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Study guide

“Publicly, boldly and honestly”

The long arc of Lutheran activism

By Robert C. Blezard

Answering God’s ancient call to love our neighbor—especially the poor, the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, the oppressed, the powerless and the voiceless—takes many forms. They include prayer, service, provision of necessities, financial assistance and fellowship. Advocacy and activism are especially potent expressions of love because they challenge the systems, ideas or structures that cause suffering. Like other Christians, Lutherans are eager to stand up for our marginalized neighbors.

EXERCISE 1: SHEEP AND GOATS

Jesus’ teaching of the judgment of the nations in Matthew 25:31-46 provides a clear imperative for relating to our neighbors in need. Read the passage and discuss:

- What is going on in this passage?
- What makes a sheep a sheep? What happens to them?
- What makes a goat a goat? What is their fate?
- Who are today’s hungry, thirsty, foreigners, naked, sick and imprisoned? What is Jesus’ mandate for us toward them? What are the consequences?
- As North Americans, we may interpret this teaching individually—how I am to relate to the marginalized. But if we consider it collectively—how we collectively relate to the marginalized—how does that change the interpretation?
- As a nation, what is our treatment of the hungry, thirsty, foreigners, naked, sick and imprisoned? Are we more sheeplike or goatlike?
- What can we do better? In what way could activism and advocacy help us to become more sheeplike than goatlike?

EXERCISE 2: WHAT GOD REQUIRES

The Bible repeatedly underscores the tension between our religious practices and our behavior toward one another. This is succinctly expressed in the three short verses of Micah 6:6-8. Read these verses and discuss:

- Verse 6 begins: “With what shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before God on high?” Who is making this inquiry? Micah rhetorically poses the question in the voice of a faithful ancient Jewish believer, but why is that question relevant for every believer of every age? How is it relevant for us today?



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- In verses 6-7, the questioner suggests a number of approaches to standing justified before the Lord. How would you characterize these ideas? In what ways would they be the “conventional wisdom” of an ancient Jewish person? Updating the ideas to our modern age (we no longer give God burnt offerings), how are they still “conventional wisdom” for many Christians today?
- At their face value, is there anything especially wrong with the approaches the inquirer suggests in verses 6-7?
- Yet Micah’s answer verse 8 suggests that verses 6-7 miss something important. What is it? What is the tension between verses 6-7 and verse 8? What is the tension’s source?
- Why is it possible for one of God’s people to do everything outlined in verses 6-7 and still not be in alignment with Micah’s teaching in verse 8?
- What is Micah’s value judgment here? Why do the instructions of verse 8 carry more weight than the practices in verses 6-7?
- What does it mean to **do** justice? What’s the difference between doing justice and simply believing in justice? What does doing justice mean for us today? Provide examples of doing justice in your context.
- What does it mean to **love** kindness? How should loving-kindness influence our behavior? Is it possible to act kindly without loving-kindness? Why is loving-kindness harder than merely acting kindly?
- How would following verse 8 more closely change you as an individual? How would it change us collectively as a church, a community, a nation?
- In what ways do Christian activism and advocacy help us to **do** justice and **love** kindness?

EXERCISE 3: GOING UPSTREAM

There’s an allegorical story (fictional, of course) that illustrates the need for advocacy and activism.

There was a church that sat alongside a river. One day congregants began seeing drowning people floating downstream. The congregation sprang into action, establishing a 24-hour river watch to save the drowning people. The congregation was proud of its ministry, but one day someone had a great idea: “Let’s go upstream, find out what’s pushing these people into the river and stop it!”

Discuss:

- Would you agree that in throwing a lifeline to drowning people, the church in the story is doing good ministry? Why or why not? What biblical imperatives is that church fulfilling?
- What “lifelines” does your congregation throw to people in need?
- How are food pantries, homeless shelters, immigrant and refugee support

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initiatives, feeding programs, clothing closets, medical ministries, legal aid and other projects absolutely essential and worthwhile ministries? How do they provide a lifeline to needy people?

- What ministries do your church or synod support that provide lifelines to people in need?

For the following ministries, discuss what “going upstream” might look like and how it might be more effective long term. Advocating and engaging in activism for:

- Living wages in addition to providing food and clothing.
- Affordable, plentiful housing in addition to supporting programs for the homeless.
- Affordable, accessible health care in addition to caring for the sick.
- Justice reform in addition to providing legal aid.
- Immigration and refugee policy reform in addition to assisting immigrants and refugees.

