



**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

*A social message on ...*

# **Government and Civic Engagement in the United States: Discipleship in a Democracy**

*As adopted unanimously by the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on June 24, 2020.*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

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Lutherans care about government because it is a gift from God intended for the safety and flourishing of human life.<sup>1</sup> Yet too often and in too many ways, this gift has been abused.

There is a spirit of broad dissatisfaction, mistrust, protest,<sup>2</sup> and even contempt of government in the United States.

According to a Pew survey, the percentage of U.S. citizens who trust the federal government to do what is right all or most of the time fell steadily from 77% in 1964 to 17% in 2019.<sup>3</sup>

We Lutherans are grateful when government functions as God's gift .... this church affirms that government is indispensable for safeguarding and improving human life and creation. p. 17

- Government OF the people has come to be seen as distant and oppressive.
- Government BY the people has come to be seen as increasingly controlled by a small minority of elites.
- Government FOR the people has come to be seen as unjust in who benefits and who pays.

This concern about dysfunctional government at federal, state, and local levels is widespread. Some experience government as a threat to personal freedoms when laws are enforced selectively or not at all. Some experience government as a danger to the safety and well-being of communities, particularly when law enforcement and the court system distribute justice unequally. Some see government violating moral norms by insufficiently protecting human life, or by giving some people unfair advantage over others.

Some experience government as a threat to financial well-being, as when taxes rise or overly burdensome regulations are imposed. Anger and mistrust may follow when governmental structures are used to enrich the few at the expense of everyone else. Some see government as ineffectual, as when it lets infrastructure decay. Some see government as inept when it fails to respond adequately to natural disasters and local, regional, or worldwide crises.

Yet government remains God's gift because it is intended to do what churches, families, individuals, and businesses cannot do on their own: protect and coordinate the well-being of individuals, communities, and creation. Some people object to the church involving itself in matters related to government, in "politics." Taking partisan stances is not the church's role, but "politics" has to do with negotiating how the benefits and burdens of living in a society are shared. Politics is key to self-governance.

To understand how important government is, consider life without the safety and services that a just and well-functioning government typically provides.

At the local level, consider:

- drinking water ... without purification
- human sewage ... without treatment
- resources and packaging for consumption ... without garbage removal
- public safety ... without accountability
- childhood ... without schools

At the state level, consider:

- travel ... without highways or trains
- health care ... without regulation
- wildfires ... without firefighters
- crime ... without recourse to law enforcement, courts, and prisons
- natural spaces ... without protection
- education ... without state universities

At the federal level, consider:

- old age ... without some form of social support such as Social Security or Medicare
- food ... without inspection
- drugs ... without certification of their safety and effectiveness
- poverty ... without some form of income-support, job-training options, etc.
- immigration ... without any controls or any lawful process and protections for those who seek entry
- agriculture ... without price supports or subsidies
- flying ... without air traffic control
- banking ... without deposit insurance or any regulations
- national security ... without armed forces or homeland security programs
- natural disasters ... without aid for rescue and reconstruction
- technological and medical innovation ... without federal research support
- civil liberties ... without judicial protection

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Many people experience these benefits to the point where they are taken for granted. Others experience the harm that results when government fails—as when the residents of Flint, Mich.,

do not have access to clean water or the residents of New Orleans, coastal New Jersey, and Puerto Rico receive insufficient government help after natural disasters. Others point to times when government inflicts suffering on asylum-seekers and other immigrants, or when Black women and men die at the hands of law enforcement, or when government violates civil liberties.

ELCA social teaching,<sup>4</sup> consistent with classical Lutheran thought, recognizes the ambiguity that civil government at all levels can be a force for good or for evil— or, most accurately, *both* in some combination.

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This realistic view of government holds in tension the failures of our shared political life with the recognition that God intends for government to protect all people and to enable human societies to flourish (Romans 13:1-7).<sup>5</sup> This realistic view establishes a fruitful middle ground between idolatrous endorsement of government or its policies and cynical rejection of the good it provides.

ELCA social teaching holds that all residents of the United States have a responsibility to make government function well—not to abandon our democracy but to engage it in a spirit of robust civic duty. For Lutherans, this responsibility is lived out as a calling from God, expressed in the discipleship described in our baptismal promises. It is based on our understanding of how God governs human society.

