sinners and are subject to limitations of knowledge, however well-  
940 meaning, and the temptation to not acknowledge limits.

941  
942 As a result, government may often seek its own advantage or that of its most influential constituencies  
943 at the expense of many of its people. This is especially likely if one thinks of politics and civic engagement  
944 as primarily a collection of warring interest groups engaged in a zero-sum game of wins and losses. This  
945 view distorts power into a contest of domination and control.

946  
947 There are circumstances that do require the use of dominating power to defend against those who are  
948 doing significant harm, such as another government. In certain circumstances, even war might be  
949 legitimate—for example, to defend one’s country against existential threats or to oppose totalitarian  
950 regimes. Under such circumstances, dominating power can be justified in good conscience to counter  
951 immense harm.<sup>42</sup>

952  
953 Even in those cases, however, Christians and others believe constraints must be observed. For example,  
954 noncombatants and former combatants, including those from the enemy’s side, should be treated with  
955 care, as God’s creatures, not as mere objects of control or domination.

956  
957 **Article 23** The lodestar of divine power implies additional criteria for assessing government action.  
958 God’s self-giving creative and sustaining power gifts human creatures with agency, the ability to set their  
959 own course. The gifts of power therefore include a presumption for self-determination. (However, this  
960 presumption for self-determination has little to do with the ideology of “individualism,” that is, that the  
961 interests of the individual ought to have priority.)

962  
963 Thus, an important criterion for assessing government action is whether it extends the self-  
964 determination of the people—and thus *their* power. Practically, this means that the necessary starting  
965 point for considering what is good for others should be what those others believe is good for them.

966

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<sup>42</sup> *For Peace in God’s World*, 13, [elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements](http://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.

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

~~974~~

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

980

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

986

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

992

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

998

999 Both the model of divine power and the consequent political presumption of self-determination include  
1000 a criterion of fostering multiple transmissions of power, i.e. plurality. Both are indispensable elements  
1001 for thinking through the nature and purpose of governments, including those of the United States.

1002

1003 **Article 24** In the United States, the Constitution, ratified in 1788, provides the federal framework for  
1004 what political authority may and may not do with respect to its citizens and other governmental and  
1005 nongovernmental institutions.<sup>44</sup> It provides for a national government consisting of three authorities  
1006 with distinct roles and power sharing—executive, legislative, and judicial. It reserves certain matters to  
1007 the states and others to citizens of the country regardless of the state in which they live. It also  
1008 acknowledges Indigenous sovereign governments.

1009

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<sup>43</sup> Christians look to Matthew 7:12 as the Golden Rule; other traditions have a comparable standard in their writings.

<sup>44</sup> 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).

1010 The U.S. Constitution was not utterly unique. There are precedents in human history for what we  
1011 recognize as “democracy” or “a republic.” The Constitution was not even the first governing framework  
1012 of the fledgling United States. That distinction belonged to the Articles of Confederation, adopted by the  
1013 Continental Congress in 1777 and ratified by the 13 states in 1781.<sup>45</sup>

1014  
1015 Within a few years, it became clear that the young country likely would not survive under the Articles of  
1016 Confederation. There was no effective executive power to enforce the national Congress’ decisions, and  
1017 the nation was in danger of defaulting on its debts. The states had separate, often conflicting, policies,  
1018 which sometimes were aimed at other states, as well as separate currencies. These and other  
1019 deficiencies produced a failure that gave rise to the Constitution.

1020  
1021 The Constitution *was* unique in crucial ways. The 1788 Constitution makes no mention of God or religion  
1022 except to prohibit requiring religious tests for holding federal office. And for the first time in recorded  
1023 history, the governing document of a people had to be ratified by the people it would govern rather  
1024 than be imposed by a monarch, a sovereign state, or religious authority (Article xx).

1025  
1026 The Constitution also strives against the monopolization of sovereignty and pure self-interest by  
1027 instituting checks and balances across institutions and with the states. The structure of the new  
1028 government was explicitly designed to combat extreme self-interest, which the drafters had  
1029 experienced both under a parliamentary monarchy and among the states included in the Articles of  
1030 Confederation.

1031  
1032 It was controversial to provide for a strong executive, as the Constitution did. Because of that, the  
1033 framers limited the executive branch, reserving certain matters for the legislature or the judiciary.  
1034 Similarly, the Constitution provides for an executive not elected by Congress, to limit Congress’ power  
1035 and influence. In addition to reserving some areas of authority for states, the Constitution provided all  
1036 states with equal representation in the U.S. Senate to combat the fear that the larger states would  
1037 ignore or destroy the vitality of smaller states. The courts were established to settle disputes and  
1038 interpret laws. The authority of the courts was also checked by certain legislative and executive means.

1039  
1040 The Constitution is both grounding and aspirational. It serves as an example *and* points this society to  
1041 values and practices that the nation has not yet fulfilled. Its preamble clearly expresses this  
1042 government’s purpose and provides a reference for assessing national faithfulness to that purpose:

1043  
1044 We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish  
1045 Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the  
1046 general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do  
1047 ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.<sup>46</sup>

1048  
1049 These aspirations provide secular standards for evaluating government and also give specificity to the  
1050 Christian question “Is the neighbor’s well-being served by government?”

1051

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<sup>45</sup> 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).

<sup>46</sup> Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, [constitution.congress.gov/constitution/preamble](https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/preamble).

1052 **Article 25** The most radical feature of the Constitution is its first three words: “we the people.” Never  
1053 before had those who would be governed been required to vote their government into effect, to  
1054 “ordain and establish” it. “The people” determine how they will be governed, and this sets up a  
1055 preference for self-determination that is inherent in the constitutional process, as much as or more so  
1056 than in the Constitution itself.

1057  
1058 The subsequent history of amendments to the Constitution makes this preference for mutual self-  
1059 determination more explicit. At the time of ratification, “the people” was largely limited to free white  
1060 men. Many states also imposed a property-owning qualification on the right to vote. Slavery was  
1061 recognized and accepted by the Constitution. Indeed, slaveholding states received additional  
1062 congressional representation through the constitutional clause counting enslaved people as three-fifths  
1063 of a person, even though those states denied them legal personhood and the vote.

1064  
1065 Most members of Indigenous nations, who were not granted U.S. citizenship until 1924, had no say in  
1066 representation. Though American Indian sovereignty is recognized in the Constitution, that commitment  
1067 was blatantly ignored as states and the federal government violated treaty after treaty, and it remains a  
1068 source of struggle today.

1069  
1070 The preference for self-determination was thus partly realized in the Constitution and partly unrealized.  
1071 Amendments to the Constitution have tended to make that aspiration more effective by reducing the  
1072 number of groups who were “governed” without their “consent,” by expanding the right to vote.

1073  
1074 Regarding people of African descent, the Reconstruction amendments essentially said that the 1787  
1075 Constitution’s “grand bargain” to preserve slavery got wrong who “we the people” should be. Later  
1076 amendments granted the right of additional citizens to vote: women (1920) and young adults ages 18-20  
1077 (1971). Levying any tax as a condition to vote was prohibited (1964). Every amendment related to who is  
1078 included in “we the people” has expanded who may participate in mutual self-determination. However,  
1079 there remain patterns of obstruction to restrict exercise of these rights.

1080  
1081 Like the theological presumption for mutual self-determination (Article 21), the Constitution’s “we, the  
1082 people” has little in common with an ideology of individualism. The sovereignty of the people is a  
1083 collective sovereignty and includes mutual self-determination. A core purpose of the protections of  
1084 individual rights in the Bill of Rights and elsewhere is to strengthen “we the people.” The protection of  
1085 individual and minority rights, in the constitutional conception, is necessary for a healthy collective.

1086  
1087 **Article 26** The framers of the Constitution recognized that self-dealing by states under the Articles of  
1088 Confederation was already destroying the country and the states themselves. Humans continue to  
1089 demonstrate, in greater or lesser measure, the tendency to want to dominate and control, to seek our  
1090 advantage over our neighbor, not for their interests but, in the end, for our own. Theologically, this  
1091 tendency is part of the meaning we Lutherans recognize when we teach that even the justified are also  
1092 sinners.

1093  
1094 Article 22 explains how government is subject to the same impulses. Accordingly, governmental action  
1095 should be subject to the presumption that those governed have a right to identify what they see as their  
1096 needs. Here, too, that presumption can be overcome, and government can act coercively upon those  
1097 who are subject to it, particularly when those subjects are needlessly damaging others’ capacity for self-  
1098 determination. That assessment is the source of much criminal law, for example.

1099

1100 As the government acts to prevent harmful behavior, the priority should be seeking to produce and  
1101 share power in ways that promote the common good. Examples of this communication of power and  
1102 well-being include compulsory school attendance, Social Security, and regulations to incentivize  
1103 accomplishing social goals.

1104  
1105 A few of the questions to assess a government at federal, state, and local levels include: Has this act  
1106 opened room for the self-determination of those in its jurisdiction? Has this coercive authority  
1107 adequately protected valuable mutual self-determination to a reasonable extent? Has this regulatory  
1108 authority made the operation of the economy smoother so that those affected can live their lives more  
1109 fully? Has this action assisted or encouraged those who want to participate in civic life to do so? Will the  
1110 act do these things in the future? Does it effectively rectify failures of the past, especially failures to  
1111 include the marginalized?

1112  
1113 All of these illustrate the criteria for whether, on balance, an action has increased or will increase the  
1114 power, mutual self-determination, and well-being of those affected by a government. The answers to  
1115 these questions provide the means for people of faith, and others, to join important civic conversations  
1116 about what is taking place in U.S. civic and political life.

1117  
1118 **Article 27** The 1788 Constitution made a firm decision for religious neutrality, thus allowing each person  
1119 and group to practice the religion of their choice, or none. Article VI reads: “No religious Test shall ever  
1120 be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.” That was a radical  
1121 choice because 11 of the 13 states at that time had religious qualifications for public officials. The same  
1122 neutrality regarding religion was expressed in the very first words of the First Amendment to the  
1123 Constitution (Section IV), ratified as part of the Bill of Rights in 1791.

1124  
1125 The Constitution’s choice to forbid religious tests was historically novel and has had momentous  
1126 consequences. For example, neither Thomas Jefferson nor Abraham Lincoln had any institutional  
1127 religious affiliation. A religious test would have left the country without their service and that of others  
1128 from non-Christian faith traditions or no faith tradition. The United States opened public offices to  
1129 people of all religions, as well to the nonreligious, and limited the ability of government to interfere with  
1130 self-determined religious choice.