EXERCISE 4: RISKY BUSINESS

The “going upstream” approach is not without its risks. Many observers—devoted churchgoers among them—denounce outspoken Christian advocacy and activism as improper church meddling into arenas of politics and economics.

Liberation theologian Hélder Câmara (1909-1999) summed up this tension handily. As a Catholic archbishop in Brazil, he won praise for his work to assist the poor with their daily needs, but he drew condemnation for his advocacy for their political, social, economic and human rights.

“When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist,” Câmara is quoted as saying.

Discuss:

- What truth does Câmara’s comment express about attitudes toward Christian advocacy and activism?
- When have you heard people denounce Christians for their advocacy and activism? What was the context? Who were the people who denounced the advocacy or activism? What was their criticism? What motivated them?
- Who is more likely to complain about Christian activism and advocacy: those who support the status quo in politics, society or economics or those who don’t support the status quo? Explain why this is so.
- Why is it important to not only help provide for our neighbor’s daily needs but also advocate and engage in activism to improve their conditions?

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EXERCISE 5: CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Especially in a nation that cherishes and has codified the right to free speech, most would agree that peaceful, nonviolent, legal activism is always appropriate. But activists sometimes engage in civil disobedience—knowingly and intentionally breaking the law—to bring attention to their causes when they think the matter is especially important or urgent. For the following examples of civil disobedience, discuss the pros, the cons and whether the situation justified lawbreaking.

- To protest Jim Crow-era laws that promoted segregation in the South, in 1955 Rosa Parks refused to comply with a bus driver’s order to give up her seat to a white person and move to the back of the bus. The incident in Montgomery, Ala., is seen as a spark for the civil rights movement. A devout Methodist, she always credited her faith for giving her the inspiration and courage to stand up for injustice. Nine years later the U.S. Civil Rights Act outlawed segregation.
- The military draft was mandatory during the Vietnam War era, and in 1965 it became a federal crime for any young man to mutilate or destroy his draft card. Believing the war to be immoral, 22-year-old David Miller, a pacifist and member of the Catholic Worker movement, publicly burned his draft card as a political statement. After he was sentenced to three years in jail, major protests on both coasts included organized draft-card burnings. He served nearly two years of his sentence. The draft ended in 1973.
- In the segregated South, some restaurants legally refused to serve Black people. In 1960, four Black students sat at a segregated lunch counter in Greensboro, N.C., and refused to leave until they were served. It triggered many similar protests around the South. Many of these protesters were beaten, spat on and harassed. Segregation laws were swept away with the 1964 Civil Rights Act.
- In 1872, women did not have the right to vote, but that year Susan B. Anthony cast a ballot and was arrested in Rochester, N.Y. Police charged her with illegal voting. Anthony paid a fine of \$100 and court costs. Women finally received the right to vote in 1920.

Discuss:

- Is civil disobedience ever an acceptable form of activism? Why or why not?
- If civil disobedience is acceptable, under what conditions or circumstances?
- When do acts of civil disobedience cross the line into unacceptability? Is violence or damage to property ever OK? Why or why not?
- Should activists turn to civil disobedience as a first or primary response to addressing their grievances? Why or why not?
- If civil disobedience is an option of “last resort” for activists, what other tactics should they use before turning to civil disobedience?
- With the examples cited, why might activists have turned to civil disobedience as a form of protest?