## **II. GOD'S TWO WAYS OF GOVERNING<sup>6</sup>**

The Christian faith teaches that God rules all of creation. This authority expresses God's single intent to foster human flourishing intertwined with God's concern for all creation. Historically, Lutherans have recognized that God's rule is experienced in two distinct but interconnected ways. These two ways for governing are necessary because of human sin. They have sometimes been described as the "right" and the "left" hands of God.<sup>7</sup> (These terms refer strictly to handedness, not political orientation.)

Through the right hand, God instills faith in Jesus Christ to actively redeem those who recognize their sin and trust God's promise. Here God acts upon the "inner" or personal dimensions of our lives through God's promise given in Word and Sacrament. Here God uses the Scriptures, prayer, sermons, worship, and human conscience to transform our relationship with God and thereby with each other.

God's right hand conveys the tangible power of God's love and forgiveness to people of faith, which stirs us to forgive others, to express mutual love and care, and to strive for justice. Earthly government has no role in the work of saving us from sin. Only God can bring about the fundamental change of heart that is true faith.

At the same time, God's left hand operates in the "outer" social, political, and economic world. Here God works through human roles, structures, and institutions to foster the well-being of the people and world God creates. Lutheran teaching describes God's work as hidden or "masked" behind these roles, structures, and institutions.

In this "outer" world, what we see is human activity, but God's intent is to work through this human activity to order and provide earthly justice and enough for all. Earthly or civil government is indispensable here, standing alongside church, family, and the economy as basic institutions that structure human life.

Our church teaches that God's two ways of governing are both necessary and interrelated.

God's left-handed ways of working through human activity are masked. However, those who trust in the forgiveness, love, and mercy they receive through God's right hand are freed to participate in government and civil society as agents of God's purpose for the flourishing of human lives and communities. In this way, "God's reign intersects earthly life, transforming us and how we view the systems of this world."<sup>8</sup>

God's two ways of governing are interrelated through at least five vital themes. These themes explain how earthly government can be a force for improving as well as safeguarding the lives of its residents and citizens. This is true even though earthly

governments are fallible because of both individual actors and institutional structures. While these themes do not provide a description of how our civil institutions and officials always perform, they provide critical insights for Christian understanding of God's work in human society.

***First, God's law is God's will for human life.*** The law tells us to love God and our neighbors (Matthew 22:37-39). This supreme demand drives Christians to recognize that we are estranged from God and our neighbors. It impels us to seek forgiveness and reconciliation from God's right hand, through Christ. Lutherans call this the "theological use of the law."

At the same time Lutherans understand that God's law makes human community possible. Lutherans call this the "civil use of the law." The Ten Commandments, for instance, are widely recognized by many people as an ancient summary for this purpose (Exodus 20:1-17). The existence of social laws, however imperfect, reflect the activity of God's "left hand." This does not mean that we believe God endorses specific legislation; it means that government must be founded on the rule of civil law because humans are sinful.

The civil use of God's law includes coercive laws, some of which are meant to deter and protect against criminality. The civil use also employs coordinating laws, which structure the social, economic, and political dimensions of our lives. The civil use of law is intended to give concrete shape to justice and equity, insofar as it aims at the well-being of the neighbor.<sup>9</sup>

***Second, God's rule in both hands is marked by equality.*** In God's right-hand work *all* have sinned and *all* are in equal need of redemption (Romans 2:1-11). None can claim privilege or status over another before God. The Lutheran Confessions also teach that faithful people equally have the capacity to pray for and minister to each other—the "priesthood of all believers."

In God's left-hand rule there is another kind of equality: *all* people have fundamental dignity and rights. For Christians, as well as countless others, this equality is grounded in the belief that all human beings are created in God's image.