1131  
1132 **Article 28** The religious diversity and neutrality of both the original Constitution and its First Amendment  
1133 (see Section IV) contradict past or present claims that the U.S. was founded as a Christian nation. In  
1134 1796, George Washington’s administration made an official statement on the subject as part of an  
1135 international treaty: “The government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on  
1136 the Christian Religion.”<sup>47</sup>

1137  
1138 Many people involved in the movement for U.S. independence and the ratification of the Constitution  
1139 had devout Christian faith, though others did not. The dominant religious practice of the times was  
1140 certainly Protestant, as evidenced by the Christian ethos still present in our social fabric. However, it  
1141 must be recognized that many who lived in and contributed to the establishment of the United States  
1142 were not Christian and were instead people of various religions and worldviews.

1143

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<sup>47</sup> 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](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/bar1796t.asp).

1144 The ELCA gives thanks for many of the ways in which God worked through Christian individuals and in  
1145 that ethos. In this sense, it is possible to speak of Christianity as contributing to the founding of this  
1146 country and to claim that the original U.S. ethos was influenced by Christianity. However, this church  
1147 rejects the baseless claims that the U.S. was founded on specifically Christian beliefs or that the U.S.  
1148 Constitution is a result of special revelation, thus establishing a Christian nation. The Constitution  
1149 established that the nation’s sovereign is “we the people,” not “we the faithful” or “we the Christians.”  
1150

#### 1151 **IV. Religion and the First Amendment**

1152  
1153 **Article 29** The First Amendment to the Constitution begins: “Congress shall make no law respecting an  
1154 establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” It indicates that the vitality of  
1155 religious life arises from the self-determination of the people in the broad plurality of civil society, not  
1156 from the government.  
1157

1158 The first clause (“no law respecting an establishment of religion”) is known as the Establishment Clause.  
1159 The second clause (“no law ... prohibiting the free exercise thereof”) is known as the Free Exercise  
1160 Clause. The two clauses work together to protect religious liberty for all people in our pluralistic society,  
1161 though federal, state, and local governments have, at times, fallen short in that protection.  
1162

1163 The Establishment Clause is cut from the same cloth as the Constitution’s prohibition against religious  
1164 tests for public office. Government is not the church, and the church is not the government. The intent  
1165 of the Establishment Clause clearly is that government must not promote a particular faith or religion in  
1166 general. Some recent decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court at the time of this writing, however, cast  
1167 doubt on the continuing strength of that limitation on government.<sup>48</sup>  
1168

1169 As discussed in Article 30, this church reaffirms the need for strong boundaries that limit government  
1170 involvement in the core activities of religion—worship, instruction in faith, and proselytizing. Such  
1171 boundaries are needed to prohibit excessive government entanglement in religious institutions, provided  
1172 that religious exercise does not harm the legitimate interests of the broader community. For example,  
1173 the government has no authority to decide who is fit to be a minister or teacher of a faith. Nor does the  
1174 government have the competence to declare which of the rival factions in a religious body represents  
1175 the correct expression of that faith.  
1176

1177 Government by the people means there is no favored religion. However, as discussed in Article 32, our  
1178 church holds that the free exercise of religion is not an absolute right and does not give faithful  
1179 individuals or religious organizations license to harm others. Individuals and organizations have the right  
1180 to determine the meaning of their religious commitments, but their exercise of such commitments does  
1181 not create a right to impose significant harm on the neighbor.  
1182

1183 **Article 30** Religious worship, teaching, and proselytizing belong solely to religious institutions. Those  
1184 activities, and the institutions that support them, are distinct from the exercise of civil authority. The  
1185 government’s authority extends only to secular matters, not to the relationship between people and the  
1186 sacred.

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<sup>48</sup> 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.

1187  
1188 By imposing a limit on the government’s involvement with religion and religious institutions, the  
1189 Establishment Clause protects both government and religion. Without this limit, political actors could  
1190 use their offices and the government’s powers to advance their faith—either to enhance that faith or to  
1191 expand the government’s claim over the people.  
1192  
1193 For example, the government threatens the principle of nonestablishment whenever it displays religious  
1194 symbols. A government-sponsored display of such symbols may be permissible if it sends a message  
1195 about the history of a particular community. It would violate the principle of nonestablishment, however,  
1196 if it intended to convey a message of religious truth. Courts in individual cases must closely scrutinize  
1197 government-sponsored displays of religious symbols to discern the intended message and protect  
1198 nonestablishment.<sup>49</sup>  
1199  
1200 Similarly, government violates the principle of nonestablishment when it attempts to use public schools  
1201 for evangelism or religious instruction. The Supreme Court has long held that required prayer or Bible  
1202 reading in public schools is unconstitutional religious activity.<sup>50</sup> Though now being challenged in some  
1203 state legislatures and courts, the principles of nonestablishment and pluralism preclude the government  
1204 from promoting or coercing such activity.  
1205  
1206 Government funding of religious activity also impacts Establishment Clause concerns. Article xx of this  
1207 statement explains this church’s position that there is a need for cooperative work between faith-based  
1208 social welfare programs and the government. In those contexts, the government pays religious  
1209 organizations for services of a secular character. If the government were to pay those organizations to  
1210 provide worship or religious instruction, such funding would violate the principle of nonestablishment.<sup>51</sup>  
1211 For this reason, this church opposes requiring states to provide equal funding for religious education.  
1212  
1213 Finally, the nonestablishment principle forbids courts and government officials from deciding certain  
1214 “essentially religious” questions. These include which faction of a divided congregation holds the correct  
1215 interpretation of its faith, or whether a religious leader deserves employment at a congregation even if  
1216 the congregation has fired them.<sup>52</sup> Each of these contexts calls for “ecclesiastical abstention,” or  
1217 deference to the religious institution’s governing structure. While ecclesiastical abstention does not  
1218 insulate religious bodies from all judicial scrutiny, it bars the government from challenging a religious  
1219 organization’s internal governance or religious decisions.<sup>53</sup>  
1220

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<sup>49</sup> 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.

<sup>50</sup> See *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962) and *Abington School District v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963).

<sup>51</sup> 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).

<sup>52</sup> 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.

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

1221 Through all these examples, this church embraces the principle of nonestablishment of religion by civil  
1222 government and recognizes that its application requires judicial and political prudence. The Supreme  
1223 Court’s interpretation of this principle now emphasizes the importance of “history and tradition” in that  
1224 application.<sup>54</sup> This church believes that an assessment of our nation’s “history and tradition” must  
1225 encompass the principle of nonestablishment even though we may not always agree about specific  
1226 applications.

1227  
1228 **Article 31** The Free Exercise Clause works together with the Establishment Clause to protect and  
1229 promote religious diversity in the United States. Prohibiting the establishment of a religion clears the  
1230 ground for a plurality of religious faiths, as well as the absence of religious faith. The Free Exercise Clause  
1231 opens space for self-determination, protecting the right of all people to decide what they believe and  
1232 how as well as whether they express those beliefs within a religious community. It also guarantees the  
1233 right of religious communities to gather as they choose for worship and religious instruction, and to  
1234 select their own leaders and organizational form.

1235  
1236 Bolstered by the First Amendment’s protection of the right to free speech, the Free Exercise Clause also  
1237 protects the right of individuals to bring their beliefs into political discussion and decision-making, and of  
1238 religious communities to engage in public debate according to their religious convictions. A prohibition  
1239 on expressing religious beliefs in political debate would have deprived the U.S. public of much of the  
1240 basis for the abolition of slavery and for the civil rights movement, to name just two examples.

1241  
1242 In addition, the Free Exercise Clause bars the government from discriminating against believers and  
1243 religious communities because of their faith. History includes examples of the government directly  
1244 targeting some faiths for hostile treatment.<sup>55</sup> Some recent claims of religious discrimination, however,  
1245 involve subtle forms of allegedly different treatment for believers or religious entities.

1246  
1247 Under the Free Exercise Clause, as under the Establishment Clause, religion is constitutionally special.  
1248 Sometimes there are such significant differences between religious and secular organizations that they  
1249 are not truly comparable. In that case, different treatment is appropriate. Other times, a religious activity  
1250 is truly being singled out or treated differently from the activities of comparable secular organizations,  
1251 which is not permissible.

1252  
1253 This issue often arises in cases involving distribution of government funds. For example, as explained in  
1254 Article xx, this church believes that, because religious education involves faith formation, there is a  
1255 fundamental difference between secular public education and religious education such that it should be  
1256 permissible for the government to fund secular public education without funding religious education.<sup>56</sup>

1257  
1258 In contrast, it should not be permissible for governments to deny organizations funding merely because  
1259 they are religious. For example, a state program violated the Free Exercise Clause by denying a grant to a

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<sup>54</sup> See *American Legion v. American Humanist Association*, 588 U.S. 19 (2019).

<sup>55</sup> See *Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye, Inc. v. City of Hialeah*, 508 U.S. 520 (1993).

<sup>56</sup> 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).

1260 religious school for playground resurfacing while providing grants to similarly situated nonreligious  
1261 schools.<sup>57</sup>

1262  
1263 The constitutionally protected right of free exercise is different from Christian freedom. For Lutherans,  
1264 Christian freedom is given through Christ and arises solely from God’s promise of salvation. This is an  
1265 eternal freedom from condemnation by the demands of God that no human fulfills. It is a gift of God  
1266 received by faith and does not depend on any specific political arrangement.

1267  
1268 Christian freedom is a matter of the Gospel whereas the right of free exercise of religion is a matter of  
1269 human law. Christian freedom has only indirect legal significance for organizations and individuals in the  
1270 civil realm. However, it gives us the positive freedom to love God and neighbor.

1271  
1272 This church affirms that Christian freedom includes the presumptive duty to obey civil law. There are  
1273 exceptions, such as circumstances when the law has become tyrannical and abusive, especially to the  
1274 most vulnerable. Then love may require something other than obedience to civil law. But in normal  
1275 situations, Christians obey for the sake of good civil order—or, in other words, for the sake of the  
1276 neighbor.

1277  
1278 **Article 32** Though the Free Exercise Clause offers stout protections for the right of people and religious  
1279 communities to worship, practice, teach, and share their faith as they see fit, that right is not absolute.  
1280 Religiously motivated conduct may violate the laws and regulations that structure our complex society.

