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Study guide

Discipleship in a democracy

How should Lutherans be involved in politics?

By Robert C. Blezard

The divisive political climate in our nation can cause tensions in our congregations. Republicans, Democrats and independents gather under the same roof for Sunday worship, but they may bring very different understandings of our nation's problems and how to tackle them. It's a balancing act to be faithful followers of Jesus, civically engaged citizens, and folks who love their neighbors as themselves. But our Christian faith and our Lutheran tradition give us some tools to manage it.

Exercise 1: Division in the house

The *Living Lutheran* article begins with four typical comments heard these days about politics and religion. Review them and discuss:

- Which comment have you heard in your congregation? Explain.
- Which comment may you have said? Why?
- What is true and valid about each comment? What do they all have in common?
- If the four people who made those comments were from your congregation, how might they interact and discuss the issues in a way that would bring greater understanding and clarity, without causing friction in their friendships?
- Should church be a place where politics and current events are discussed? Why or why not?
- Should the church/can the church be a "safe place" where divisive issues can be discussed?
- As a study group, brainstorm guidelines for conversation that promote listening, respect, understanding and collegiality. Give it to your congregation council or pastor for review.

Exercise 2: Render unto Caesar

Jesus astounded the Pharisees with his answer about paying taxes to the emperor. What does it tell us about our relationship with civil authority? Read Mark 12:13-17 and discuss:

- What is the role of taxation in government? Do we generally have a choice in the matter? Did the people of Jesus' day? Do you think they were happier about paying taxes than most people are today?



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- How would our government work if we didn't have to pay taxes? Which services would you be willing to give up for less in taxes?
- Why would the Pharisees even question whether it was lawful for God's people to pay taxes? How might the first of the Ten Commandments, "You shall have no other Gods," figure into their discussion?
- What do you make of Jesus' answer to the Pharisees?
- Is Jesus telling the Pharisees that church and state are two separate realms that must not commingle? If that were the case, what might his answer have been?
- By affirming that God's people need to pay taxes, what was Jesus saying about the reality that God's people live in overlapping spheres of religious and civic life? What was Jesus implying about the need to be a good citizen?
- Do you see yourself, first, as a subject of God's reign, or, first, as a citizen of our nation and your state? What's the difference? How does either choice affect how you live and interact with the world?
- Does being, first, a subject of God mean that we are free to ignore and flout civil laws? Explain.
- What principles would help us live in this dual reality—as both children of God and as citizens of our country and state?

Exercise 3: Left hand, right hand

Martin Luther taught that God works in our lives in two distinct but interconnected ways, visualized as the works of God's left hand and of God's right hand. The 2020 social message "Government and Civic Engagement" describes them this way (see the message for its fuller explanations at elca.org/socialmessages):

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. ...

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.

- How do you understand the notion of God working in these two ways—the inner lives of God's people on the one hand, and the outer spheres of civic life on the other?



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- Why is God working in both inner and outer spheres necessary for orderly life? What would our civilization look like if God's "left hand" was working without the right? God's "right hand," without the left? Why is the balance of left hand and right hand ideal?
- Does anybody fully understand the workings of God's "right hand," to give faith, direction and spiritual growth to God's people? What aspects of faith lie in the realm of mystery—beyond full knowing and comprehension by human beings?
- Similarly, is it possible to fully understand the workings of God's left hand in governmental and civic life? What aspects lie in the realm of mystery?
- If governmental and civic affairs are the work of God's left hand, does that mean God's people play no part? Do God's people, then, simply sit back passively and accept whatever governmental and civic authorities do?
- What is the proper role of God's people in this work of God as employees or elected governmental officials? As citizens?
- As a study group, come up with a list of principles that would guide God's people in their work as government employees, elected officials or citizens.