It is true that the world is fractured along economic, political, social, cultural, ethnic, racial, and gender lines. However, human dignity means all persons have claim on the protection, care, and concern for equity that government should provide. This is true regardless of residency or citizenship status.<sup>10</sup>

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***Third, God's right-hand rule inspires a powerful impulse of empathy.*** As used in political discourse, empathy includes the capacity to recognize and honor every human being as a person with dignity and rights.<sup>11</sup> For the Christian, empathy is one way in which love and compassion (Matthew 25:31-46) may be embodied in the world of civil authority, through God's left-hand work.

As the gospel message of forgiveness releases individuals from incapacitating anxiety about their own salvation, it opens up space in their worldly lives for a sense of vocation of service to their neighbors. Empathy cannot negate the pervasive and insidious power of sinful self-centeredness or the fear that lies behind it.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, empathy helps us see even strangers as neighbors—to become aware of our biases—as we try to imagine the world from perspectives other than our own and act accordingly.

***Fourth, God has concern for justice in both ways of working.*** In God's left-hand governance, earthly justice is most fundamentally done when people get what they are due. Minimally it involves fair and proportionate punishment for wrongful deeds.

In the left hand there is also another type of justice. Because government's God-given role is to protect and ensure the welfare of its people, its scope goes beyond individual deeds to the health of the whole society. This involves, to the greatest extent possible, some measure of restoration to individuals and groups who are injured by wrongful deeds.

While not a special Christian insight, we recognize an emphasis on this kind of restoration in the earthly ministry of Jesus.

Jesus protects the woman found to be committing adultery and reminds those who are judging her that they are sinners just as she is (John 8:7-8). Jesus heals and restores the lepers who have been largely abandoned by their community (Luke 17:11-19).

Just as no one stands above the law, no one falls below the reach of restoration. In this sense for Christians, God's right hand of forgiveness and mercy seasons our understanding of justice beyond simply what one deserves and toward a more expansive view of reconciled community.

***Fifth, God imparts purpose to the roles of worldly governance.*** Some government officials and the public they serve see such roles as means primarily for power and gain. It is the proper task of the church, however, to declare that government, citizenship, and public service are gifts to be exercised with integrity and respect for the well-being of human communities. They are not entitlements to be clawed after or obstacles to be avoided or eliminated.

**These interconnections** between God's left-hand and right-hand governance are vividly foreshadowed by Jesus' encounter with the Roman Centurion at Capernaum (Luke 7:1-10).<sup>13</sup> Yet even in the midst of the interconnected themes, it is clear that serious tensions mark the two ways in which God governs, due to the enduring power of sin. This church recognizes at least three temptations that must be avoided:

1. The belief that God's two ways of governing are entirely unrelated. This happens when faith is privatized and seen as unrelated to God's hidden work in civil life. (This was one of the ways German Christians justified support of the Nazi government.)
2. The dismissal of government as unnecessary or wholly evil.
3. The temptation for any government, country, political movement or party to claim a privileged relationship with God or special status in God's plan for redemption.

Lutherans adopt a more complex approach, a middle way confessing that government is of a fallen people, by a fallible people, but nonetheless intended by God as a blessing for all people.

### III. GOVERNMENTAL ROLES AND FUNCTIONS—IS THE NEIGHBOR BEING SERVED?

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These interconnections between the two ways in which God governs earthly life bear directly on assessing performance of governmental functions in the United States and on how we may choose to direct civic engagement. To evaluate how well agencies of government are doing their proper work of providing for the safety and well-being of those within the country's borders and/or jurisdiction, Lutherans ask one simple but all-encompassing question: is the neighbor being served?<sup>14</sup>

The question has no single or simple answer, given the scope of government in the United States. Government consists of thousands of agencies and millions of employees carrying out particular functions at the federal, state, local, territorial, and tribal levels, and abroad. While discernment ranges widely on what exactly it means to serve the neighbor, ELCA teaching about the nature of government and public service points to the following 14 guides for assessing the performance of government:

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**1. Consent of the governed.**<sup>15</sup> U.S. Lutherans have learned that their neighbors are best served by a government in which supreme earthly power is held publicly by the people (a democracy) and they are governed by representatives chosen in fair elections in which each person is assured of their vote (a republic).<sup>16</sup> Such consent requires government to allow the neighbors it serves to pursue their lives in a spirit of freedom.

