



A STUDY CURRICULUM ON CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH

PARTICIPANT GUIDE



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America



SESSION 1: HOW IS GOD'S INVITATION TO DISCIPLESHIP LIVED OUT IN A DEMOCRACY?

Discerning together as people of grace: an introduction to social statements, the study, civic topics, and the gift of unity as God's people in dialogue, even when there is disagreement.

WELCOME

We are disciples of Jesus Christ who happen to live in a democracy, although God's people have lived under every kind of government. Whatever the type, followers of Christ have had to figure out how to serve God, our highest authority, within that society. Being civically engaged is vital for disciples because through government many of the needs of our neighbors are met—or ignored.

For these reasons, in 2019 the Churchwide Assembly—the ELCA's highest legislative body—authorized development of "an ELCA social statement on government, civic engagement and the relationship of church and state" in order to "probe for shared convictions and establish this church's comprehensive teaching" on this important question. This study invites you into that conversation.

OPENING PRAYER

Blessed Trinity, you call your people to responsible citizenship for the sake of your world. Help us to be faithful disciples who care as you do about the common good. We give thanks for the aspirations of this society toward democracy and justice for all, even while admitting our fears and acknowledging failures. Be with each of us as together we study these topics relevant to civic life and faith. May our thoughts and words be honest, insightful, and faithful. In all that we say and do, may we strengthen each other as siblings in Christ. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

SCRIPTURE

"How wonderful it is, how pleasant, for God's people to live together in harmony!"
(Psalm 133:1 GNT).

HYMN SUGGESTIONS



Spotify Playlist

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

draw any kind of line you want under Agree & Disagree.

Decide where you land on the topics introduced by the facilitator.

Are you the same as those sitting with you? Why or why not?

Disagree

Agree

PARTICIPANT PAIRINGS DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The old adage advises us never to discuss “religion, politics, or sex,” but this study invites participants to engage in two of the three! Yes, talking about our differences may open up controversy, which can be scary and difficult. However, controversy is not new in the church. The good news is that we don’t all have to agree to be God’s people together; our unity and core Christian identity are already given to us by God. Acts 15 illustrates an early church controversy and makes clear that our unity derives from God’s grace alone.

Read Acts 15:1-2, 6-7, 11

¹Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” ²And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. ... ⁶The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. ⁷After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. ... ¹¹On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does or doesn't it surprise you that there was “no small dissension and debate” (read “sharp controversy”) among the first generation of Jesus’ followers?
2. Do you regard controversies in your congregation differently when you remember that “we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will?”
3. Peter’s words show how Christian unity is a gift from God in Christ rather than a result of being in full. How does this affect your view of what unites people in your congregation?
4. What controversial issues related to civic life and faith might challenge your group?

VIDEO PRESENTATION: MAIN POINTS

To help you understand the fundamental

- ELCA commitment that, as we talk together about tough social issues, we form a community of moral deliberation.

To explain how this study will inform the social statement.

- To give you a sneak preview of the other sessions in this study.
- To help you understand why talking about civic life or “politics” is very hard today.
- To introduce you to the idea of a conversation covenant.

Civic Engagement Bible Study

Session 1: Video Notes

Pastor Roger Willer shows a Scripture at the beginning.
What is the reference?

Word Bank:

WITH

UNITY

GOOD

IDENTITY

The ELCA believes you should work _____ civil authorities
(those in charge in the government).

Our Christian teaching believes that our _____ is rooted in
God's work through our baptism.

Our _____ is not in our ability to find full agreement.

Politics: Ordering of life together for the common _____.

My definition of Holy Conversation is:

POST-VIDEO DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Name one key point you recall about being a community of moral deliberation.
2. Identify one experience of partisan polarization in your life.
3. Spell out one idea about a conversation covenant that you find important.
4. When talking about polarizing topics, what helps you to feel heard and respected?
5. What things are most important to your personal identity? How do or don't you relate to the idea of a "mega-identity" that walls you off from others?

Optional: Draw yourself as a SuperHero with the title of your "mega-identity"

6. Rev. Willer defines politics as how we conduct human government for the common good.

How do you imagine our society would look if there were zero politics and no means of influencing governmental structures?

CREATING A CONVERSATION COVENANT

A covenant is different from a contract, which governs a transactional exchange of goods, services, funds, etc. Covenants are about establishing a certain kind of relationship, and they are deeply rooted in Scripture (recall God's covenants with Noah and with Abraham in Genesis).

Baptism is a covenant God makes with us, promising that "the one who believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16). The person being baptized, or their parents and sponsors, also makes promises, as a grateful response to God's love. United by baptism, God's people sometimes make promises to one another about their relationship during any activity.

A covenant for relationship during conversation honors God's call that we talk together honestly. It is a commitment to seek the truth together in a respectful way, guided by Jesus' command to love one another. Such a covenant allows participants to share perspectives, receive new facts, come away with fresh insights, and consider what we might do together as God's people.