1281  
1282 When a conflict between religiously motivated practices and civil law occurs, the government should try  
1283 to accommodate those practices. However, religious accommodations should not damage important  
1284 public interests, including the civil rights of others.

1285  
1286 The ELCA’s predecessor churches<sup>58</sup> adopted the then-prevalent legal standard of “strict scrutiny”<sup>59</sup> to  
1287 define the balance between a religious accommodation and countervailing public interests. Under that  
1288 standard, the government must accommodate a believer’s religiously motivated practice if that practice  
1289 is “substantially burdened” by government rules, unless the government can show that denial of the  
1290 requested accommodation is the “least restrictive means” of protecting a “compelling state interest.”<sup>60</sup>  
1291 At the time our predecessor bodies adopted that language, courts in such cases tended to be quite  
1292 deferential to the government despite using the language of strict scrutiny.

1293  
1294 In the 1990 decision *Employment Division v. Smith*, the U.S. Supreme Court moved away from strict  
1295 scrutiny entirely and held that the Free Exercise Clause did not require accommodations from neutral,

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<sup>57</sup> See *Trinity Lutheran Church of Columbia, Inc. v. Comer*, 582 U.S. 449 (2017).

<sup>58</sup> See <https://resources.elca.org/?categories=faith-and-society&subcategory=social-teachings-predecessor-churches>.

<sup>59</sup> 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).

<sup>60</sup> 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.

1296 generally applicable laws.<sup>61</sup> In response, the ELCA, together with its ecumenical partners and a broad  
1297 coalition of groups from across the religious and political spectrum, advocated for adoption of the  
1298 federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). This statute restored the “strict scrutiny” test as to  
1299 federal government action.<sup>62</sup> Many states followed suit with similar laws. The “strict scrutiny” standard  
1300 continues to apply in important federal statutes and case law and in the constitutions or statutes of  
1301 some states.<sup>63</sup>

1302  
1303 More recently, the Supreme Court has moved away from its earlier deference to governmental authority  
1304 and interpreted in literal terms the federal statutes that use the “strict scrutiny” standard to provide  
1305 religious accommodations. These decisions focus almost exclusively on the burden imposed on religious  
1306 exercise and pay scant attention to “important governmental interests”<sup>64</sup> or the interests of others  
1307 harmed by the requested accommodation.<sup>65</sup>

1308  
1309 The ELCA affirms the need for a standard that balances religiously motivated conduct with public  
1310 interests, including the protection of other individuals’ civil rights. This church urges legislators and the  
1311 courts to fashion legal standards that respect the importance of religiously motivated conduct. In  
1312 contrast with the “strict scrutiny” standard adopted by the ELCA’s predecessor churches, this church  
1313 affirms an intermediate standard. Such a standard would require accommodation only if the proposed  
1314 accommodation would *not* harm important (rather than compelling) public interests, impose significant  
1315 burdens on others, or significantly impair the government’s efforts to serve the interests of those  
1316 burdened.

1317  
1318 This standard leaves room for judicial interpretation. However, it offers a starting point that better  
1319 reflects the necessary balance among respect for the wide diversity of religious practices in our  
1320 pluralistic society, respect for the government’s interests in protecting and promoting the public welfare,  
1321 and respect for the interests of others in the community.

1322  
1323 **Article 33** Citing the First Amendment, some people, including religious individuals, mistakenly believe  
1324 that religious commitments and claims stemming from religious values are out of bounds in public life.  
1325 This can include claims that there should be no interaction with or funding of religious organizations by  
1326 the government, or that discussion of government policies or political matters should never happen  
1327 within assemblies of believers.

1328

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<sup>61</sup> 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).

<sup>62</sup> 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 Espirita Beneficente União do Vegetal*, 546 U.S. 418 (2006).

<sup>63</sup> 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.

<sup>64</sup> 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.

<sup>65</sup> 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.

1329 Some invoke a “wall of separation” between church and state to deny the place of religious voices in the  
1330 public square. This phrase, however, is not in the Constitution<sup>66</sup> and should not be substituted for what  
1331 the Constitution actually says. The First Amendment does not prohibit or discourage the application of  
1332 religious convictions to public life. The Establishment Clause applies only to the government and those  
1333 acting as officers of the government. It does not require religious individuals or communities to withhold  
1334 their beliefs from public life.

1335  
1336 As Christians, we know from experience that religion plays a central role in our identity; the same is true  
1337 for people who are part of other religious or spiritual traditions. If nonestablishment or “separation of  
1338 church and state” meant that religious commitments should not enter public life, religious people would  
1339 be uniquely harmed. Not only would this conflict with the Free Exercise Clause, but it would also  
1340 uniquely disadvantage religious people in that they—and they alone—would be unable to bring their  
1341 most deeply held convictions to bear on public issues.

1342  
1343 If people of all faiths could not bring their highest convictions to consideration of civic questions, public  
1344 life would be impoverished. History points to the specifically religious invocations of many slavery  
1345 abolitionists and participants in the civil rights movement, for example. Moreover, many public officials  
1346 turn to their religiously formed moral sources in considering critical decisions for local, state, and federal  
1347 governments.

1348  
1349 The proper relationship of personal religious commitment to political and civic life cannot, then, be  
1350 reduced to a wall of separation between “church” and “state.” Rather, religious commitment must be  
1351 guided in civic life by the constructive relationships that religious organizations hold with political bodies.  
1352 The next section addresses the character and boundaries of such constructive relationships.

1353

## 1354 **V. Constructive Relationships Between Religious Organizations** 1355 **and Political Authority**

1356

1357 **Article 34** As God’s people pray for God’s will to be done on earth, it is necessary to set forth ELCA  
1358 teaching about the constructive relationship of religious organizations to political authority. The U.S.  
1359 Constitution, including the First Amendment, neither prohibits religious institutions from actively  
1360 engaging in civic and political life nor requires them to do so. The Constitution leaves those decisions  
1361 largely to religious institutions themselves.

1362

1363 The basis for the ELCA’s understanding of this church’s relationship with government is twofold. First,  
1364 this church teaches a scriptural responsibility before God to join divine activity toward the well-being of  
1365 society. It is God who gives the church a responsibility to address society’s issues under the aspect of  
1366 God’s Law while also conveying the good news of mercy and life to individuals. Yet in this approach,  
1367 there is always a creative tension because God’s church is “in” the world while not “from” the world.<sup>67</sup>  
1368 Second, as a corporate body in society, this church corporately takes to heart God’s gift of an earthly  
1369 sovereignty that resides in “we the people.”

1370

---

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

<sup>67</sup> *The Church in Society*, 3, [elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements](http://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.

1371 The theological conviction of responsibility before God and the reasoned conviction about the consent  
1372 of the governed intersect to undergird a productive relationship. The ELCA constitution expresses this  
1373 understanding as a calling to “work with civil authorities in areas of mutual endeavor, maintaining  
1374 institutional separation of church and state in a relation of functional interaction.”<sup>68</sup>  
1375

1376 **Article 35** The phrase “work with civil authorities in areas of mutual endeavor” makes clear that the  
1377 church should engage political authority actively and flexibly. Theologically speaking, “work with”  
1378 depends upon a dynamic Lutheran understanding of God's two reigns, especially the left-handed reign  
1379 by which God’s work in society is carried out primarily through a just use of the law. This church holds  
1380 that the Triune God, our all-encompassing source and commitment, is at work in society and calls the  
1381 church, and all religious organizations, to join in public action relying upon their best understanding of  
1382 God’s intention for creation and society  
1383

1384 This church also understands “work with” as grounded in the foundational commitment that sovereignty  
1385 in the United States rests in “we the people.” Both individuals and corporate bodies in the U.S. find their  
1386 purpose summed up in the preamble to the Constitution: “to promote the general welfare.”<sup>69</sup> These  
1387 constitutional underpinnings encourage those who live in this country and all organizations and  
1388 institutions to work with governing authorities toward that end.  
1389

1390 Living in the U.S. implies a promise and opportunity to seek the welfare of all residents through every  
1391 aspect of civic life. This does not imply that this church’s relationship with political authority is cozy.  
1392 Often, to be sure, “working with” affirms the mutual endeavor of addressing human needs. Sometimes,  
1393 however, “working with” entails critical challenges to government, such as advocating for change in  
1394 policies and programs that harm people and creation.  
1395

1396 **Article 36** The phrase “maintaining institutional separation of church and state” does not point to a  
1397 “wall of separation” between public (government) and private (religious) arenas. Rather, the integrity of  
1398 the institutional relationship depends on understanding proper and distinct jurisdictions.  
1399

1400 On the one hand, theologically, such a distinction is congruent with the Lutheran understanding of how  
1401 God works differently in the church and in the state (see articles **xx** and 35). Beyond common human  
1402 faculties, religious faith does not provide revelatory or other special knowledge regarding the practical  
1403 policies or means for government’s work (**Article xx**). On the other hand, “institutional separation” also  
1404 follows the logic of the U.S. Constitution. It points to preserving the integrity and distinction of both  
1405 political authority and religious institutions, based on their distinctive purposes, organizational  
1406 principles, and competencies (**articles xx-xx**).  
1407

1408 While institutionally distinct, religious organizations and institutions share spaces of mutual concern and  
1409 action with government. The ELCA therefore holds that this relationship should be one of “functional  
1410 interaction.” That is, it is a critical engagement governed by institutional boundaries, created, on the one  
1411 side, by the faith-based purpose and competence of religious faith and institutions and, on the other  
1412 side, by the secular purpose and competence of government.  
1413

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<sup>68</sup> “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](http://www.elca.org/constitution).

<sup>69</sup> See [constitution.congress.gov/constitution/preamble](http://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/preamble).

1414 Religious organizations, then, cross the boundaries of their role when they campaign for parties or  
1415 candidates or assert specific legislation or policies as “God’s plan.” Religious communities are mistaken  
1416 when they identify a particular political movement as God’s or claim divine revelation for the  
1417 Constitution or identify the U.S. national experience with salvation history.

1418  
1419 For these reasons, this church, unlike some Christian churches, teaches that it is not the church’s role to  
1420 endorse candidates or parties. The ELCA also recognizes the legal soundness of the Johnson  
1421 Amendment<sup>70</sup> in prohibiting religious bodies or their representatives from verbally or financially  
1422 supporting candidates or parties. Individual parishioners may, of course, advocate specific candidates  
1423 and parties based on religious values and reasoned criteria but should not claim to do so as  
1424 spokespeople for a church.