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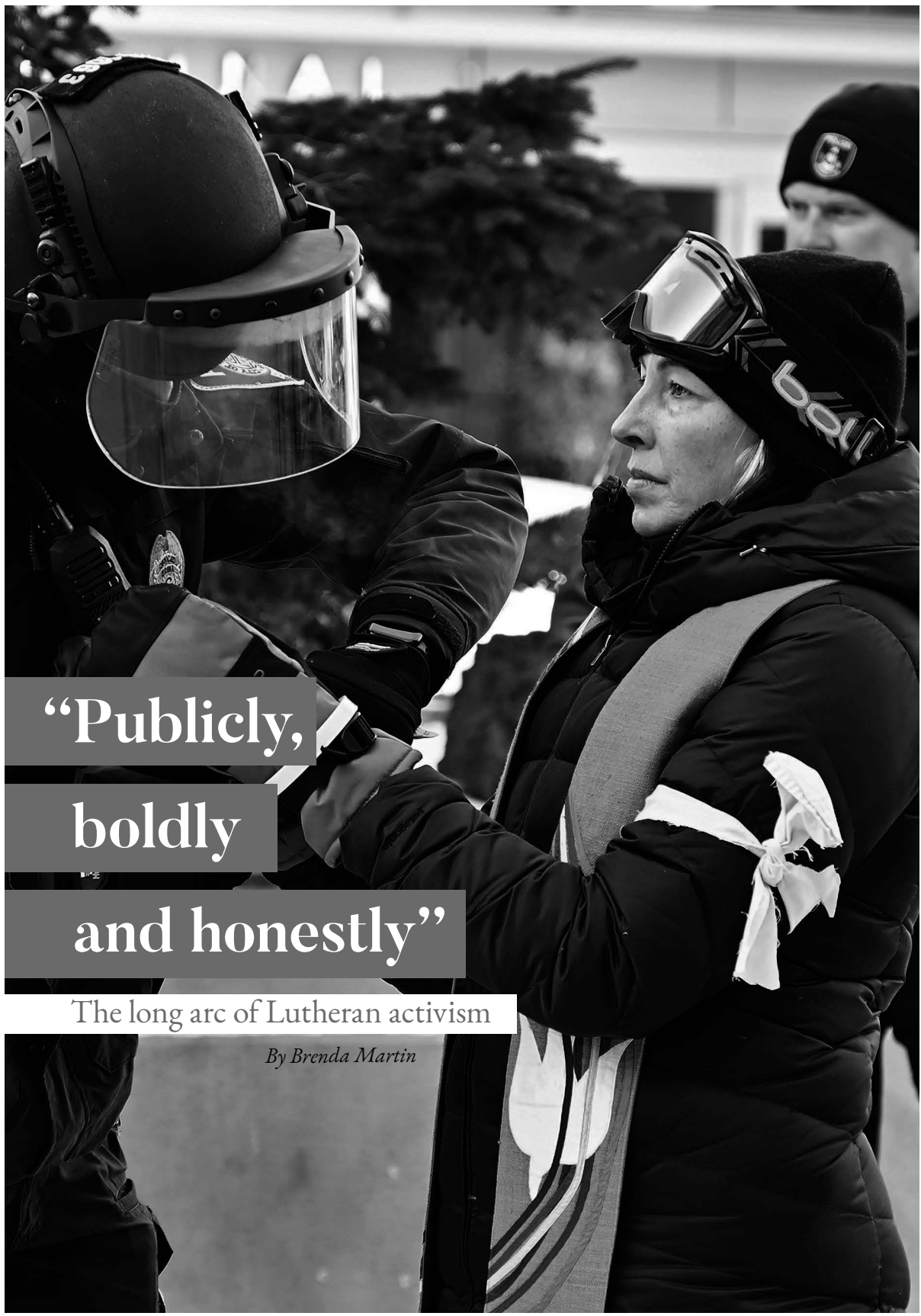
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- What causes would you be willing to break the law to protest?
- What do you think of today’s civil disobedience protests over such issues as immigration enforcement, abortion rights, LGBTQIA+ rights, war, government corruption?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Is it ever inappropriate for Christians, as an expression of their faith beliefs, to engage in legal, nonviolent, peaceful activism? Why? Should any issues be “off limits” for Christians to protest as an expression of their faith? Explain.
- Which causes are appropriate for Christians to support through activism or advocacy? What issues are inappropriate? If Christians get involved in political issues, what principles should guide their activism?
- Look back at the *Living Lutheran* article about Lutherans who engage in advocacy or activism. Reflect on each person spoken to and the issues about which they are passionate. Do you understand their viewpoint? Would you have done what they did? Why or why not? What would have been your response?
- Is it true that people tend to agree with public activism and civil disobedience protests for causes they believe in but also condemn activism against causes they don’t support? Where have you seen this phenomenon? Is it true for you, even somewhat, in your own opinions? Among your circle of friends and church colleagues?



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The long arc of Lutheran activism

By Brenda Martin

Ingrid Arneson Rasmussen is arrested with other clergy members leading a demonstration against U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement tactics at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport in January.