The importance of this point is illustrated by the shameful history in which so many, such as African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinx Peoples, Native Peoples, and women, have been denied the right to vote, and so were governed without consent. Even today many people cannot vote on matters that affect them directly.

The situation in each case is complex and varied, but examples include Puerto Rico, the District of Columbia, American Indian reservations,<sup>17</sup> Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

**2. Unrestricted participation.** The political health of our nation still suffers from the stain of antidemocratic exclusion. Efforts to restrict access to voting should be condemned and resisted. Examples include requiring voters to show identification without issuing identification to all eligible voters, purging voter rolls of those who have not voted recently, denying access to voting by mail, or closing polling places so that voting becomes more difficult for eligible voters. Active suppression robs voters of a key means of participation.

**3. Public service as vocation.** Since the Reformation, Lutherans have recognized public service as a worthy calling—a means by which all individuals may serve the common good. Examples include educators, military, law enforcement, medical providers, and so forth.

For Lutherans, one way Christian vocation finds expression is through dedicated, competent public service.<sup>18</sup> Public service is not limited to paid government employees. It includes those who run for political office or those who volunteer in political campaigns. Public service includes those who sit on advisory boards, volunteer at national parks, or pursue forms of citizen involvement.

**4. Functions and roles for public benefit.** The work of government is carried out through roles designed to serve particular functions. A given role is occupied by a person who has the expectation—and responsibility—to serve the public rather than personal ambition or gain. Government is to “serve the good of society.”<sup>19</sup>

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There is a sharp distinction between public service and private gain, a distinction measured by the straightforward question “Whose good is being served?” Laws, regulations, and enforcement are needed to separate officeholders from their personal interest, so that the neighbor is served.<sup>20</sup>

**5. Equity for public servants.** Government employees need to be paid fairly for their work and to enjoy the benefits they seek to obtain and protect for the neighbors they serve.<sup>21</sup> Differences in function and role are to be recognized and rewarded. Sacrifice for public service must not be forced upon government employees; it can be taken on only voluntarily.

**6. Neighborly service to strangers.** Government service should operate without discrimination in regard to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, or other individual characteristics.<sup>22</sup> Governmental agencies and employees should encounter the public impartially, as *strangers* to whom law-defined, obligatory performances are due, and from whom law-defined, obligatory performances are expected.

Except at the local level, these strangers likely will remain strangers. Strangers are encountered in shared public spaces, rather than in our private lives.<sup>23</sup> Such encounters, when respectful, help ensure fairness and impartiality. Strangers encountered in public spaces are rendered neighbors by Christian love through competent, dedicated, and compassionate service.

**7. Respect and dignity.** The way in which government officials treat each other and the public they serve should be governed by a spirit of respect for human dignity. Such respect involves addressing matters of policy through reason and persuasion rather than denigrating or marginalizing other individuals or groups.

**8. Adequate regulation.** The proper concern of government is with the safety and well-being of the people within its boundaries, so it must serve as a referee in economic life. Consumers must be protected. The market economy creates abundant goods and services, but when left unchecked, it generates harmful inequalities of wealth and power. When the market economy fails to incorporate all social costs (pollution, exploitation, etc.) into the prices of goods and services, governmental action is needed to contain the harm done to the health and well-being of people and of creation.<sup>24</sup>

**9. Reform of government.** Not only might public officials be personally corrupt, but the functions they carry out, as outlined in policies, statutes, regulations, and laws, may be corrupt by

design or corrupted in practice. A government function quickly loses credibility if carried out unfairly or arbitrarily, in a way that discriminates against some in favor of others. Government systems should strive to include the perspectives of those affected by their decisions and to seek fair representation of the communities they serve.

Here a distinction must be drawn between structured evil and fallible structure. Government becomes evil when its goals, policies, and programs are designed or transformed into vehicles for harming the neighbor—such as voter suppression laws and gerrymandering. In contrast, government is fallible when its goals, policies, and programs are poorly designed or implemented, and cause waste or hardship. “Red tape” is an ongoing, genuine concern, as is bureaucratic stagnation.

Sometimes, governmental failure involves both evil and fallibility. In either case, public servants have the obligation to seek improvements in the design and function of the roles they take on. Citizens and residents also have an obligation to seek reform through the procedures of democratic self-rule, which may include nonviolent protest.