1425  
1426 At the same time, this dynamic, critical engagement approach *encourages* religious organizations to  
1427 champion values in the public sphere for the sake of society’s good. The ELCA teaches that religious  
1428 communities may speak publicly about their values to express support for policies and legislation that  
1429 seem the best among competing legislation or policy. This church, for example, actively assesses and  
1430 advocates for policies that affect those who are hungry (Matthew 25:35).

1431  
1432 **Article 37** In the work of functional interaction, churches and other nonprofits in the U.S. have become  
1433 increasingly dependent on aid from public entities. The ELCA continues to support the prime criterion  
1434 that government support for faith-based social services is appropriate only when they, as religious-  
1435 based organizations, serve people without expectation about or regard to their faith. ELCA ministries,  
1436 such as chaplaincy in armed services, correctional institutions, hospitals, and other care facilities, meet  
1437 this criterion, as do ELCA social ministry organizations.

1438  
1439 The ELCA view asserts a complicated protection that enables support of good government while  
1440 insisting on the important distinction between religion and civil authority. To maintain the distinction,  
1441 the ELCA holds that:

- 1442 • Government must not fund programs that discriminate between religions in providing their  
1443 services and benefits.
- 1444 • Government must not fund programs that require recipients to participate in religious activities  
1445 as a condition of receiving a public service.
- 1446 • Government must treat program service providers equally—on religious and other grounds—  
1447 and selection of funded service providers must be based solely on outcomes identified in  
1448 publicly available criteria.

1449  
1450 This dynamic, function-driven interactionist relationship<sup>71</sup> has guided constructive, beneficial  
1451 interactions between the ELCA and political authority. Our church will continue to be so guided. As a  
1452 church, we also commend this approach as salutary, both theologically and practically, for consideration  
1453 by other religious bodies in their interaction with political authority in the U.S.

1454  
1455 **Article 38** The ELCA understanding of civic life and faith affirms healthy forms of patriotism. Patriotism is  
1456 to love one’s country, to pray for its well-being, to be committed to its success, to have a sense of pride

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<sup>70</sup> 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.

<sup>71</sup> 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.

1457 in it, to criticize it, and to work for its reform when necessary. All of these can be elements of how  
1458 Christians and their communities live out discipleship as individuals and in corporate bodies.  
1459

1460 There are also unhealthy expressions of patriotism. They actually are distortions of true patriotism and  
1461 can be dangerous for the country and for vulnerable populations within it. Such forms of unhealthy  
1462 patriotism attribute to the country, to a political party, to certain individuals, or even to a racial or ethnic  
1463 group a veneration, worship, loyalty, or trust owed to God alone (Mark 12:17). Christ's church cannot  
1464 condone elevating a country or anything else to the place that belongs only to God, because this is  
1465 succumbing to idolatry. This statement rejects unhealthy forms of patriotism, including those related to  
1466 any form of religious nationalism.<sup>72</sup>  
1467

1468 At the time of this writing, there is a peculiar form of unhealthy patriotism gaining traction in the United  
1469 States—Christian nationalism. Christian nationalist belief seeks to fuse selected Christian ideas about  
1470 what should be the national way of life with a comprehensive cultural framework.<sup>73</sup> That framework  
1471 incorporates highly selective narratives, practices, symbols, and value systems. For example: "In a  
1472 Christian nation, social power is placed in the service of the Christian religion."<sup>74</sup> Christian nationalism  
1473 explicitly seeks to implement such a legislative framework. Yet, this "turns God into a mascot for the  
1474 state."<sup>75</sup>  
1475

1476 In hardline strains of Christian nationalism, only white, U.S.-born, Christian believers are considered  
1477 genuine U.S. citizens. This privileging of white, U.S.-born Christians is connected to our country's violent  
1478 practices of white superiority, such as Jim Crow laws or the hundreds of years of Black African slavery.  
1479

1480 Such belief in an intrinsic moral and intellectual superiority of white European Christian civilization has  
1481 been used to justify as natural and right that white Christians, especially males, should be in power. Such  
1482 views about race, ethnicity, sex, social/economic class, and religion deny that one's birth in the nation or  
1483 one's great contributions and service to the country are enough for a resident to be considered a "true  
1484 American." It distorts who is considered to be a true citizen of the nation.  
1485

1486 A comparison of any strain of religious nationalism, including Christian nationalism, with the actual  
1487 teachings of Jesus and of the Holy Scriptures reveals that these values are not Christlike. Christian  
1488 nationalism, in particular, perverts the Christian message by cherry-picking texts that interpret the  
1489 Scriptures in ways that connect religion to domination.  
1490

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<sup>72</sup>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](https://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](https://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](https://learn.elca.org/jle/issue/may-2007-christian-zionism), as helpful starting points.

<sup>73</sup> *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.

<sup>74</sup> 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.

<sup>75</sup> Amanda Tyler, *How to End Christian Nationalism* (Broadleaf Books, 2024), 69.

1491 Christian nationalism fuses an imagined conception of a Christian nation with a false vision of God’s  
1492 ultimate will. It confuses the kingdom of God with a particular government. Jesus rejects identification  
1493 of earthly structures with God’s kingdom or will: “My kingdom does not belong to this world” (John  
1494 18:36). Lutherans teach that the kingdom of God is not a nation, not a particular culture, not a racial  
1495 grouping, not a form of government, and not even a denomination or a religion (Article xx).

1496  
1497 For theological reasons, the ELCA rejects Christian nationalism as a distortion of the Christian faith that  
1498 crosses the line into idolatry. This church also realizes that Christian nationalism contradicts the U.S.  
1499 motto, *e pluribus unum* (out of many, one). It effectively substitutes “we the (self-declared) true  
1500 American-Christians” for “we the people.” It is an unhealthy form of patriotism that harms this country,  
1501 divides it, and especially endangers the well-being of vulnerable members of our society.  
1502

## 1503 VI. Selected Contemporary Concerns in Civic Life

1504 **Article 39** As we pray to discern God’s will for today, our church addresses particular issues in  
1505 contemporary civic life through its social teaching. Since 1988, social statements have addressed nearly  
1506 every facet of contemporary life: economics, criminal justice, science and human power, war and the  
1507 military-industrial complex, sexuality and family, health care, and others (visit  
1508 [www.elca.org/socialstatements](http://www.elca.org/socialstatements)).

1509  
1510 ELCA social messages have spoken to civic and political concerns such as human rights, terrorism, and  
1511 community violence ([www.elca.org/socialmessages](http://www.elca.org/socialmessages)). ELCA social policy resolutions, adopted by ELCA  
1512 assemblies, have addressed narrow policy questions. Some, for instance, speak to voter apathy, racially  
1513 motivated restrictions to voting, and gerrymandering ([resources.elca.org/? categories=fait-and-](http://resources.elca.org/?categories=fait-and-society)  
1514 [society](http://resources.elca.org/?categories=fait-and-society)).

1515  
1516 The issues addressed in this section do not revisit questions the ELCA already has addressed and  
1517 therefore is not intended to be comprehensive. Rather these articles supplement the existing teaching  
1518 of this church on selected contemporary questions.

1519  
1520 **Article 40** Among the most troubling contemporary hindrances to healthy civic life in the United States  
1521 at this time is hyperpartisan polarization because it undercuts the search for collaborative solutions and  
1522 significantly damages individuals and the social fabric. The U.S. political system depends on the presence  
1523 and work of partisan activity. Different interests and perspectives are normal, and the party system itself  
1524 provides an avenue for organizing, educating, and advocating for issues of political concern.

1525  
1526 Except for a few instances, such as the Civil War, however, this partisanship did not bar cross-party  
1527 work, collegiality, or friendships. Parties commonly formed coalitions, made compromises, and could  
1528 work together toward their varied yet overlapping views of the common good. Working together often  
1529 forged more effective ideas than working alone.

1530  
1531 At the time of writing, a quite different hyperpartisanship is increasingly evident. Political identity now is  
1532 often closely linked with other identifications such as ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, race, urban  
1533 or rural residence, cable news preference, and even what restaurants and stores are frequented. These  
1534 constellations of identification, or “mega-identities,”<sup>76</sup> are becoming supreme. The many commonalities

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<sup>76</sup> 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).

1535 that once connected people despite their political affiliation are increasingly overwhelmed by these  
1536 rigid, us-versus-them identities. Often they harm relationships between colleagues, friends, and family.

1537  
1538 These mega-identities take partisanship to new levels—to hyperpartisan polarization. They are  
1539 reinforced by cable news preference, social media echo-chambers, the assertions of elected officials,  
1540 and other factors. They are reinforced by a “nationalization” of issues and an oversize focus on those  
1541 issues. Local political campaigns are overwhelmed by outside money, and though there may still be  
1542 vibrant, democratic discussion of, for example, zoning policy at the local level, that discussion gets little  
1543 play in the media.

1544  
1545 The result is a polarization in which loyalty to hyperpartisan identities becomes absolute. This loyalty is  
1546 supposedly because of one’s family safety, protection from “them,” and the survival of “our way of life.”  
1547 This hyperpartisan polarization is practiced as “zero-sum power,” as a winner-take-all struggle for  
1548 domination. Those with alternative perspectives are designated as enemies rather than fellow members  
1549 of the public with a different view.

1550  
1551 Many people today cynically assume that such polarization is unavoidable. It is certainly a reality, and  
1552 many accept such outsize loyalty and harsh practices as necessary, or even right and good. However,  
1553 such hyperpartisan animosity destroys the fabric of a nation and the lives of those in it, especially people  
1554 already marginalized.

1555  
1556 This statement contends that a different approach is both possible and necessary. A productive  
1557 commonality of purpose is possible, one in which all can participate. There is a path forward that is not  
1558 motivated primarily by fear of others or belief in the greater purity of one’s own group. It is a path  
1559 different from rancorous attack and hyperpartisan animosity. These are vices to be confronted, both  
1560 within the church and within the wider society.

1561  
1562 This alternative approach is primarily not about tolerance but about respectful engagement. Article 14  
1563 describes how practicing discernment together is a gift for civic life and a witness to God’s love because  
1564 it models how people with opposing views can give priority to the practice of careful listening and  
1565 respect.

1566  
1567 For Christians, our identity in Christ as forgiven sinners undercuts polarization and urges love for every  
1568 person as a creature of God who is not to be dominated and whose well-being we should try to improve.  
1569 Our Christian identity encourages us to take seriously both our well-considered perspectives *and* the  
1570 limitations of our knowledge, thoughtfulness, empathy, and goodwill. Our identity in Christ encourages  
1571 a posture of prayer for those who disagree and careful listening to others whose well-considered  
1572 perspectives may be quite different from our own.

