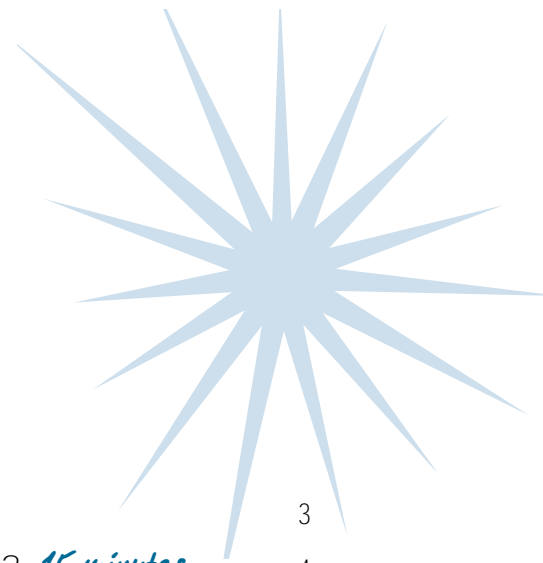




# *Called to be* **political**

(But I don't want to be political!)

*A workshop focusing on the teachings of  
Martin Luther on the role of Christians in politics*



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## *To the leader*

This two-hour program offers a fascinating glimpse into the teachings of Martin Luther on the role of Christians in politics. It's the History Channel and confirmation class all rolled into one. You do not need to be an expert. Invite the group to follow along with you as you explore Luther's teachings together.

Allow your members to "come as they are" with respect to their personal views on how faith intersects with politics. Encourage them to be open to exploring Luther's teachings and considering how those teachings speak to them today.

## *Time required*

You may present this program in two sessions of approximately one hour each (Parts 1–3 and Parts 4–8) or present the entire program in a 2 1/2-hour retreat setting, with a break after Part 3.

## *Materials needed*

Copy of this resource for each participant • Bibles • Newsprint

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## introduction *10 minutes*

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**LEADER:** *Fears or questions about our church's involvement in politics may reflect a misunderstanding of how Christians, and especially Lutheran Christians, are called to participate in the political arena. Ask for volunteers to read one of each of the "voices" below. When all the voices have been heard, ask the group to discuss the follow-up questions.*

**VOICE 1:** "I'm a registered voter. I'm not one of those who don't even bother to vote. But when it comes to signing a petition or calling Washington, I hesitate. It's not that I don't care; it's just that if I don't really understand the issue, I'm not comfortable trying to defend a position. I guess I'm afraid of looking stupid. Or maybe I'm not sure what I'd do if someone challenged me from the other side."

**VOICE 2:** "People involved in politics are just plain smarter than I am. They've read more, they've seen more, they know the movers and shakers. Me, I try to keep up with the news, but I've never been able to figure out what's really going on behind the scenes. Who can you believe these days anyway?"

**VOICE 3:** "Do I think my church should be involved in politics? Like God cares who's president? Come on. Let the church do what it's good at, and leave politics to the politicians."

**VOICE 4:** "I've been to a rally or two. It's fun carrying signs and chanting for a cause I believe in. I like the idea of being able to get the attention of elected leaders and change public policy for the better."

- *Which voice did you identify with most and why?*
- *Perhaps your voice was missing. What perspective needs to be included?*
- *Why do you think people are reluctant to "be political"?*



## what does the Bible say about faith and politics? *15 minutes*

**LEADER:** *Distribute Bibles to all present. Ask participants to count off from 1 to 6. After they assemble in groups corresponding to their number, assign each small group one of the Scripture passages below. Ask them to read silently, or invite a person in each group to read the text aloud. After they've discussed the follow-up questions below, call the groups back together and ask each small group to report. Jot on newsprint some key words from these Bible passages.*

1. Leviticus 19:33–34

2. Psalm 82:3–4

3. Proverbs 31:8–9

4. Isaiah 58:6–7

5. Luke 1:46–55

6. Luke 10:30–37

- *What do these passages say about our involvement as Christians in society?*
- *How do they apply to situations in our own society?*