**10. Calling attention to abuses of power.** Government must always be held accountable. All public servants have a duty to ensure that government remains true to its purpose of protecting and fostering the common good. No function, organization, policy, or official is beyond reasoned, evidence-based criticism. Abuses of power must be named and challenged. Where reform through normal internal channels does not work, the function of whistleblower is necessary, and whistleblowers should be protected against retaliation.

**11. Maintaining the distinction between the role and the person filling it.** Good public servants can be caught in poorly designed, destructive, or corrupt roles. Well-designed and constructive roles can be occupied by inexperienced,

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incompetent, or corrupt individuals. Public servants are fallible but not immoral or evil unless they use their positions and functions to serve themselves or interests other than the public good. If the role is designed or used to harm people rather than help, it should be resisted and changed.

**12. Recognizing neighbors, not just citizens.** “Citizenship” is a status established and recognized by government; “neighbor” is a status God bestows on all people as a gift, regardless of legal status, racial or ethnic background, gender identity or sexual orientation, mental and/or physical ability or disability, religious conviction, or political ideology.<sup>25</sup>

Just as Christians enjoy the “priesthood of all believers” from God’s right hand, all people are to enjoy a “neighborhood of all residents” from God’s left hand. Official citizenship is to be honored and regulated by law—but not used to justify stripping any individual or group of their dignity or human rights as neighbor.

As an example, the ELCA has declared that all residents, asylum-seekers, and refugees in the United States are to be protected as neighbors, even as they await determination of immigration status in the courts.<sup>26</sup>

**13. Protecting individual freedom.** Each individual is created in the image of God. Government should serve the neighbor by protecting individual rights and liberties. These rights and liberties are important because they allow individuals to develop and employ God-given gifts without oppression from others or from the government.

**14. Accepting limitations on freedom.** Living within a network of governmental structures protects and privileges but does *not* absolutize individual freedoms. Living under government involves limiting certain freedoms and taking on responsibilities in order to foster well-being and other freedoms, both for ourselves and for others.

**These guidelines** set a high standard for government. That is evident to most people and sharply painful for those who have suffered neglectful or abusive treatment by government agencies or officials at all levels in the United States. The problem runs

deep, and many Lutherans are among those Americans who distrust government.

There are many examples of how government has betrayed the trust of the people and its mandate to protect. Many people of European descent think that political control has passed to distant elites contemptuous of their well-being. Many of African descent continue to experience the evil legacies of slavery, perpetuated in forms of legal discrimination, police brutality, and mass incarceration.

Many American Indians and Alaska Natives still suffer from the complex tangle of federal, state, and tribal government. Many Latinx people are often treated as foreigners in this country despite a presence in some areas that predates the founding of the United States. New citizens from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa face intolerant suspicion. Many white Americans living in extreme poverty have felt abandoned by their government. LGBTQ Americans also have experienced legal discrimination.

We have the responsibility to raise our voices and votes against misuse of government.

In response to these deeply troubling examples, Lutherans confess that we are complicit when we do not participate actively enough in the civic arena to strengthen and support the guidelines for government outlined above. We have the responsibility to raise our voices and votes against misuse of government. Despite a few heroic examples of resistance, in our history Lutherans too often have been uncritically obedient and subservient to their governments, even authoritarian ones.<sup>27</sup>

#### **IV. CALLED TO CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

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Over time Lutherans have learned that energetic civic engagement is part of their baptismal vocation, both as individuals and through the church's corporate witness. Such civic participation is not simply voluntary, idealistic, or altruistic. The ELCA holds to the biblical idea that God calls God's people to be active citizens and to ensure that everyone benefits from the good of government (Jeremiah 29:7, Romans 13:1-7).<sup>28</sup>

Civic engagement takes many forms. Examples include:

- informed and regular voting
- participation in government efforts such as the census
- attending public meetings
- public service as a government employee or in public office
- involvement with political parties and campaigns
- advocacy about particular issues
- volunteering for public-service organizations
- community organizing for social change
- nonviolent protest

Lutheran civic engagement arises both from a concern about disorder and injustice and from hope about what government can accomplish for the neighbor. God's law in its civic use is intended to contain human sin, and when it fails, all are harmed. Corrupt or fallible structures and individuals generate destructive consequences, sweeping the guilty and innocent alike into disorder or injustice.