1573  
1574 The presumption of democracy and the criterion of mutual self-determination likewise require a starting  
1575 point of respect and listening (Article xx). These are comparable to the values articulated in the U.S.  
1576 Constitution—truly democratic values, commitment to diversity, and the public good of all. The  
1577 objective should be a common search for constructive ways to enhance the well-being of human society  
1578 and all creation.

1579  
1580 On that basis, the ELCA calls for an end to practices that contribute to hyperpartisan polarization. Both  
1581 as a society and as a church, we must end any winner-take-all mindsets, which approach our common  
1582 life together as if it were a highly competitive sporting event. Political opponents are not enemies simply

1583 because they have different opinions of what constitutes the best course forward on a specific issue or  
1584 because they travel in different social circles.

1585  
1586 It is possible to face difference without aggression and with an eye to the common good. It is even  
1587 possible to close huge gaps through an exchange of values and ideas that changes *all* participants for the  
1588 better. The solutions found in collaboration are often better, as most of us know from personal and  
1589 social experience. Civic, including political, experience should not be an exception.

1590  
1591 **Article 41** In this current polarized context, civic thought and opinion leaders as well as information  
1592 sources bear a particular responsibility to foster constructive debate and solutions. Though this is the  
1593 responsibility of each of us, individuals and groups look to thought and opinion leaders and to various  
1594 information sources to negotiate life in a fast-paced, information-saturated society. Most of us look to  
1595 both certified and unconventional experts, and both are influential in shaping the values and behaviors  
1596 of the public.

1597  
1598 Civic thought leaders do not always see themselves as such, but leadership comes in many forms and  
1599 exists in many forums. Elected and publicly appointed officials are obvious leaders. However, civic  
1600 thought leaders include community league coaches, social media influencers, news reporters, religious  
1601 ministers, activists, think tank staff, and the heads of nonprofit and volunteer organizations.

1602  
1603 A healthy society requires such leaders to be models of vigorous and constructive participation. To bring  
1604 people together, these leaders must renounce misleading and inflammatory discourse that hinders  
1605 conscientious listening among neighbors. Civil disagreement about issues and the interpretation and  
1606 relative importance of facts is understandable, but inflammatory rhetoric and personal attacks have no  
1607 place in the public arena. Our society needs to be a place of informed public dialogue that enables  
1608 people to hear one another and find solutions.

1609  
1610 The ELCA commends leaders who model constructive practices, which are essential to honest analysis  
1611 and creative solutions to social problems. Likewise we denounce “hateful, deceptive, violent speech that  
1612 has too readily found a place in our national discourse.”<sup>77</sup> Our church also encourages associations, think  
1613 tanks, and other sources of analysis and information to seek to understand cultural and political  
1614 differences rather than deride them. All of these are necessary steps toward building political  
1615 accommodation and encouraging fact-based negotiation.

1616  
1617 **Article 42** The saying is hundreds of years old that “falsehood flies, and truth comes limping after it,”<sup>78</sup>  
1618 but it is widely acknowledged that the spread of lies, rumors, and ignorance in civic life has reached new  
1619 levels today in media of all types. It is especially acknowledged as acute in social media activity.<sup>79</sup>

1620

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<sup>77</sup> 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](http://www.elca.org/news-and-events/8247).

<sup>78</sup> This saying is attributed to satirist Jonathan Swift, Anglican cleric (1667-1745).

<sup>79</sup> 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](https://mitsloan.mit.edu/ideas-made-to-matter/study-false-news-spreads-faster-truth). Another study ([www.newsguardtech.com/misinformation-monitor/september-2022/](http://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.”

1621 Healthy civic engagement depends on clear distinctions between fact and all forms of falsehood, ranging  
1622 from partial misstatements to intentional disinformation to outright lies. The reach of media and the  
1623 lack of clarity about the origins of its information, especially posts in social media, all necessitate  
1624 stronger self-regulation in all media. This urgency increases significantly given the ability of artificial  
1625 intelligence (AI) to convincingly conjure utterly false information, images, and video.

1626  
1627 The Eighth Commandment directs people of faith to exert efforts against bearing false witness. The  
1628 Small Catechism teaches that “we are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our  
1629 neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead, we are to come to their  
1630 defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.” Our church,  
1631 then, encourages us all to ask, in every personal interaction and on social media, whether our words or  
1632 those we repeat represent the best possible understanding of our neighbor.

1633  
1634 We should be “innocent as doves” when interpreting the intentions of our neighbor but “wise as  
1635 serpents” (Matthew 10:16) when discerning what information we encounter in any media. We should  
1636 not share:

- 1637 • Sensationalist headlines.
- 1638 • Insulting memes.
- 1639 • Information whose source we cannot verify.
- 1640 • Information from sources whose purpose or chief likely effect is to stir up anger or hatred and to  
1641 undermine, rather than foster, our civic unity.

- 1642  
1643 For the sake of U.S. civic life, the ELCA calls upon media and social media platforms to:
- 1644 • Align their policies and procedures worldwide with the most comprehensive and rigorous online  
1645 safety regulations provided by U.S. law.
  - 1646 • Regularly assess and publicly disclose the extent to which platforms may foster violations of civil  
1647 and human rights.
  - 1648 • Protect users by labeling AI-generated content.
  - 1649 • Allow oversight of operations in human rights hotspots.
  - 1650 • Allow transparency in algorithms and advertisements.
  - 1651 • Regularly assess, report on, and address hate speech, misinformation, and disinformation,  
1652 removing these as quickly as possible through fact-checking.

1653  
1654 **Article 43** In the political arena, money plays a commanding role. Individuals, corporations, lobbyists,  
1655 PACs, super PACs, nonprofits, industry trade groups, and interest groups spend money to influence  
1656 political campaigns. Contributions are spent in a variety of ways, including political advertising to  
1657 influence public opinion on candidates and ballot measures. Public officials are generally required by law  
1658 to report on their personal finances to ensure that ethical guidelines are followed. However, so-called  
1659 “dark money” is increasingly present. It is widely suspected to have an outsize influence on elections,  
1660 public policy, and political discourse.

1661  
1662 The U.S. Supreme Court has held that financial contributions by individuals and groups to political  
1663 campaigns are a form of free speech protected by the First Amendment.<sup>80</sup> The ELCA acknowledges that  
1664 publicly accountable financial contributions are both legal and basic to campaigning. They demonstrate  
1665 a level of commitment consistent with a donor’s views. Historically, laws often have included reporting  
1666 requirements for disclosure of a contributor’s name, address, and occupation. Individuals who choose to

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<sup>80</sup> See, e.g., *Buckley v. Valeo*, 424 U.S. 1 (1976).

1667 engage in contributing are expected to adhere to the appropriate laws and consider the implications  
1668 such disclosures could have with their employer(s) or other entities.

1669  
1670 Though some federal, state, and local laws continue to regulate the sources and contribution limits for  
1671 elections, it is widely recognized that recent Supreme Court opinions have altered the system of  
1672 campaign finance.<sup>81</sup> As a result, the expansive influence of money in elections and politics has become  
1673 an ever more dominant feature of public life.

1674  
1675 The ELCA affirms that every citizen should have the opportunity to play a free and active part in the  
1676 functioning of our communities. However, the ability to be heard should not be effectively limited to  
1677 those individuals, organizations, or corporations that have above-average financial wealth and resources  
1678 at their disposal.

1679  
1680 Democracy is threatened if those with the most disposable income have the dominant voice with  
1681 politicians while those with less are effectively silenced. Free speech does not include the right to drown  
1682 out the speech of one's neighbors. To do so is to obstruct equitable roles for all participants in a society.

1683  
1684 This church urges state and federal lawmakers to adopt legislation that sets limits on campaign and  
1685 other political contributions. Likewise, legislation is needed to increase transparency in our elections and  
1686 political processes through financial reporting by public officials, including the judiciary, about all  
1687 contributions and gifts. It is up to legislators to take steps that lead to the transparency of overpowering  
1688 corporate and super PAC money that distorts the political debate and influences our representatives.

1689 Our church urges policies and reforms that help to:<sup>82</sup>

- 1690 • Increase transparency and public awareness of campaign contributions and financial reporting
- 1691 by public officials.
- 1692 • Hold corporations publicly accountable for lobbying of trade associations that contradicts their
- 1693 publicly proclaimed standards.
- 1694 • Expand access for citizens across the economic spectrum to run for political office.
- 1695 • Reduce the power of wealth to shape political debate and media influence, including through
- 1696 political advertising.

1697  
1698 **Article 44** ELCA teaching has long held that it is the proper concern of government to regulate aspects of  
1699 social life to provide for the safety and well-being of its people. This church also recognizes that  
1700 sometimes government policies, statutes, regulations, and judicial opinions harm well-being more than  
1701 they promote it. Harm results from poorly conceived and implemented policies and from intentional  
1702 actions that discriminate against some in favor of others.

1703  
1704 There is a critical distinction between fallible structure and structured oppression. Government is fallible  
1705 because it is made up of humans. It has not served its purpose when its goals, policies, and programs are  
1706 poorly designed or implemented, or cause undue waste or hardship. In contrast, government becomes  
1707 oppressive when its goals, policies, and programs are designed or transformed into vehicles for  
1708 oppressing the neighbor—such as voter suppression laws or gerrymandering.

1709

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<sup>81</sup> 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.

<sup>82</sup> For more, see the ELCA document at [resources.elca.org/advocacy/money-in-politics/](https://resources.elca.org/advocacy/money-in-politics/).

1710 All public servants have a duty to ensure that government remains true to its purpose of protecting and  
1711 fostering the common good. Public partnerships between nonprofits (which include all faith-based  
1712 organizations) and the private sector can be means to enhance the work of both partners when  
1713 dedicated to the common good. Finally, when government goes astray, members of the public have an  
1714 obligation to seek reform through the procedures of democratic self-rule.

1715  
1716 It is not possible for this church, or any civic actor, to identify a complete set of ethical norms that apply  
1717 in all cases for discerning failures in civic and political life. Some criteria for discernment are elaborated  
1718 on in the articles of this statement and in previous ELCA social messages and social statements.<sup>83</sup>

1719  
1720 However, at a minimum, discernment regarding these everyday but weighty questions should strive to  
1721 include the perspectives of those affected as well as fair representation of those served. That is the  
1722 starting point for mutual self-determination and deciding whether the neighbor is being well served.