# 3

## what did Luther say about Christians and politics? *45 minutes*

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*This section provides a brief overview of Martin Luther's perspective on the Christian's involvement in politics. The goal is to help us examine what our own roles might be as God's partners in the world.*

*This section is packed with weighty material. Read aloud the following three sections (A, B, C), allowing the group to absorb this key information. Pause briefly after each section to ask for clarifying questions, but keep the momentum going.*

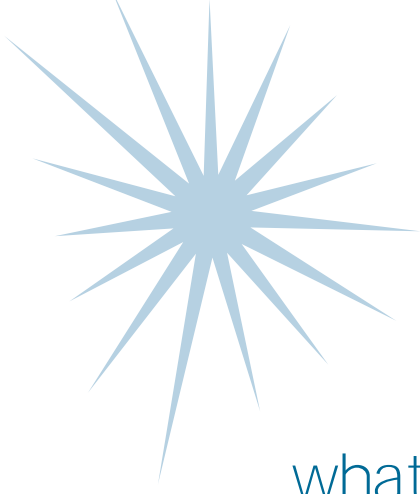
### **A.** Need help? I'm there!

Lutherans have always known how to handle a crisis. We're the first ones to bring a casserole when there's been a death in the family. From early on, we have been taught to care for our neighbors in need. Whether providing this care has called for founding hospitals, social service organizations, or national and international disaster relief agencies, Lutherans have been right out front.

On the other hand, Lutherans have not always been so eager to become involved in advocacy and politics. Historically, we have been reluctant to challenge unjust systems or lead reform movements. But the end of World War II sounded a wake-up call, when we realized that most German Lutherans had been silent about the Nazis' brutal extermination of Jews. We saw that to do nothing in the face of evil is to acquiesce to evil, to "go along with" evil. We learned, belatedly, that we are either part of the solution or part of the problem.

Where did this lack of involvement come from? Does it reflect the theology of Martin Luther? The answer, emphatically, is *no*. Luther strongly felt that Christians should play an active role in the social and political order, and he often cried out prophetically for justice. Many of Luther's sermons leveled strong criticisms against the ruling nobility and the rising capitalistic institutions.

Luther's writings display his recognition of the need for social activism. In *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*, Luther suggests that there are some times when one *must* disobey unjust government. In *On Usury and Trade*, Luther rails against the people in power who are getting immensely rich on the backs of the poor. He calls people to boycott such enterprises rather than patronize structures that are obviously unjust.



Luther believed that God's ultimate intent for the universe is that it be freed from oppression and evil.

## what did Luther say? *(continued)*

In *Whether Soldiers Too Can Be Saved*, Luther counsels soldiers to refuse to obey their military superiors when they are convinced that the military action is evil and unjust. In *On Sending Children to School*, Luther encourages parents to educate their children so that they may bring decency and efficiency to the middle management of government, since so many of the leaders and princes of his day were unprincipled and immoral.

- *What surprises you about Luther's writings?*
- *What unjust structures or systems do you see in society today?*

### *B.* Good vs. evil

Luther believed that we are always in the midst of a struggle between good and evil. He believed that God's ultimate intent for the universe is that it be freed from oppression and evil. The kingdom of God, ushered in by Jesus, embodies an ethic of wholeness, justice, and fullness of life, which is God's will for the universe. We live in constant conflict, however, with evil forces that keep us from experiencing that wholeness.

Luther believed that we Christians have the responsibility to be part of this struggle, not to withdraw from it. In all that we do, we are God's partners in the world, promoting love, justice, and the well-being of all God's creation.

God's reign, according to Luther, governs society through both law and gospel. The gospel proclaims God's unconditional love expressed to us through Jesus. When we accept this love, we spontaneously respond by reaching out and showing love to others.

- *Luther says that we are partners with God. What are some ways in which we can be God's partners in promoting love, justice, and the well-being of creation?*
- *If Luther were to carry a placard announcing an issue of his day, what might it say?*

## C. Everybody needs rules

Because we are influenced by the power of evil, which expresses itself both in the world and within ourselves, structures and laws are necessary. We need them for the preservation of God's good world and for the hindrance of evil.