Exercise 4: The purpose of government

Our faith presupposes community life, where we are dependent on and responsible for the welfare of one another. Evidenced throughout the Bible, the principle is expressed succinctly when Jesus declares the greatest commandments are that we must love God with all our being and our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:28-31). The social message "Government and Civic Engagement" observes that "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).

- Do you agree with Luther's understanding that the primary purpose of government is to serve our neighbor, not ourselves? Why or why not?
- How is Luther's understanding of the purpose of government consistent with Jesus' commandment for us to love our neighbors as ourselves?
- Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan to explain who is our neighbor. Read Luke 10:29-37 and discuss who our neighbors are in the United States. Are our neighbors only the citizens? Only those who vote same way as we do? Only those who have the same skin tone? Only those who speak the same language as us? Only those who share our income level? Only the "legal" immigrants? Only those who are not incarcerated? Only those who are Lutheran, or even Christian?
- From your reading of this passage, describe who is *not* your neighbor.
- What does Luke 10:29-37 say about how we are to treat our neighbors? How is this expressed in our personal lives? In your personal life? In your congregation? In our church?



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- Given that God's "left hand" works God's purposes in the outer realm of government and civic life, how should love for neighbor be expressed in our nation's system of laws, services and policies?

Exercise 5: Media mishmash

A Pew Research Center reports that the percentage of people who say they trust that the federal government will do what is right has declined 60 percentage points from 1964 (77%) to 2019 (17%). What's up with that? How has the changing media business played a part? Discuss:

- When you were young, were politics as high stress and polarized as they are now? What was it like back then?
- Back then, how did people get their political news?
- Describe the news business back then. What was the role of newspapers and magazines? How did the radio handle news? What was the TV news like?
- Newspapers/magazines, radio and TV are sometimes referred to as "traditional news outlets." Were they generally seen as trustworthy back then? Accurate? Fair?
- How have the role, style and tone of "traditional news outlets" changed since you were young? Are newspapers/magazines as influential? The role of radio? How has television news changed? How have the "24-hour news cycle" and multiple, competing news channels affected coverage?
- Are "traditional news outlets" still as trustworthy as they were back then? As accurate? As fair? Explain.
- Many radio and television news shows now regularly use anger and outrage to boost their ratings (and, hence, profits). Have you noticed this phenomenon? If news is regularly reported or commented on in an atmosphere of outrage and anger, how would that affect regular news consumers? Is it trustworthy? Accurate? Fair?
- The internet and social media have been around for only the last 25 years or so. In that time, how have they changed the way people are informed about politics and the world? Both have given rise to "nontraditional news outlets"—blogs, self-styled "journalists" who have no formal credentials, and partisan websites set up to exploit political divisions and that use false information to mislead people. How has the rise of "nontraditional news sources" affected how people view politics? Has it helped or hurt?
- The internet and social media have become notorious for generating fake or exaggerated news that is designed not to inform but to deceive, to alarm, to outrage and inspire. What is the consequence of this phenomenon?
- Consider how the media landscape has changed in the last 25 years: increased competition, the use of anger and outrage as ratings (and profits) boosters, the decline in influence of "traditional news outlets," false and misleading information offered by "nontraditional news outlets and social media." How



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have these affected how people view politics? Has it had more of a positive effect or more of a corrosive effect? Explain.

- To what degree does the changing media landscape explain the decline in trust for the federal government from 1964 (77% trusted) to 2019 (17% trusted)?

Exercise 6: Study the social message

The ELCA's social message "Government and Civic Engagement in the United States: Discipleship in a Democracy" offers an in-depth look at these issues. It is worth a deep-dive exploration. Moreover, there is an excellent study guide and leader's guide to help you or your congregation dig into the topic. Find the message and guides at elca.org/socialmessages.