Civic engagement: this phrase points to various ways individuals and institutions engage public/civic life.

Examples include fervent prayer for governmental leaders, voting, local service in volunteer agencies, street demonstrations, contacting legislators, public service, and many others.

Common good: while this term has various descriptions in philosophy, the use here is the general idea of what is beneficial for all or most members of a given community. In particular it is assumed that seeking the general welfare of all members of the public is the purpose of government and is achieved, if often flawed, in collective action, citizenship, and other forms of active participation in the realms of politics and public service.

Community of Moral Deliberation/Discernment: a concept established in the first ELCA social statement, *Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*. Expresses how the whole Christian community shares in the responsibility of praying for each other, studying scripture, and wrestling toward moral understanding and action. It is a ground-up way of doing ethics in the ELCA rather than top down. The first social statement specifies this practice as an element of the ELCA's identity into which our church must grow. Its roots are found in Reformation writings—such as the Smalcald Articles—that spell out the marks of the church. This mark is “the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters.”

Discernment: the practice of evaluating multiple factors found in an issue with the intent to make an appropriate response to the matter that is God-pleasing. It generally implies theological or ethical reflection that involves study, prayer, and dialogue. It is a practice that seeks wisdom from God's Spirit in order to make a decision not according to our own desires but as much as possible according to God's will. See Romans 12:1-2.

Mega-identity: An interlocking set of identifications, such as being urban, rural, ethnic, religious, conservative, liberal, that is loaded with huge emotional stakes and has become semi-fixed as an identity to the point that it walls off people from others who don't share the same set of characteristics or beliefs.

Partisanship: the strong and sometimes blind adherence to a specific party, group, faction, set of beliefs, or personal characteristics.

Partisan Polarization: a partisanship that so completely distinguishes itself from another group that the other's beliefs and views are considered utterly opposite and most often inferior, dangerous to society, and unworthy of talking about together. The polarization is such that the value of and respect for “those” people is absent. A common descriptor: it's my way or the highway.

Politics: a term from the Greek (the polis) that designates the activities of deciding how to govern and order life in the community. It is the activity through which people make decisions about “who gets what, when, where, and how.” It is the necessary art of guiding or influencing government that is intended to seek the common good.

Theology: While this term can indicate academic or abstract reflection, the use in this study refers to faith's expression when talking about anything related to God. Every person of faith, therefore, does theology when expressing thoughts about God, the church, etc.

CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH STUDY GROUP COVENANT

Our commitment is to lift up the body of Christ through words and actions that:

- **Follow the Golden Rule: do unto others as I expect them to do unto me.**
- **Model respectful and careful listening, without interrupting.**
- **Strive to understand each other's insights and experiences.**
- **Speak honestly, as an individual rather than for a group.**
- **Do not presume that others speak on behalf of a group.**
- **Utilize any technology constructively and not as a distraction.**
- **Step up to share thoughts, then step back to allow others to share theirs.**
- **Be mindful of viewpoints not represented.**
- **Fervently seek the Holy Spirit's presence and blessing in the group and our civic life.**

COVENANT LITANY OF COMMITMENT

(Leader reads standard font; participants read bold font.)

Our faith teaches that there is one body of Christ and one Spirit,

One hope in our calling,

One Lord, one faith, one baptism.

One God and Parent of all, who is above all, through all, and in all,

And through whom, even as we are one in Jesus Christ,

We acknowledge our varied identities and views.

Holy Spirit, as we bind ourselves to this covenant, help us to listen.

We commit to hear one another,

To make room for every voice and every heart's concern.

We commit ourselves to seek to understand and respect one another.

Holy Spirit, as we engage in conversation, help us to express ourselves honestly.

We commit to bring our own voices as we are able,

With our words, with our body language, and with our silence,

Whether with conviction or confusion, but always with respect.

Holy Spirit, as we explore civic life and faith, help us to remember we are one in Christ.

We commit to ask honest questions, to assume the best of one another,

to follow the Golden Rule, to treat one another as we would want others to treat us.

We commit ourselves to value community with one another,

Even when there is tension and discomfort.

We ask for your grace, dear God, to keep this covenant we have made,

And for forgiveness when we stray from it.

We pray for hearts and minds that are open to one another

And open to your presence in our midst.

In the name of Jesus we ask this.

Amen.

"Homework"

Have a focused conversation with your family (or friends, neighbor, your choice!) to come up with a good definition of the following:

Morals:

Moral Deliberation:

Identity:

How can I live out Micah 6:8 this summer?

**"He has told you, O mortal, what is good,
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God?"**

Check out these websites and make a list of your local representatives.

<https://wrm.capitol.texas.gov/home>

<https://www.vote411.org/>

Did anything surprise you? Were you able to find the information you wanted?
Are there other resources you'd like to share with the group next session?