As Christians, then, we live out of an ethic of love, while simultaneously living within laws designed to maintain order and curb evil influences.

This understanding of law and gospel can place Christians in a great ethical tension. Although Luther understood the need to live under structures and laws for the sake of order, he also believed that the dictates of love require that we actively resist those laws when they support evil and oppression. Christians are involved both in the promotion of good and in the active struggle against evil.

- *What unjust structures do you see in society today? What unjust structures have figured in recent news accounts? Jot these on newsprint for the group to ponder.*
- *In a democratic society such as ours, how can we speak out against such unjust structures? Is speaking out scary or exciting or both?*
- *Have there been times in your life when you have experienced the ethical tension between the need to live under structures and laws and the gospel mandate to speak out for justice?*

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**LEADER:** *You may stop here and continue this study at your next meeting, or if you are using this entire resource in one meeting, allow for a 20-minute break with refreshments at this point.*



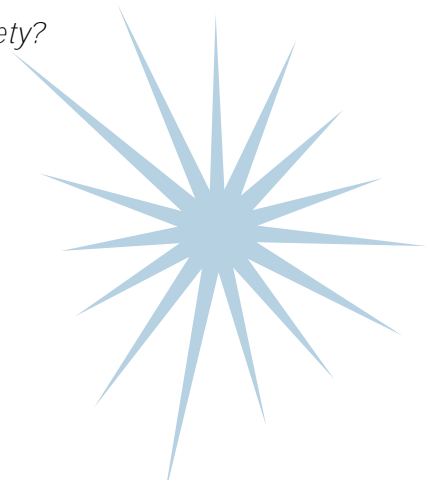
## why didn't Luther's message stick? *15 minutes*

**LEADER:** *Now we get into church history and European history at the time of the Reformation. Travel back in time. Imagine the chaos. Enjoy being a "mouse in the corner" during this historic era.*

If Luther was such an outspoken activist, why were later Lutherans often reluctant to get involved in politics? Part of the problem lies in the particulars of Lutheran history. Once Luther was kicked out of the Roman Catholic Church, he and his colleagues in the Reformation were forced to find new structures for church governance. In Germany Luther turned to the princes—the secular rulers—and asked them to be emergency bishops, so that ecclesiastical order might continue for the Lutheran churches. Unfortunately, what began as an emergency measure quickly became the normal order of things. Church governance became a department of the government, and the new church quickly came under control of the state. In many people's minds, the church and state were working hand in hand, so there seemed little reason for Christians to adopt a critical attitude toward the ruling powers.

Another part of the problem was that Luther's understanding of the role of Christians as instruments of God's will in society was gradually replaced by an individualized theology. The kingdom of God became understood as being found primarily within one's heart. Religion became a "personal thing" having little to do with the social order. As much of modern society became divorced from the sacred, the church structure and its leaders often gave up their prophetic role as defenders of God's vision of justice.

- *During your religious and spiritual upbringing, were you taught that faith is mostly a "personal thing"? Did your training also include an emphasis on the Christian's responsibility to promote justice and love throughout society?*
- *Do you agree with Luther's views of the role of a Christian in society?*







## things go from bad to worse *15 minutes*

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**LEADER:** *We zoom ahead in history nearly 400 years. "Church" and "State" look very different now. Must our application of Luther's teachings now change? See what you think.*

Lutherans in the nineteenth century saw the nearly total separation of private and public life. German theologians misinterpreted Luther, falsely preaching that the kingdom of God was totally divorced from the kingdom of the world. Reacting to the populist uprisings occurring at that time, some theologians proclaimed that Christianity was totally otherworldly and that Christians had no right to impose their beliefs on secular institutions. Other Lutheran theologians, wishing to affirm the advances of the Industrial Revolution and its emphasis on scientific exploration and economic and colonial expansion, came to the same conclusion. They believed that the state was independent from religious concerns and that it therefore should be obeyed with little question.

As these understandings became dominant, the existing institutions were legitimized, and criticism of them was discouraged. Luther's understanding that one's social activity is governed by an ethic of love and justice and that Christians are called to be involved in the struggle between good and evil was fading. It was replaced by the view that Jesus' mission was directed not toward changing the order of secular life, but instead primarily toward meeting the spiritual needs of individuals. The result was a growing quietism (a passive withdrawal from worldly affairs) on the part of Lutherans toward the excesses of the state.