Discussion questions

- As followers of Jesus we submit to the Lordship of Christ, the rule of God and the direction of the Spirit. Describe to what degree and in what ways this principle is true for you. How does (or should) faith inform every aspect of our lives? Your life? How should our Christian faith inform our politics? How does it inform yours? Could or should your faith be a bigger part of your everyday life, including political thought and actions?
- In our American culture, there are some churches where it seems that politics drives their faith expression, and other churches where it appears faith drives their political expression. From your experience, where have you observed both phenomena? What are the dangers of each? What is the proper balance between faith expression and political engagement?
- As Christians we have "dual citizenship"—in the kingdom of God and in the United States of America (or whatever country you live in). Which citizenship is more important in your life, and why? When priorities of the two realms are in conflict, toward which one do you trend, and why?
- The role of government has been a matter of great debate in the United States. On the one hand, there are those who say the government should have as small a role as possible and let free-market forces take care of social, political, economic and environmental concerns—things collectively described as "the common good." On the other hand, there are those who say government should have a controlling role to protect "the common good" from destructive excesses of an unregulated market economy. What do you think? How does our faith inform our deliberation of these issues?
- Every public policy decision—from zoning to taxation to education funding to foreign policy—has an effect on us and our neighbors, even neighbors living across the country or around the world. That effect may be positive or may be negative. Given that Jesus commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves, how could it be part of our Christian responsibility to be informed and active in political decision-making? What are ways that Christians can get involved in politics responsibly?



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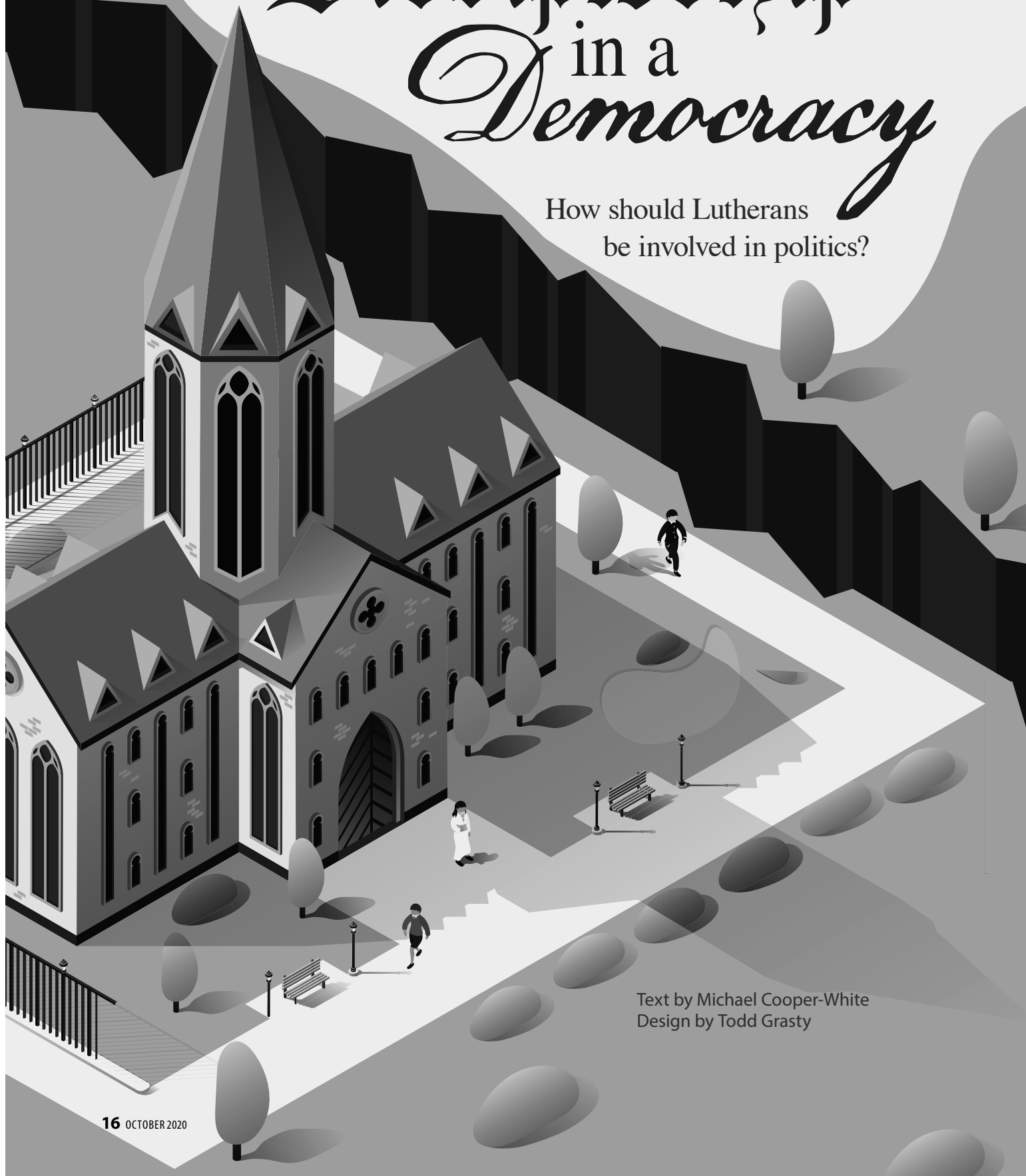
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- In previous generations there was a saying that described how people viewed differences of opinion on politics: “I disagree with what you say, but I defend with my life your right to say it.” Is this still how people handle political differences today? As Christians, we are called to model love and respect for neighbor. Along with respect and goodwill, what are some Christian principles that could guide political conversations among people with differing opinions?
- The ELCA operates an office in Washington, D.C., that advocates on public policy matters, and a number of synods support advocacy offices in their states that comment on public matters. The difference between advocacy and lobbying is that lobbyists push for policies and laws that benefit them or their clients, whereas advocates support policies and laws that benefit the common good. As a study group, come up with 10 reasons why Christian advocacy for policies and laws in the public good is consistent with our directive to be “salt of the earth” and “light of the world” (Matthew 5:13-15).