Ingrid Arneson Rasmussen, a pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, was handcuffed and arrested in January for kneeling in the middle of a road at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport. Along with about 100 other clergy members, she was protesting at a site used by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to dispatch immigrants and asylum-seekers to detention centers around the country during Operation Metro Surge, a three-month escalation in ICE enforcement in the area.

Lori Wise participated in a No Kings rally in York, Pa., in March. Drawn to the rally with other members of Zion Lutheran Church in York, she was protesting for personal reasons. She had watched her adopted son, an immigrant, struggle while growing up in the United States. She uses her voice now because she believes civic leaders have emboldened cruelty toward immigrants.

At 93, retired ELCA pastor Joseph Ellwanger is still recovering from a stroke, but he rallied with others in Milwaukee on the Sunday after Easter to protest the detention of a Muslim man who'd lived and worked in the United States legally for more than 30 years. The man had been targeted for detention, protesters argued, because he had been vocal in his support of Palestinian rights. Ellwanger is no stranger to civic activism: the first church he served, from 1958 to 1967, was in Alabama, the center of the civil rights struggle.

All three have been called to action by faith. They carry on a long tradition of Lutheran activism rooted in Jesus' commandment to love our neighbors.

During Operation Metro Surge, residents of the Minneapolis-St. Paul area—including many Lutherans—made news around the world for establishing a rapid-response

network to monitor ICE arrests and protect potential detainees. But the network was only a natural extension of the ways ELCA congregations had been caring for their communities for years.

Rooted in the Protestant Reformation, the Lutheran faith has been expressed through civic activism throughout its history. Protests against slavery in the United States were organized in the 1830s by the Frankean Synod and Daniel Alexander Payne, the first African American admitted to a Lutheran seminary. A resolution at the 1862 General Synod denounced slavery.

In the following decades, Lutherans supported and welcomed waves of immigrants as they arrived in the United States. They were also part of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s.

"As long as there is injustice, we have to stand up against it," Ellwanger said. "Love of neighbor requires that we stand up for fair and just treatment of our neighbor, and everyone is our neighbor. And especially everyone in need. ... This is part of living the gospel."

All hands on deck

In the aftermath of Operation Metro Surge, Rasmussen believes it will take years, if not decades, for portions of the city to recover.

"What we are living in right now is the economic crisis that follows what I would describe as an experience of wartime, in at least our area of Minneapolis," she said. "Many people in our community were necessarily sheltering in place, not leaving their homes and not working. The byproduct of that is fewer people were doing things like buying groceries or eating out. What we find ourselves in at this moment is a serious rent crisis, utility crisis, small business crisis."

At the height of ICE activity there, Holy Trinity members responded in myriad ways.

"We had a lot of congregants involved, whether they were on street corners [checking] license plates or on school watch at drop-off and pickup times, doing legal observing down at the federal building, food distribution to thousands of families who were receiving groceries at their doorstep, medication distribution," Rasmussen said. "Congregants who are less able to leave home because of age or ability were finding ways to participate in the public outcry by calling senators or representatives, saying this is not the way the world has to be and that we can imagine more for our communities."

"It was 'all hands on deck' in a thousand different ways for this community. This congregation is deeply connected to the wider neighborhood."

Rasmussen said Holy Trinity spent its entire pastoral discretionary fund in the first 14 days of the year, responding to individual and communal crises among residents.

One of the ways the congregation responded financially was by hiring lawyers. "The legal aid that is required by people who were touched by the occupation is like nothing I've seen before," she said.

Local congregations helped those who had been wrongfully detained to file habeas petitions, which are used to challenge unlawful detention or imprisonment. "In all of our cases that we were able to have an attorney work on a habeas, the judge deemed the arrest unlawful and released the person from detention," Rasmussen said.

The legal case against Rasmussen ended in April when she and many of those arrested with her pleaded guilty to a petty misdemeanor and paid a fine.

She didn't imagine her life as a pastor looking this way.



Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Susan Ruggles

Retired ELCA pastor Joseph Ellwanger, pictured here at a rally for worker's rights outside the Wisconsin State Capitol building in February 2011, has a history of civic activism stretching back to the 1950s.