However, in a democracy, disorder and injustice have the potential to call forth civic engagement toward a constructive purpose. When government consistently acts against the public good or violates fundamental rights, citizens and other residents can raise these issues to the public view. Those who band together may be strangers who are not connected by religious, ethnic, economic, or personal ties but they share the urge to make government work. They render themselves trustworthy participants in fostering a just society by following the procedures of democratic self-rule. This includes—when there is no lawful recourse—nonviolent civil disobedience.<sup>29</sup>

This church teaches that civic engagement is a vital aspect of discipleship for baptized Christians.<sup>30</sup> We have a responsibility not only to fulfill our private roles and functions in life, and to pray for those in authority (1 Timothy 2:1-2), but also to be civically engaged. We do so to act *against* destructive consequences but also *for* fair and compassionate governance.

In service of fair and compassionate government, this church expresses gratitude for its members who serve in dedicated and competent public service and commends more members to

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consider work in the public domain. It urges all members to consider forms of nonpaid public service. This church also strongly affirms voting, guided by faith-based values, as an exercise in citizenship.

Lutheran citizens and residents also have a calling to address the destructive consequences of evil in government. For example, the legacy of race-based slavery and subsequent legal-based discrimination has created and reinforced entrenched habits of thought and action that continue to devastate fellow members of society. The calling to address such failure or structured evil is in line with the Biblical prophetic tradition where God raises up ordinary people to speak out against unjust or evil governmental leaders or policies. (Amos is one example, as in 5:24. Jesus also speaks out against rules that harm people in Matthew 12:9-13.)

The ELCA is called as a church body to discern nonpartisan means of civic engagement.<sup>31</sup> As a church we affirm the importance of government, specifically democratic self-governance. In this affirmative role, this church should support public servants and elected officials in their vocation to wield authority for the good of all. In this role our institutional witness is to foster justice, racial and social equity, reconciliation, and healing with compassion and imagination.

This church affirms the value of civics education to promote equality, justice, and respect for the value of every person, not only in the nation's schools but as a task for all. All people also should have the opportunity to hear the story of this nation from different perspectives, including those often neglected and marginalized.

God's church together is called to a critical, even prophetic role.<sup>32</sup> We recognize ourselves to be in mission in a multicultural society, committed to build connections between members of our communities and challenge systems of social injustice that build walls between us.

We should oppose governmental policies and programs that undercut public health, impose economic damage, destroy the environment, or deny neighbors their dignity and rights. This is true even while we recognize that some policy choices place these issues in tension with one another. Whenever there is division and oppression, this church should advocate for a more just distribution of both the benefits and the burdens of participating in democracy.

## V. CONCLUSION

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When confronted with a question about the legitimacy of paying taxes to the Roman authorities, Jesus declared, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:9-13). Jesus’ response does not support a compartmentalized view of religious identity and political responsibility but rather endorses both religious and political responsibilities as legitimate. Lutherans conclude that life in society involves honoring God’s two ways of rule: the right hand, which channels God’s forgiveness and unmerited love, and the left hand, which channels God’s love into just governance on earth.

We Lutherans are grateful when government functions as God’s gift and critical when it fails. While many have had their trust betrayed by government, this church affirms that government is indispensable for safeguarding and improving human life and creation. At the same time, this church affirms that government’s failures and injustices need to be remedied through robust civic engagement.

Although we may disagree about the best ways to achieve the public good, we do not disagree about our shared responsibility to seek it.

As members of the ELCA and as residents of this nation we will have serious disagreements about specific policy choices regarding what government should do or not do.<sup>33</sup> We recognize that our siblings in faith can, in good conscience, reach different conclusions as to how to best serve our neighbor in complex circumstances. This recognition is healthy for us as a church and as residents of this nation, as we enter into conversations around

those conclusions Although we may disagree about the best ways to achieve the public good, we do not disagree about our shared responsibility to seek it.