Discipleship in a *Democracy*

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Text by Michael Cooper-White
Design by Todd Grasty



“Pastor, I was really upset by Sunday’s sermon. You’re meddling in politics, which you have no business doing. I also hear that you participated in those recent protests. Don’t you understand the separation of church and state?”

“Some of us are frustrated that our church won’t take a stand. Aren’t we named for a protester, Martin Luther? Don’t we point with reverence to martyrs like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who took a very political stance?”

“As a young person, I am deeply concerned about social justice, and I find little to no support for my convictions in my church.”

“I don’t want my church to tell me how to vote, but I would welcome some guidance on how to prayerfully cast my ballot.”

Each of these wide-ranging views represents the stance of some members in a typical ELCA congregation. It’s little wonder, then, that much of the conflict we experience in the church today is generated by differing views about the proper relationship between church and state, faith and politics.

Prompted by increasing polarization over the appropriate role of government and by the conflict such divisions are causing in congregations, the Minneapolis Area Synod brought to the 2019 Churchwide Assembly a memorial “to initiate the development of a social statement on the role of government, the nature of civic engagement, and the relationship of church and state.”

The synod’s bishop, Ann Svennungsen, expressed her conviction that “one of the great crises currently facing the United States is the role of government.” The ELCA, she said, “could contribute to the political landscape of the country with a social statement on this topic.”

Another who urged offering guidance to the church was Gladys Moore, a pastor of St. John Lutheran Church, Summit, N.J. Moore said the urgency she felt last year has been heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic and the anguished cries for racial justice across the country. The church, she said, can “provide guidance about how and why, in service to the gospel, we Lutherans approach our civic responsibilities, especially when the gospel message so clearly flies in the face of an unjust society.”

Recognizing that a social statement takes years to develop, Moore and others argued last year in favor of a social message, which could be issued

in less than a year by action of the ELCA Church Council. In the end, nearly 900 assembly voting members decided that doing both would be wise.