1723  
1724 **Article 45** The ELCA has worshipping communities in Washington, D.C., and several of the U.S. territories,  
1725 e.g., Guam, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Northern Mariana Islands. The  
1726 ELCA's Caribbean Synod, in fact, consists largely of several of these territories. This fact and the lives of  
1727 millions of people in these areas urge our church to discern the responsibility of the United States for  
1728 these areas under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Congress as possessions or unincorporated territories. The  
1729 ELCA recognizes that issues pertaining to the relationship between these territories and the wider U.S.  
1730 society are manifold and complex, but they must not be ignored.

1731  
1732 Many view the political relationship between the U.S. government and its unincorporated territories as  
1733 problematic because of the inherent inequality between the territories and the states. There is also the  
1734 specter of continued colonialist relationships in which territories lack any real power for self-  
1735 determination. Territories get a representative in Congress with voice but no vote, despite residents  
1736 being required to sign up for military selective service or having a long and distinguished record of  
1737 service to the U.S. Territorial residents pay taxes but do not have equitable representation. Many believe  
1738 that the U.S. Congress has actually undermined the democratic processes in the territories.<sup>84</sup>

1739  
1740 This church recognizes complicating factors. One of those is the legacy of racism, since the vast majority  
1741 of local residents in all the territories belong to racially minoritized groups—historically Black,  
1742 Indigenous, Latiné, and Pacific Islander people.

1743  
1744 The relationship between U.S.-based churches and the territories is also complicated because the  
1745 churches were complicit in colonizing territories, exploiting them economically, and stripping their  
1746 ancestral inhabitants of their religious and spiritual traditions.<sup>85</sup> The goal of converting people to  
1747 Christianity was deeply entangled with expansionist ideology. As Lutherans, we believe that the Holy  
1748 Spirit brings faith to people—it should not be forced or coerced by human action.

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<sup>83</sup> "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](http://www.elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements).

<sup>84</sup> A case in point is the Promesa law (see [oversightboard.pr.gov/debt/](http://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.

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

1749  
1750 Churches bear a responsibility to help repair the harm done. Intentional, humble listening is the starting  
1751 point for the principle of mutual self-determination and the first step on the path toward justice and  
1752 healing. This process of careful listening can be difficult and challenging. However, when rooted in a  
1753 people’s sincere willingness to understand one another, it can lead to new possibilities for reparation,  
1754 healing, and wholeness.<sup>86</sup>  
1755  
1756 This church urges its members, its ecumenical partners, and others of goodwill to foster and facilitate  
1757 processes of listening and accountability between the territories and those in positions of power over  
1758 them in the U.S. government. Consistent with the principle of mutual self-determination (Article 22), the  
1759 ELCA also is committed to advocating for equality in government representation for the District of  
1760 Columbia<sup>87</sup> and U.S. territories, and for their economic and social equity.  
1761  
1762 **Article 46** American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians are U.S. citizens with unique,  
1763 historical relationships to the U.S. Federally recognized tribes have sovereignty as Tribal Nations, and  
1764 the U.S. federal government has a federal trust responsibility with those nations.<sup>88</sup> This sovereignty and  
1765 the federal trust responsibility are based variously on treaties, the U.S. Constitution, and Supreme Court  
1766 decisions.  
1767  
1768 In these histories, treaties and other legal guarantees repeatedly were *not* honored by European settlers  
1769 and those who followed as they swept across the North American continent. Native people have  
1770 endured horrid racial, social, and economic oppression that constitutes some of the most shameful  
1771 chapters in American history. The ELCA, with others in this country, recognizes that this dreadful history  
1772 must be acknowledged, the status of Native Americans in the United States protected, and efforts at  
1773 reconciliation and justice increased.<sup>89</sup>  
1774  
1775 There are many layers to the history, but all must recognize that it is grounded in the Doctrine of  
1776 Discovery, which originated in 15th-century papal bulls.<sup>90</sup> The doctrine was introduced into United  
1777 States law by U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Marshall in *Johnson v. McIntosh* (1823). This decision  
1778 stipulated that the discovery of territory previously unknown to Europeans gave the discovering nation  
1779 title to territory against all other European nations, and that this title could be perfected by possession.  
1780

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<sup>86</sup> 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](http://www.elca.org/truthandhealing).

<sup>87</sup> 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/](http://resources.elca.org/faith-and-society/dc-congressional-voting-spr01/).

<sup>88</sup> 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](http://www.bia.gov), accessed February 10, 2025.

<sup>89</sup> “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](http://tinyurl.com/ywt42njz).

<sup>90</sup> 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](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discovery_doctrine) (accessed November 19, 2023).

1781 Though global in origin, this principle undergirded the actions of people who made claims on Native  
1782 lands in North America.<sup>91</sup> Justified by this doctrine, the settlers who moved across North America,  
1783 including predecessors of this church, claimed Indian lands as their own property.  
1784

1785 The legal doctrine was plainly rooted in Christian discourse. The ELCA has acknowledged that the  
1786 doctrine “created a theological framework that supported racism, colonialism, and the annihilation of  
1787 Indigenous people. Today it continues to support those evils and injustices found in our church, U.S. law,  
1788 and legal interpretation.”<sup>92</sup>  
1789

1790 The ELCA has joined other religious bodies in explicitly repudiating this European-derived doctrine,  
1791 calling it an “improper mixing of the power of the church and the power of the sword.”<sup>93</sup> This church has  
1792 acknowledged and called for repentance of its complicity in the colonialism that continues to harm tribal  
1793 governments and tribal members.<sup>94</sup>  
1794

1795 Early in its life, the ELCA named and acknowledged the sovereignty of federally recognized Tribal  
1796 Nations and committed to speaking out for their just treatment.<sup>95</sup> This social statement reaffirms this  
1797 church’s stance on the importance of that sovereignty. It calls for and commits this church to support  
1798 just policy in treaty rights, tribal sovereignty, religious freedom, and other matters that affect the civic  
1799 well-being of American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians.  
1800

1801 In particular, this statement calls upon the U.S. federal government, its agencies, and its residents, along  
1802 with all other governments, to:

- 1803 • Honor the legal trust relationship the U.S. federal government has with Tribal Nations or  
1804 federally recognized tribes, acknowledging their sovereignty, self-determination, and self-  
1805 governance.
- 1806 • Be guided by concern for truth, justice, reconciliation, visibility, equity, and healing as central to  
1807 these sovereign relationships.
- 1808 • Prioritize consultation with Tribal Nations that ensures equity and honors parity with them.
- 1809 • Give particular attention to policies and legislation that uphold sovereignty and increase Native  
1810 American self-determination.
- 1811 • Support efforts to increase voter registration and access to polling places and early voting while  
1812 opposing state efforts to raise barriers to the ballot box.
- 1813 • Engage in careful listening and consultation with Native Americans on matters with  
1814 environmental impact that affect their original and sovereign land.  
1815

1816 **Article 47** Comprehensive, honest civics education is an essential element for revitalized civic life. It  
1817 provides the building blocks of a society. The ELCA has addressed the social institution of education in  
1818 the United States and is on record that schools “ought to teach the principles and virtues of living

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<sup>91</sup> “Declaration,” 2.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., citing Augsburg Confession, XXVIII, Latin text, BC 2000.

<sup>94</sup> 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](http://www.elca.org/our-work/congregations-and-synods/ministries-of-diverse-cultures-and-communities/indigenous-ministries-and-tribal-relations/repudiation).

<sup>95</sup> ELCA Social Policy Resolution CA91.5.28., “1992: Year of Remembrance, Repentance, and Renewal.”

1819 together in responsible freedom in a democratic society, which includes respect for the diverse cultures  
1820 and beliefs of their students.”<sup>96</sup>

1821  
1822 To have a strong democracy, members of the public must know how civic institutions are supposed to  
1823 function and how they are called to participate. A comprehensive, honest civics curriculum therefore  
1824 must teach the whole story of U.S. history in all its aspirations, successes, and failures. It should  
1825 emphasize the values inherent in the U.S. Constitution. It should draw upon what the community holds  
1826 in common and explore in a fair and impartial way those issues on which the community is divided.

1827  
1828 Essential to that is both factual accuracy and including works of the many groups that have been part of  
1829 the American story. The ELCA encourages curricula that promote understanding of the full history of  
1830 U.S. government operations and cultures; it opposes legislation that prevents students from a full  
1831 engagement with those stories.

1832  
1833 **Article 48** No single solution will reduce the increasingly fevered polarization of the U.S. or repair the  
1834 damage that endangers our social fabric and democratic republic. One fundamental element is a  
1835 renewed, constructively grounded, and thoughtful commitment to civic life across this nation.  
1836 Hyperpartisan polarization is, in part, the result of individuals withdrawing from widespread  
1837 participation in civic life. This church holds that the return to a robust civic engagement as a public good  
1838 is both our calling as Christians and our responsibility as residents of this country.

1839  
1840 The social message “Government and Civic Engagement: Discipleship in a Democracy” addresses at  
1841 greater length the nature and purpose of a healthy civic engagement, especially in relation to  
1842 citizenship.<sup>97</sup> Among other elements, that message teaches that civic engagement takes numerous  
1843 forms—informed voting, attendance at public meetings, holding public office, political party  
1844 involvement, policy advocacy, community organizing, and nonviolent protest.

1845  
1846 The message points out that civic engagement arises both from concern about disorder and injustice and  
1847 from hope for the well-being of all. It affirms elements of a healthy civic engagement such as democratic  
1848 self-governance, support for public servants, and well-crafted policies that foster justice, racial and social  
1849 equity, and reconciliation. The ELCA urges its members and all residents of this society to contribute to  
1850 and urge robust civic participation.

1851

## Conclusion

1852  
1853  
1854 **Article 49** “Your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread.” As Jesus taught the  
1855 disciples, so we pray in this church. We do so in concert with Christians down through the ages and into  
1856 the future who, in the Spirit, are witnesses to God’s will for just peace and well-being. We do so in faith,  
1857 understanding that God’s creative power is shared throughout all creation and is given to human beings  
1858 to use in civic life for the good of all.

1859  
1860 May we walk humbly with you as we strive for justice, kindness, and peace in human society. May we as  
1861 your church live wisely by the civic use of the Law in joining your purpose toward *shalom*. May we, as

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

<sup>97</sup> “Government and Civic Engagement,” 14, [elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements](http://elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements).