We must also remember that our judgements and participation will always be marked by sin. Still, God's care for human society calls us to rise again each day, forgiven and nurtured through our baptism to appreciate—and do—the work of self-government.

## ENDNOTES

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1 The Lutheran view of orderly government as “created and instituted by God” was formalized in the Augsburg Confession, article XVI (Kolb and Wengert, p. 48). Language of government as “gift” has appeared as recently as 2013, in the ELCA social statement *The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries*, section II.

2 At the time of this writing, this dissatisfaction has erupted into mass protests throughout the country in response both to how federal and state governments have responded to the global coronavirus pandemic and to the high-profile killings of Black people at the hands of police.

3 <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/24/public-trust-in-government-1958-2024/>. The federal government appears to be the main issue. A similar sampling found that almost two-thirds approve of state and local government. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2018/04/26/1-democracy-and-government-the-u-s-political-system-elected-officials-and-governmental-institutions/>

4 This social message gathers into one place ELCA teaching but draws most heavily from the following social statements: *Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*; *Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture*; *For Peace in God's World*; and *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*. The social message “Human Rights” is also an important source. [ELCA.org/socialstatements](http://ELCA.org/socialstatements)

5 While this passage has been used to demand uncritical support of tyrannical regimes, it affirms that government is “God’s servant for your good” (Romans 13:4)—supplying a standard against which government is to be held accountable.

6 For a compact summary of God’s two ways of governing, see *Luther’s Works*, vol. 13, p. 197. Traditionally known as the “Two Kingdoms” in Lutheran teaching, this doctrine has been widely criticized for fostering political quietism in the face of tyranny and totalitarianism—particularly National Socialism. But, Martin Luther developed it as Biblical teaching; see his 1523 treatise “Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed,” particularly section 1, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 45 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, and Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1955-1986), pp. 81-104. (All subsequent references are to this series.) Two Kingdoms thinking avoids quietism when firm links are drawn between the right-hand and left-hand dimensions of God’s governance, as in this social message.

7 In classic Lutheran teaching, God’s right hand governs with the “Word,” and God’s left hand rules with the “sword.”

8 From the ELCA’s 1999 social statement on economic life, *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*, p. 2.

9 The marks of a fair judicial system are laid out in the ELCA social statement *The Church and Criminal Justice*, section II:C.

10 ELCA teaching has emphasized care and justice for all people, with particular concern for those who are most vulnerable. For instance, see the ELCA social statements *Freed in Christ* (1993) and *Sufficient, Sustainable, Livelihood for All* (1999) or the social messages on “Immigration” (1998) or on “Human Rights” (2018). All are available for download at <https://resources.elca.org/?categories=faitH-and-society>.

11 Empathy here means the capacity to feel for and with others as a beneficial characteristic in the political sphere. Empathy, however, also has a problematic side, in that the ability to experience the feelings of others can be used to manipulate or even inflict pain upon them. The term here and in the political science literature assumes a standpoint of sympathy or compassion. While “empathy” was not a common term in the Reformation period, there were comparable terms, such as the spirit of forbearing kindness (“Sermon on the Mount” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 21, pp. 29-32).

12 “Self-centeredness” here includes the dimensions of sin identified in the ELCA’s 2019 social statement *Faith, Sexism, and Justice*: “[Sin] may take the form of pride (being centered on ourselves), idolatry (placing someone or something else other than God at the center of our lives), or self-abasement (not recognizing our value and dignity as a person created by God)” (p. 19).

13 The Centurion represented the often violent, occupying Roman empire. Signs of God’s governance are readily visible in Jesus, of course. He expresses God’s law as love for human life as he consents to heal the Centurion’s servant—an act of empathy with Israel’s enemy. Equality is evident as he treats the Centurion no differently from a fellow Israelite, and justice in its broad restorative sense as he restores the servant to life. Perhaps more remarkably, the Centurion also foreshadows the interconnections between God’s left and right hands. He requests rather than commands help from Jesus, expressing respect. He softens his official role with empathic concern for his servant and generosity toward the Jewish community of Capernaum. Jesus recognizes and admires his faith, which is framed as humble obedience oriented toward care for those under his authority. Such faith illustrates God’s left hand being interconnected with the right hand, which saves and heals.