The council then fast-tracked the message’s development so ELCA members could benefit from their church’s advice prior to the 2020 national elections.

New social message offers guidance

In June, the Church Council unanimously adopted “Government and Civic Engagement in the United States: Discipleship in a Democracy.” The social message gathers into one document what the ELCA and its predecessors have stated about the topic over many years and offers guidance for thinking about faithful Christian citizenship.

Consultants worked with Roger Willer, ELCA director for theological ethics, in developing the message.

Stewart Herman, a retired Concordia College professor contracted to assist in the process, said he was especially impressed by the large number of substantive responses received from across the church as drafts were circulated. More than 550 individuals offered comments. Herman said he is pleased that so many “feel empowered to jump in” and that the message “helps people stir up their own thinking.”

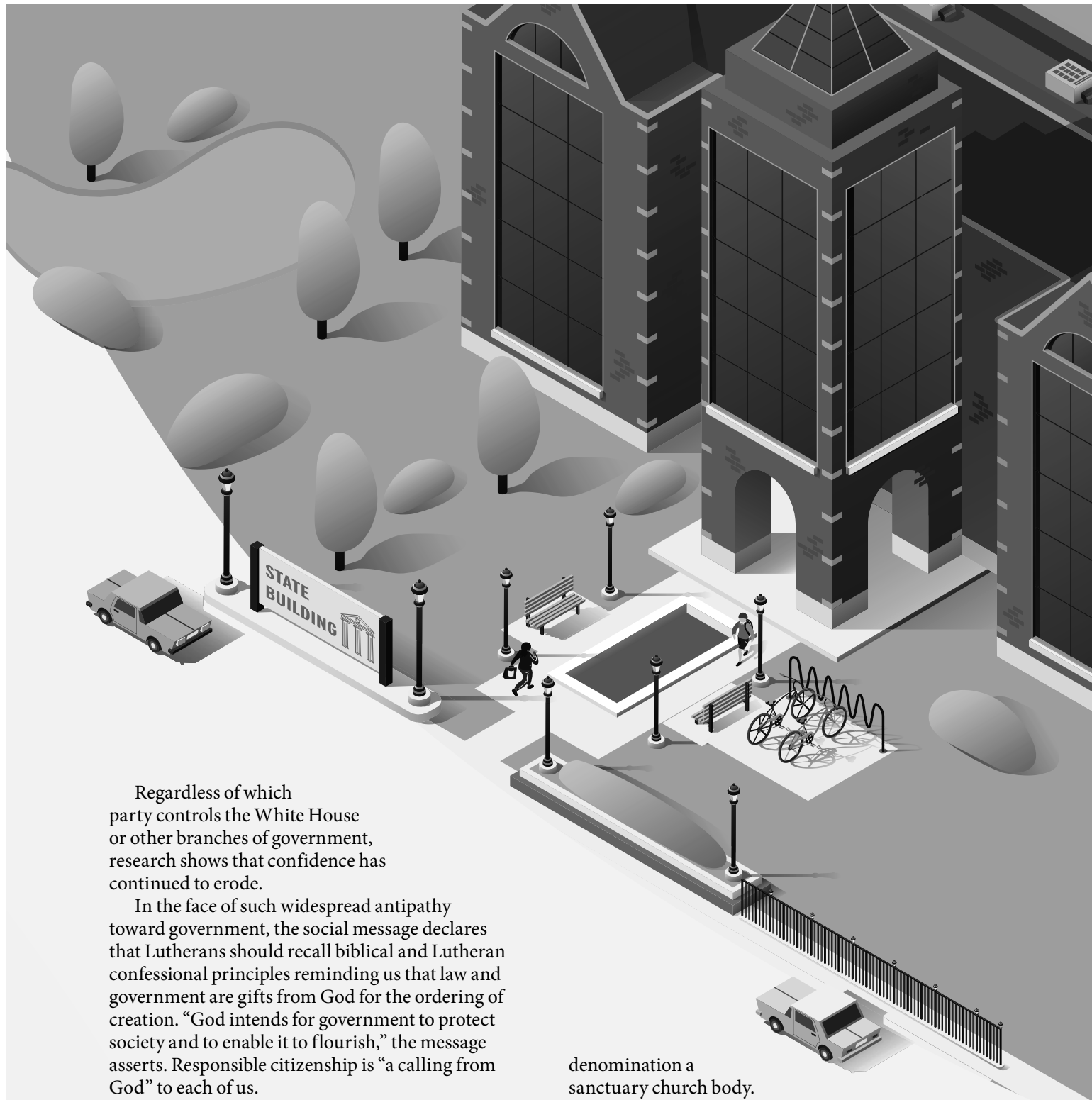
This fall, a task force will begin developing the more comprehensive social statement, which will address many concerns and questions beyond those included in the message. Willer, who oversees the development of social statements, said of the 18 task force members who were selected from more than 80 nominees, “This church will be well-represented.”