"I'm a farm kid who grew up in a small town, and now I have the great joy of serving in the center of the city. I never imagined this for my own vocation or for my life or my family's life," she said. "I think living in this time as a Lutheran leader or any public leader requires courage. I don't think any of us are born with that. We learn it in the context of community. To my great delight, I have been placed in a congregation and in a neighborhood and in a city that is passionate about acting collectively for the common good. That's the Spirit's call to us in this particular time."

Proclaiming and living the gospel

In 1958, nearly 70 years before he rallied with other Milwaukeeans in April, Ellwanger, who is white, was called as pastor of St. Paul Lutheran, an African American congregation in Birmingham, Ala. He remembers the call as a blessing: "It was the right place at the right time for me to learn and grow into what it means to really proclaim the gospel and live it."

Stepping into activism wasn't immediate for Ellwanger. "The first time that I really went public and walked with the civil rights workers in Birmingham was in

November of 1963, which was after the civil rights demonstrations of that spring," he said.

After those demonstrations, five Birmingham department stores had committed to each hire one African American clerk. When they didn't follow through, Ellwanger joined picket lines outside the stores. "They didn't live up to their promise," he said. "So we picketed to remind them and the public of their promise."

St. Paul was deeply affected that September when a bomb planted by the Ku Klux Klan exploded at 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, killing

four schoolgirls. One of them, 11-year-old Carol Denise McNair, had attended the Baptist church with her mother, but her father was a member of St. Paul. Ellwanger participated in the funeral for McNair and two of the other girls.

“That was a very important part of my life and my experiences,” he said. “It was becoming more real. Obviously it was a very emotional moment in the life of our congregation and in my work as the pastor.”

Ellwanger said these events were part of a natural progression that drew him to activism and advocacy as part of his ministry. He not only joined the Greater Birmingham Council on Human Relations but was elected president. Through that role, he led more than 70 white protesters in a voting rights march on March 6, 1965—the day before “Bloody Sunday,” when Black protesters marching from Selma to Montgomery were attacked by state troopers on horseback as they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

Though no violence occurred on March 6, both days were a critical turning point in the civil rights movement, directly leading to the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

When Ellwanger moved to Milwaukee for a new call in 1967, he supported forming a coalition of urban congregations to work for justice and establishing school breakfast programs in public schools.

After the passage of the Voting Rights Act and the collapse of legal segregation, Ellwanger felt significant progress had been made. He is dismayed by the opposition from elected leaders that he sees again today.

“It’s a reminder that injustice does not die easily, and it is important for people of faith to be awake and aware to how people are being treated,” he said. “That’s why we need to stand up for justice and

truth. As long as there is injustice, we have to stand up against it.”

“We’re going to protect people”

When Wise and other ELCA members participated in the No Kings rally on March 28, they took part in one of the largest single-day protests in U.S. history. Over 8 million people gathered at 3,300 coordinated events in all 50 states to protest immigration enforcement, the Iran war and the erosion of democratic norms.

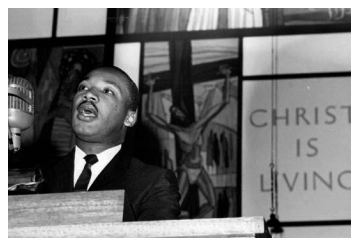
“My faith is about working with the vulnerable and needy in our society,” said Wise, a medical administration professional. “I worked in substance abuse and mental health as a clinician for many years. I feel very strongly about the mission of helping people.”

Wise said she witnessed the pain of stricter immigration enforcement when medical colleagues working legally in the United States left the country to vacation or visit family and were denied reentry. “We had doctors who couldn’t get back into the country,” she said.

Being the mother of an adopted immigrant son “triggered me to go out and do this,” she said. “So I don’t feel alone in this, and I’m with like-minded people.”

Bruce Davidson, a retired pastor and member of Christ Ascension Lutheran Church in Philadelphia, participated in a No Kings rally there as an exercise in both patriotism and faithfulness. He attended with other members who participate in advocacy campaigns, sign petitions and write letters to elected leaders.

The congregation isn’t large, Davidson said, but it has a history of activism, especially regarding poverty, hunger and immigration. When he served in Philadelphia during the AIDS epidemic, Christ Ascension helped to reverse neighborhood resistance



Martin Luther King Jr. speaks to the American Luther League Convention in Miami Beach, Fla. in 1961.



Lutherans gather in Washington, D.C., to prepare for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963.