1862 your people, join all others of goodwill in the work of government as gift, aspiration, and responsibility  
1863 to serve the common good of “we the people.” May we, as your forgiven ones, be empowered by your  
1864 gracious Word and Sacraments to boldly and courageously seek the good of the neighbor through our  
1865 participation in civic life.

## Glossary

1866 These terms are **underlined** when used the first time in a statement article.

1867

1868  
1869 **Alien work:** See “proper work” below.

1870

1871 **Book of Concord:** A collection of writings from 1580 that were subscribed to by some 80 royal and  
1872 municipal governments. It was published on the 50th anniversary of the 1530 Augsburg Confession and  
1873 is generally understood as an authoritative, confessional set of documents for the Evangelical/Lutheran  
1874 movement across the globe. The most widely affirmed writings include the Augsburg Confession, its  
1875 Apology, and Luther’s two catechisms. The ELCA accepts the entire book as authoritative.

1876

1877 **Christian nationalism:** A cultural framework that idealizes and advocates fusion of highly selected  
1878 Christian beliefs with U.S. civic life. This nationalistic ideology holds, among other things, that the U.S.  
1879 Constitution was divinely inspired, that Christianity should be a privileged religion in the United States,  
1880 and that this nation holds a uniquely privileged status in God’s eyes. Proponents range from those who  
1881 believe the U.S. legally should be declared a Christian nation (approximately 21% of the U.S. population)  
1882 to those involved in more virulent strains that are openly racist, patriarchal, and antidemocratic.

1883

1884 **Church:** Has multiple meanings that are largely dependent on context. Fundamentally “church” is the  
1885 event of God’s saving presence wherever two or three are gathered (Matthew 18:30). In the Lutheran  
1886 tradition, this event is specifically identified with God’s commands and promises in the proclamation  
1887 of the Word and distribution of the Sacraments. In its widest sense, the word applies to the universal  
1888 (catholic) body of Christ, describing all believers. “Church” is used to designate denominations (the  
1889 ELCA, for example) but also local congregations, as in “going to my church.” In this statement  
1890 regarding civic life, “this church” or “our church” refers to the ELCA as a body that is part of the  
1891 Church Catholic.

1892

1893 **Civic life:** Activities and institutions in society that are not primarily individual or that occur within a  
1894 family/household or private space. An activity is civic when it is in a public space, whether in one’s  
1895 neighborhood, state or nation, or beyond.

1896

1897 **Common good:** Has various definitions but is used here to denote what benefits a society in terms of  
1898 justice and peace for all people and creation. It conveys the belief that the purpose of government is to  
1899 seek these outcomes for the well-being of all members of the public.

1900

1901 **Community of moral deliberation/discernment:** A concept established in the first ELCA social  
1902 statement, *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*, as an element of the ELCA’s identity to which  
1903 our church is called to grow. The concept envisions the whole community praying for one another,  
1904 studying Scripture, and wrestling together toward moral understanding and action. This approach to  
1905 doing ethics is bottom-up rather than top-down. Romans 12:2 speaks of discernment, and Reformation  
1906 writings such as the Smalcald Articles present the idea as a mark of the church, that of “the mutual  
1907 conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters.”

1908

1909 **Confessions:** Has wider meanings in Scripture and historical theology but, in this study, designates the  
1910 ELCA's authorized teaching standard of the Book of Concord.

1911  
1912 **Corporate social responsibility:** The means by which a corporation, nonprofit, or other organization  
1913 intentionally specifies its contributions or responsibilities toward the well-being of society, especially in  
1914 economic decisions. The Corporate Social Responsibility program of the ELCA, for instance, decides ELCA  
1915 investment policy in socially responsible ways, as guided by ELCA social teaching. This program also  
1916 enables dialogue between this church and representatives of the businesses with which it deals  
1917 regarding the social implications of company practices.

1918  
1919 **Dark money:** Campaign contributions in which the source of the money is not disclosed to the public but  
1920 silently influences political discourse, election outcomes, and public policy.

1921  
1922 **Discernment:** The practice of evaluating multiple factors in an issue to find an appropriate response that  
1923 seems God-pleasing. It generally implies active theological or ethical reflection involving study, prayer,  
1924 and dialogue. It seeks wisdom through God's Spirit as understood through a community process  
1925 (Romans 12:1-2). (See also "Community of moral deliberation/discernment.")

1926  
1927 **Doctrine of Discovery:** Several papal bulls in the 15th century established this doctrine, which legally  
1928 codified for European countries and settlers land acquisition, colonialism, and religious intolerance in  
1929 relation to Indigenous people.

1930  
1931 **Establishment Clause:** The first clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. It states that  
1932 government "shall make no law regarding the establishment of religion." This means that government  
1933 cannot establish a state/national religion or impose any form of worship or devotion upon members of  
1934 the public. It does not mean that a person's religious commitments cannot or should not enter into or  
1935 influence their public life in the form of political activity or broader civic engagement. (See also  
1936 "Separation of church and state" and "Free exercise of religion.")

1937  
1938 **Ethics:** The science and art of asking "How then shall we live?" or "What is the good?" Ethics implies  
1939 extended reflection and dialogue toward critically considering, defining, negotiating, and determining  
1940 what ought to be or what ought to be done. It is a practice done both by individuals and as a  
1941 community. It often involves analyzing a current, accepted moral idea to determine its rationale or ways  
1942 it should be altered. The terms "ethics" and "morals" are somewhat different but are often used  
1943 interchangeably. (See "Morality.")

1944  
1945 **Faith:** Has many meanings and uses, even in a religious context, but the fundamental Lutheran  
1946 understanding teaches that faith is a trusting response to and relationship with God. This relationship of  
1947 trust is expressed through means such as active participation in religious communities and attention to  
1948 key teachings of the church universal.

1949  
1950 **Free Exercise Clause:** The second phrase in the First Amendment ("Congress shall make no law ...  
1951 prohibiting the free exercise [of religion]") focuses on the relationship between faith and public/civic  
1952 life. The first clause, prohibiting establishment of a state religion, clears the ground for the faithful to  
1953 determine their own best way of exercising faith in their own public life. (See "Establishment Clause"  
1954 and "Separation of church and state.")

1955  
1956 **God's sovereignty:** Has had multiple meanings in Christian thinking but fundamentally describes God's

1957 supreme power or God’s rule and reign over and in the universe. This statement speaks theologically of  
1958 God’s sovereignty as the source of all power and thus of political sovereignty. Both power and  
1959 sovereignty are fundamental to civic life. (See “Power.”)  
1960

1961 ***Justice:*** Generally refers to an underlying sense of fairness, right treatment, and reciprocity. This  
1962 statement emphasizes the aspects of justice related to civic life and government. These include fair and  
1963 equal treatment under the law, ending oppression based on power differences, and, as emphasized in  
1964 the Scriptures, a right and wholesome relationship with God and within community.  
1965

1966 ***Law and Gospel:*** Expresses a key Lutheran emphasis that God’s Word and work in human society  
1967 occur under different means. “Law” is understood to have two forms: (1) as a directive and  
1968 corrective for society (first, or civil, use) and (2) as judgment on sin (second, or theological, use).  
1969 “The Law” is a summary term for God’s directives for human living, such as the Ten  
1970 Commandments. “The Gospel” is the good news of God’s mercy, received in faith on account of  
1971 Jesus Christ.  
1972

1973 ***Luther, Martin (1483-1546):*** German priest, theologian, author, and professor. Luther was a seminal  
1974 figure in the Protestant Reformation and is the namesake of Lutheranism.  
1975

1976 ***Mega-identity:*** An interlocking set of social identifications: ethnic, religious, urban/rural,  
1977 conservative/liberal. When these identifications cohere in a set that is semifixed and loaded with huge  
1978 emotional stakes, they become a mega-identity that walls off people from others, especially those who  
1979 don’t share the same characteristics or beliefs.  
1980

1981 ***Morality/morals:*** Originates from the Greek word *mores*, which designated the binding customs of a  
1982 culture or society related to what is good or right. It designates an existing or already negotiated moral  
1983 structure. In every society, certain actions, goals, and character traits are considered moral, immoral, or  
1984 some combination thereof, according to established norms. “Ethics” and “morals” often are used  
1985 interchangeably. (See “Ethics.”)  
1986

1987 ***Neighbor:*** Has multiple references but suggests a member of one’s community. However, because  
1988 humans live in multiple communities, the term can refer to a person in one’s neighborhood or town,  
1989 region, international community, or even ecological community.  
1990

1991 ***Neighbor justice:*** Seeking to meet neighbors’ needs for equality and equity in public life. Though rooted  
1992 in the biblical directive to “love your neighbor as yourself,” the term expresses how faith is active in  
1993 love, seeking justice in relationships and in the structures of society.  
1994

1995 ***Partisanship:*** Strong loyalty or blind adherence to a specific party, group, set of beliefs, or person.  
1996

1997 ***Polarization:*** As used in this study, a partisanship so strong that partisans are rigidly set apart from other  
1998 groups, whose beliefs and views are considered utterly opposite and most often inferior, dangerous to  
1999 society, and unworthy of consideration. There is no value of or respect for “those people.” In everyday  
2000 speech, such polarization is often expressed in the saying “my way or the highway.”  
2001

2002 ***Politics:*** Comes from the Greek word *polis*, meaning the city or place of the people. As used here,  
2003 designates the activities of deciding how to govern and order life in community. Politics in this  
2004 sense is the activity through which people exercise decisions about “who gets what, when, where,

2005 and how” to fulfill the purpose that all may flourish. It is the necessary art of guiding or influencing  
2006 government to seek the common good. (See “Common good.”)

2007  
2008 **Political:** That which relates to political activity. (See “Politics.”)

2009  
2010 **Power:** All power is grounded in God, who is all-powerful and whose sovereignty creates, sustains,  
2011 and redeems creatures who are not God. Divine power is not a possession but a gift that aims to  
2012 create power for others. Power is not merely sovereignty or the capacity to control. To the extent  
2013 that acts of power, whether political or otherwise, are reduced to such control, they distort and  
2014 pervert power because sovereignty is not an end in itself. Rather, power reaches its end in the gift  
2015 of power to and for the fulfillment of others. In Luther’s theology, this understanding of divine  
2016 power is central to his theology of creation, justification by grace, and the Lord’s Supper.