14 Luther’s main treatise on government emphasizes that the purpose of government is to serve the neighbor, not the self (“Temporal Authority,” *Luther’s Works*, vol. 45, 93-100, especially 100). The neighbor here is not simply someone next door but includes all people regardless of differences in economic status, political ideology, religious affiliation, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, citizenship status, ethnicity, age, etc.

15 While democracy as a form of government is unfamiliar to the Biblical world, consent is not. God’s covenant with the liberated slaves at Mount Sinai came into force only after the people freely bound themselves to it three times (Exodus 19:7-8, 24:3, 24:7-8).

16 Technically, the United States has a republican form of government—where supreme authority and power are lodged in the people, who consent to be ruled by representatives.

17 There are several issues that contribute to voter suppression on American Indian reservations but, for instance, some people living in some reservations are denied voter registration because the U.S. Postal Service does not assign street addresses on their reservation.

18 Jesus called his followers to serve rather than lord it over their neighbors (Matthew 20:25-28). In contrast to accounts of government that reduce governmental decision-making and actions to individual, self-seeking economic behavior (see James M. Buchanan, “Public Choice: Politics Without Romance,” *Policy*, vol. 19:3 [Spring 2003], 13-18), Lutherans assert that public servants have not only the obligation but the capacity to carry out their functions in a way that serves the neighbor over self, and thus to fulfill the stated design and purposes of government with dedication and competence.

19 See the ELCA's 1991 social statement *The Church in Society*, p. 3.

20 Guidelines for honest, responsive, and competent government were revealed from the earliest days of Israel (Exodus 18:19-23; Deuteronomy 16:18-20, 17:8-13). Jesus called his followers to serve rather than lord it over their neighbors (Matthew 20:25-28).

21 The New Testament frequently endorses fair pay for labor, whether in the Gospels (Luke 10:7) or the Epistles (Romans 4:4, James 5:4, 1 Timothy 5:18).

22 The ELCA's 1993 social statement *Freed in Christ* calls for governmental action that provides equal access to education, housing, public transport, employment, entrepreneurship, and other economic functions. The ELCA's 2009 social statement *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* takes a similar stance supporting full civil rights for people regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

23 Parker J. Palmer's book *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of American Public Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) presents a strong and nuanced argument for engaging in public life with strangers.

24 In the section titled “Human Dignity,” the ELCA's 1999 social statement *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All* argues that attaining this lofty goal will involve public policies and regulations to curb the damaging effects of the market and reduce poverty.

25 The centrality of God's concern for every person as a neighbor to be served runs through all ELCA social teaching. [ELCA.org/socialstatements](http://ELCA.org/socialstatements)

26 By action of the 2019 Churchwide Assembly (CA19.03.11).

27 Noteworthy examples of resistance include Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany and Bishop Medardo Gómez during the civil war in El Salvador.

28 Jeremiah 29:7. The prophet addressed a people who had been forcibly transplanted from Israel to Babylon. How much more does his exhortation apply to those who live in their own land? Romans 13:1-7 commands citizens to respect figures of temporal authority—in the expectation that governing officials act for the general welfare and not in a despotic manner.

29 In assembly action (CA87.30.14, 1987) the ELCA's constituting convention affirmed the ELCA's fundamental commitment to the rule of law but specified the criteria for cases when civil disobedience may be warranted (cf. Augsburg Confession, art. XVI).

30 For an example of this teaching, see *Freed in Christ*, p. 6: “Through public events such as elections or town meetings, through public bodies such as legislatures or volunteer groups, church members help to forge political will and consensus. Participation in public life is essential to doing justice and undoing injustice.”

31 “This church, therefore, will actively promote a public life worthy of the name.” See *Freed in Christ*, p. 6.

32 *Church in Society*, p. 4.

33 For example, the pace and scope of stay-at-home orders and economic reopening policies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (declared in March 2020), involved complex weighing of public health system capacity, individual physical and mental health, and economic interests.



*A social message on ...*

## **Government and Civic Engagement in the United States: Discipleship in a Democracy**

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