The bipartisan and ethnically diverse team includes clergy and lay members from urban and rural communities, attorneys and theologians, and members who serve in the military and government.

Initial listening events to gain input from ELCA members will be held throughout the church. As study materials and a statement draft are developed, they will be made available to everyone for comment and feedback. A final proposed statement will be presented to the 2025 Churchwide Assembly.

Government now widely mistrusted

Views on government vary widely in the United States and have changed dramatically over the past half-century. The social message names “a spirit of broad dissatisfaction, mistrust, protest, and even contempt of government in the United States.” It cites a Pew Research Center survey that revealed “the percentage of U.S. citizens who trust the federal government to do what is right ... fell steadily from 77% in 1964 to 17% in 2019.”



Regardless of which party controls the White House or other branches of government, research shows that confidence has continued to erode.

In the face of such widespread antipathy toward government, the social message declares that Lutherans should recall biblical and Lutheran confessional principles reminding us that law and government are gifts from God for the ordering of creation. “God intends for government to protect society and to enable it to flourish,” the message asserts. Responsible citizenship is “a calling from God” to each of us.

Some current burning issues

Debate around many current social issues has convinced members that the ELCA needs to address the foundational matter of church and state. Immigration policy is an area where differing perspectives on Christians’ and the church’s appropriate role have provoked heated debate. In what proved to be the 2019 assembly’s most controversial action, the ELCA declared the

denomination a sanctuary church body.

Ongoing discussion over that action reflects a gulf between members who come to different conclusions as to the meaning of various Scripture verses. Some believe that Christians’ primary responsibility is to citizens and legal residents of their own nation. Others are convinced that governments and social agencies should serve people regardless of their legal status.

Although ELCA leaders on the issue have emphasized that the sanctuary declaration does

not call for lawbreaking, some members are willing to risk arrest or even imprisonment as they shelter migrants. (See “Sacred hospitality,” May 2020.)

Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and calls for racial justice have shone a spotlight on other sharp divides in the nation and in the ELCA over church-state relations. Some people reacted against governors’ inclusion of churches in bans on large gatherings, arguing that the states were curtailing freedom of religion. Many have felt called to join Black Lives Matter demonstrations and protest police violence and systemic racism. Rostered ministers and lay leaders engaging in such protests have been chided by some and cheered by others in their congregations.

Seldom has a presidential campaign generated such intense feeling and heated rhetoric as the one currently nearing its conclusion. There are growing fears that,

whoever wins, the outcome will further divide our nation and cause even more intense conflict within families and churches.