2017  
2018 **Proper versus alien work:** “Proper” and “alien” are best known among Lutherans in connection to  
2019 the distinction between the “proper work” of God in justifying sinners and the “alien work” of God in  
2020 condemning sinners. However, these terms are theologically useful in related, if more general,  
2021 meanings because the word “alien” comes from the Latin *alius*, meaning “other.” In this statement,  
2022 the distinction is made in terms of the calling of rostered ministers. The unique “proper work” of the  
2023 ministry of the Word is defined in the historic Lutheran tradition and in our Confessions in terms of  
2024 the proclamation of Christ’s mediatorial and redemptive work, including justification, sanctification,  
2025 and eternal life. At the same time, rostered ministers of the Word also necessarily engage in other  
2026 kinds of work; these works can helpfully be described as “alien work.”

2027  
2028 **Religious diversity:** The state of affairs in which more than one religion is accepted within a society. In  
2029 the United States, the term generally indicates a situation in which the society sees the value of each  
2030 person having their own religious beliefs and practicing them openly and safely. This includes the  
2031 freedom to practice no religion.

2032  
2033 **Rostered ministers:** In the ELCA, includes all the ordained such as bishops, pastors, chaplains, and  
2034 deacons.

2035  
2036 **Self-determination:** Most basically, the ability of people or communities to determine their own  
2037 objectives and actions in the mutuality of common life, with minimal external compulsion. In terms of  
2038 political authority, it means that people have the right to freely choose their government within the  
2039 collective life of a society.

2040  
2041 **Self-governance:** The ability of people to play a fundamental role in the functioning of their  
2042 government.

2043  
2044 **Separation of church and state:** Often used as shorthand for the Establishment Clause of the U.S.  
2045 Constitution, which forbids state-sponsored religion. However, this applied meaning of the phrase is  
2046 contested. For example, many people believe it means that religious convictions or religious institutions  
2047 should have no legitimate role in social or political life. The ELCA constitution, on the other hand,  
2048 endorses institutional separation with functional interaction and argues that the church as a civic body  
2049 must avoid partisanship but engage in civic life because God calls people of faith to join God’s activity  
2050 there.

2051  
2052 **Shalom:** Hebrew word used in the Scriptures to denote God’s intent for whole, healthy, peaceful,

2053 joyous, just relations among all elements in God’s creation. It is often translated as “peace,” but it  
2054 means far more than mere peace of mind or absence of violence. In the Scriptures, *shalom* indicates  
2055 universal well-being and wholeness—a state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural  
2056 gifts fruitfully employed. Though the term appears in what Christians call the Old Testament, it also has  
2057 a long, rich history as a central and complex concept within Judaism that Christians should acknowledge  
2058 and respect.

2059  
2060 ***Sin***: Expresses the human proclivity for being in opposition to God. Sin is variously described as  
2061 disobedience, lack of trust, self-centeredness, pride, or complacency, among other things. Sin occurs in  
2062 an individual’s thoughts and actions but also is expressed in organizations, institutions, and systems. In  
2063 the last three cases, it is often termed “structural” or “systemic” sin.

2064  
2065 ***Solidarity***: A kinship within all of nature that issues from God’s creative activity. The term expresses the  
2066 contention that the interests of the entire community of life should be legitimate concerns when  
2067 decisions are made and actions evaluated.

2068  
2069 ***Sovereignty***: Can be used in various ways but, in this statement, refers to ultimate authority in a  
2070 particular arena.

2071  
2072 ***Systemic sin***: A theological theme recognizing that social and political systems are developed by humans  
2073 and that, because of this, the sin embedded in them is greater than the sin of any individual action. For  
2074 instance, consider a society in which a racial minority has dramatically less access to political power  
2075 because of laws or widespread discrimination and, therefore, has less chance of living and thriving.

2076  
2077 ***Theology***: Can indicate academic or abstract reflection but, in this study, generally refers to faithful  
2078 reflection about anything related to God. Every person of faith, therefore, engages in theology when  
2079 expressing thoughts about God, the church, God in relation to civic life, etc.

2080  
2081 ***Theology of the cross***: Refers to a theology that sees “the cross” (that is, divine self-revelation) as the  
2082 only source of ultimate knowledge concerning who God is and how God saves. Identified with the  
2083 writings of Martin Luther, it contrasts with the “theology of glory,” which places great emphasis on  
2084 human capacity and human reason to know who God is and what God wills.

2085  
2086 ***Three estates***: Used to designate the fundamental structures in human society (originally in Christian  
2087 Europe). During the Reformation period, the three overarching social functions (estates) were identified  
2088 as (1) the church, (2) the government, and (3) the family (which included all of society’s economic  
2089 functions). The concept remains useful as a teaching about God’s active involvement in society and  
2090 human roles therein, but it must be understood in contemporary terms.

2091  
2092 ***Two kingdoms***: A traditional theological term described more accurately by other terms from the  
2093 Reformation. (See “Two reigns, hands, or regimens of God.”)

2094  
2095 ***Two reigns, hands, or regimens of God***: Refer to Lutheran teaching that distinguishes between God’s  
2096 activity in the world through secular means and God’s gracious activity through explicitly gracious means  
2097 in the church. God’s “right-hand reign” conveys the tangible power of God’s love and forgiveness to  
2098 people of faith, which stirs us to forgive others, to express mutual love and care, and to strive for justice.  
2099 God’s “left-hand reign” works through secular roles, structures, and institutions to protect and foster  
2100 the social well-being of the people and creation. The ELCA teaches that both of God’s two reigns (hands,

2101 ways, regimens) are necessary for governing creation and that they are interrelated.

2102

2103 **Vocation:** In this statement, a calling from God that comes as both gift and responsibility. The ELCA  
2104 understands baptismal vocation as fundamental; it is God’s saving call, lived out in joyful response  
2105 through service to the neighbor in daily life. This overarching vocation is expressed in multiple callings  
2106 (or specific vocations) such as being a responsible citizen, parent, student, worker, etc.

2107

2108 **Word:** Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom God’s message to us, as both Law  
2109 and Gospel, reveals God’s judgment and mercy. The ELCA constitution holds that the Word is  
2110 expressed in creation and in the history of Israel but is centered in all its fullness in the person and  
2111 work of Jesus Christ. The canonical Scriptures of the Old Testament and New Testament are the written  
2112 Word of God in the sense that they are inspired by God’s Spirit as the writers tell the story and  
2113 announce God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. Through them, God’s Spirit speaks to us to create and  
2114 sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.

2115

2116 **Works righteousness:** As conceived during the Reformation period, describes the practice or belief that  
2117 some level of right activity, belief, or character is required to achieve righteousness in God’s eyes. The  
2118 Lutheran tradition encourages people to seek righteousness (right action, character, and relationship) in  
2119 civic life but emphasizes the biblical teaching that no works righteousness can achieve God’s salvation  
2120 (Romans 3:21). Righteousness is given by God’s mercy as a gift on account of Christ and is received by  
2121 faith.

2122

2123

## Implementing Resolutions

2124

### **Resolved:**

- 2125 1. To urge members of this church to pray, participate in, and advocate for civic life in the United  
2126 States that reflects God’s activity and call, which seek both the well-being of all people and a  
2127 creation marked by justice and peace;
- 2128 2. To encourage members to draw inspiration from the ELCA social message “Government and  
2129 Civic Engagement: Discipleship in a Democracy,” which highlights the call to embrace daily our  
2130 baptismal vocation through active participation in self-governance;
- 2131 3. To reaffirm and encourage use across our church of other existing social teaching and policy  
2132 documents that promote robust and wise civic participation, such as those that address matters  
2133 of voting, campaign finance, public service, nonviolent protest, and the like;
- 2134 4. To recognize with deep appreciation the commitments and efforts by those in this church—  
2135 including but not limited to churchwide organization teams such as Witness in Society and  
2136 Building Resilient Communities, as well as the many church-related social ministry organizations  
2137 and educational institutions—that contribute to healthy civic life through service, advocacy, or  
2138 education;
- 2139 5. To call upon all members of this church to intentionally evaluate the dangers of polarization and  
2140 the threats posed by disregard for democratic practices and self-government;
- 2141 6. To encourage ELCA worshiping assemblies and ministries to build bridges, foster reconciliation,  
2142 practice communal discernment, provide opportunities for difficult conversations, and address  
2143 polarization constructively in their communities;
- 2144 7. To encourage synod leaders, in collaboration with other appropriate bodies, to explore creating  
2145 or expanding state public policy advocacy in their domains as part of the ELCA Witness in Society  
2146 network, similar to those already existing in several states;

- 2147 8. To direct the churchwide office, in consultation with the Conference of Bishops, theologians,  
2148 and ethicists, rostered leaders, and elected lay leaders, to develop guidelines and protections  
2149 consistent with this social statement regarding the roles in civic life of representatives of this  
2150 church who have official responsibility to preach, teach, and lead on behalf of our church;
- 2151 9. To call upon the publishing and educational ministries of this church, including but not limited to  
2152 Augsburg Fortress Publishers, to consider the need for civics education curricula, civic  
2153 participation guidance, and related theological reflection, and to create these in multiple  
2154 formats, including multimedia and online;
- 2155 10. To call upon the publishing and educational ministries of this church, including but not limited to  
2156 Augsburg Fortress Publishers, to explore the need for resources dedicated to nonviolent  
2157 resistance and peaceful engagement in civic life, with special concern for materials dedicated to  
2158 religious and political histories, liturgical guidance, and training for rostered and lay leaders;
- 2159 11. To direct the Witness in Society team of the churchwide organization and to call upon all  
2160 expressions of this church in their advocacy efforts to support and advocate for policies and laws  
2161 consistent with this social statement, and to give sustained attention to the fresh convictions  
2162 and commitments found here in the creation of programs and projects;
- 2163 12. To direct the Ecumenical and Inter-religious Relations team in the Office of the Presiding Bishop  
2164 to share this statement as a resource for dialogue, discernment, and collaboration with  
2165 ecumenical and interreligious partners toward the well-being of all people and creation from  
2166 within the U.S. context;
- 2167 13. To urge faculty, staff, and administrators of ELCA-related colleges, universities, and seminaries  
2168 to renew and emphasize education toward callings in public service, and to model and  
2169 encourage dynamic civic participation among their students;
- 2170 14. To direct appropriate units in the churchwide organization, coordinated by the Office of the  
2171 Presiding Bishop, to establish or oversee processes for implementation of these resolutions,  
2172 with an initial report to the fall meeting of the ELCA Church Council in 2027.