Lutherans and Protestant groups gather in Washington, D.C., to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Supreme Court ruling mandating desegregation in 1964.



David W. Preus, president and presiding bishop of the American Lutheran Church (ALC), speaks about the creation of the ALC’s World Hunger Appeal at the 1974 General Convention.



In 1983, Will Herzfeld, presiding bishop of the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, third from right, joins civil rights activists in San Francisco to mark the 20th anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

Photos: ELCA Archives



Lori Wise and other ELCA members participate in a No Kings rally in York, Pa., joining one of the largest single-day protests in U.S. history.

to a treatment facility in the area. “That was pretty gutsy back in the ’90s,” he said.

When ICE became active in the city, the congregation drafted a plan for how to respond should agents try to enter the preschool housed at the church. “We mapped

out ‘Here is the law, and we will follow the law,’” he said.

Christ Ascension committed to not allowing federal agents into its private spaces without an arrest warrant. “A significant number of people in the congregation needed to make it clear where we stand,”

Davidson said, “and we’re going to protect people here.”

Advocacy: The toolbox we use

Today the ELCA continues the tradition of Lutheran civic activism, in part by connecting

faith with public life through its Witness in Society office.

As senior director of Witness in Society, Amy Reumann leads the church's public advocacy and witness in the world. "You almost have a toolbox of resources for how we respond to human suffering, to crisis, to caring for creation," she said. Advocacy, mobilization and community-based organizing are among those tools. So is prayer.

Public prayer was particularly important during the resistance to ICE in Minnesota this year, Reumann said, adding, "Holding vigils, doing it publicly, talking about where people are feeling pain has been important. And the church is doing it publicly and visibly."

Reumann acknowledges that the work of advocacy can feel overwhelming, given the number of global public crises Lutherans attempt to engage with today. But she believes that the ELCA's social policies ground members in God's call to seek justice for all people.

Development of the most recent ELCA social statement, "Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All," was requested at the 2019 Churchwide Assembly to clarify "the role of government, the nature of civic engagement, and the relationship of church and state." The social statement—a primary teaching document of the ELCA—was adopted by the 2025 assembly.

"Faith and Civic Life," Reumann said, can guide church members in even small steps to make change. "We can preserve and care for what is immediately in our vicinity," she added. "There are simple things you can do in your community, through support for election officials, volunteering to be a poll worker. We find what our small part is, and those small parts make a difference."

Reumann refers to the work of advocacy as "farming redwoods"—planting, cultivating and tending.

"What we do in advocacy, we're not going to see all the fruit of it," she said. "Public policy takes time to forge and implement. It needs to be corrected and funded. You really need a long view for what we're doing."

In other words, faith expressed through civic activism is what the ELCA has been doing, is doing now and will be doing tomorrow.

Reumann points to another ELCA social statement, "The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective," which includes the following passage: "With Martin Luther, this church understands that 'to rebuke' those in authority 'through God's Word spoken publicly, boldly and honestly' is ... 'a praiseworthy, noble, and ... particularly great service to God'" (page 4).

"These [statements] really inform us that we have a grounding in our theology," she said. "There can be a lot of reticence to protest injustice, and here we have it directly from Luther, saying this is one way that God's word works. It needs to be proclaimed loudly and boldly." †

For more information

- Read "Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All," "The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective" and other social statements at elca.org/socialstatements. Social messages, which focus attention and action on timely, pressing matters of social concern to the church and society, can also be found at the above link.
- Learn more about the advocacy work of ELCA Witness in Society, find resources and sign up to join its network at elca.org/advocacy.



Photo: Rod Borlack

Participants of the 1991 ELCA Youth Gathering in Dallas run a food drive.



Photo: ELCA/Janine Truapp

2019 ELCA Churchwide Assembly attendees participate in the AMMPARO walk and prayer vigil in support of migrant families on Aug. 7 in Milwaukee.



Photo: ELCA Witness in Society

ELCA Young Adult Climate Immersion participants and accompanying staff advocate for climate action in the U.N. Security Council chamber in July 2025.



Photo: ELCA Witness in Society

In October 2025, Lutheran Disaster Response leaders advocate for positive policy reforms for disaster response and recovery on Capitol Hill.



Photo: Bruce Davidson

Members of Christ Ascension Lutheran in Philadelphia say they participated in a No Kings rally in March as an exercise of patriotism and faithfulness.