Between the Bible and the Bill of Rights

The earliest additions to the U.S. Constitution, known as the Bill of Rights, were enacted in 1791. First among them are guarantees against government intrusion into matters of faith: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

Some interpret the First Amendment as constructing an absolute wall between church and state. But as the Lutheran Church in America (a predecessor body to the ELCA) described in “A Social Statement on Church and State: A Lutheran Perspective” (1966), many Lutherans view the relationship between church and government as one of “institutional separation and functional interaction.”

The First Amendment extends certain liberties to churches and other religious bodies. We are free to preach and teach as we are guided by Scripture, our theological tradition and our convictions. Under what is often called the “ministerial exception,” churches determine who will lead them without certain limitations that are binding upon other employers.

Recent Supreme Court decisions have ruled that church-related schools and organizations may refuse to extend certain employee benefits that run counter to their convictions.

But in other aspects of our communal life, church members are held to the same standards as all others in society.



Church construction projects must conform to building and fire codes. Religious communities can't use illegal substances under the guise of sacramental practices. Recent revelations of clergy sexual abuse across denominations have resulted in criminal prosecutions in addition to ecclesiastical discipline.

There are many murky areas where we wrestle with Jesus' retort to the Pharisees: "Give ... to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21).

Holding accountable those who govern

A key aspect of "functional interaction" occurs through the ELCA's advocacy efforts, whereby the church encourages government officials to enact policies that promote just treatment of all people.

The ELCA operates offices of public policy in several state capitals, and a Washington, D.C., office advocates on federal legislative matters. In these arms of the church's ministry, the ELCA doesn't "lobby" to serve its own interests. Rather, it advocates especially on behalf of those on the margins of society, whose voices are often suppressed. Its stances are based upon the church's social statements and messages, not the personal views of ELCA Advocacy staff.

The percentage of U.S. citizens who trust the federal government to do what is right ... fell steadily from 77% in 1964 to 17% in 2019.

Amy Reumann, director of ELCA Advocacy, summarized this approach in the *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*: "As the people of God called and sent to the world, our public testimony is always an opportunity to proclaim a hope-filled witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ, the God who calls us to do justice" (April 2020).

ELCA Advocacy offices also help the church hold accountable those who govern on behalf of the people. Advocacy staff frequently share information on pending critical issues so members can call or write their representatives and share their Christian convictions.

Sara Lilja, director of the Lutheran Episcopal Advocacy Ministry of New Jersey, explained that a key role for her office is helping ELCA and Episcopal Church members understand why their churches engage in advocacy and "how we take our faith to the streets."

A consultant on the social message, Lilja said the broader social statement will need to address more fully multicultural and multifaith contextual realities. In many areas, she noted, Christians are a minority of the population and are challenged to "shape public opinion" amid many perspectives.

Navigating two realms of discipleship

In some areas the church is beyond the reach of the law, but in many other aspects, our communal practices and individual behaviors fall within what Luther and others have referred to as the work of "God's left hand."

The "two hands" (or "two kingdoms") teaching, explained in detail by the social message, holds that God cares for creation in two ways, through law and gospel. With the right hand, God governs by grace and gospel, extending mercy as a gift. With the left hand, God carries out his stewardship in the world by means of law and government. The social message sets forth the ELCA's teaching on these matters, helping church members become more faithful in their Christian discipleship and responsible citizenship.

In assessing government's effectiveness, the message declares, one question dominates all others: "Is the neighbor being served?" The message offers 14 guidelines to help members answer that question and navigate the complex interrelationships of church and state, government and civic engagement.

Faithful disciples of Jesus, the message concludes, understand "that energetic civic engagement is part of their baptismal vocation. ... The ELCA holds to the biblical idea (Jeremiah 29:7) that God calls God's people to be active citizens and to ensure that everyone benefits from the good of government." †

To learn more

- Download the social message on government and civic engagement and a related study guide at elca.org/socialmessages.
- Learn more about ELCA Advocacy at elca.org/advocacy.
- Download a study guide for this article at livinglutheran.org by clicking on the "Spiritual practices & resources" tab.



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