This quietistic attitude continued into the twentieth century, even with the rise of Adolf Hitler and Nazism. A number of Lutheran theologians supported Hitler, arguing that because the kingdom of the world was totally separate from the kingdom of God, it was appropriate for Christians to accept the political situation of the time.

Other Lutherans, however, including members of the so-called Confessing Church in Germany, and particularly pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, reacted to the crisis of Nazism and attempted to proclaim Luther's understanding that the reign of God includes all of life. They believed that it was necessary for Christians to resist the unjust actions of the state. In Norway, Lutheran bishop Eivind Berggrav encouraged active resistance to the Nazi invaders and was ultimately imprisoned for that courageous stand.

- *What are some of the dangers of quietism (a passive withdrawal from worldly affairs)? Do you see evidence of quietism in our church and society today? Give examples.*
- *Can you recall some major historical events in which the church remained quiet? What were the consequences?*

## there is hope *10 minutes*

**LEADER:** *It's time to apply all this information to today. Consider how what you've learned affirms what you already thought or challenges you to consider new viewpoints. Remember: Your Women of the ELCA unit is a safe place to examine difficult issues and stretch your thinking.*

Since World War II, Lutherans have been looking more deeply into Luther's original concept of a two-kingdom ethic. Lutherans are increasingly viewing themselves as advocates for justice in social and political arenas.

For example, the ELCA study on economic life, *Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread: Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*, reaffirms Luther's conviction that our calling as Christians is lived out in whatever situations or arenas in which we find ourselves, and that it is through our active involvement in those arenas that we serve as God's hands and feet in the world, seeking justice and wholeness for all.

- *Do you think Hitler would have been as successful if the church had been more vocal?*
- *Do you see the quietistic view in the church changing? If so, how? If not, give examples.*
- *What are some issues in our society and our world today that might require our involvement as advocates for justice?*

We are God's hands and feet in the world.



## God's partners for justice *10 minutes*

As Lutherans we have a legacy of two differing interpretations of Christian ethics in society. On the one hand, there is Luther's understanding of Christian life as our total cooperation with God in bringing about God's reign of justice in all areas of creation. On the other hand, there is the later view that one's Christian ethical life is personal and does not concern itself with reforming existing social orders or actively working toward the fulfillment of the reign of God in this life.

Luther's vision should continue to inform us as we live out our faith in all the dimensions of society. It is that vision that motivates us to act as God's partners for justice in the world and keeps us from quietly giving in to unjust systems and structures. It is that vision that can sustain us as we participate in God's reign of justice.

- *What are the positives and the negatives of the two different understandings of the role of Christians in society that we have examined?*
- *What do you think it means to "be political"? Do you see any differences between being political and being partisan?*
- *Someone has observed that not to be involved in the political and social arena is the most political act of all. What does that statement mean to you? Do you agree or disagree?*





## closing prayer *5 minutes*

Lord, so many people are in pain.

**Teach us the way to peace.**

When people around us don't agree and think differently,

**Teach us to listen and understand.**

When we see people who are hungry and poor,

**Teach us to give to them as you give to us.**

When we see people treated poorly because of their skin color or language,

**Teach us to be an example of love.**

When we see war and conflict around the world,

**Teach us to make a difference and bring peace.**

When we see pain,

**Teach us to bring healing.**

When we feel low and things don't seem to be going well,

**Teach us to talk to our friends, to our family, and to you.**

When we stop and see all that you have given us,

**Teach us to be thankful.**

In our lives, in our neighborhoods, and around the world,

**Give us grateful hearts, O God. Help us to open our hearts to your wisdom and let peace flow.**

Let us pray:

Dear God of Justice, you call us to serve our neighbor, to give a voice to the voiceless. Yet we often lack the courage to do so. Help us as we strive to speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, knowing that in all we do, we are your partners in the world, promoting love, justice, and the well-being of all creation. Amen

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**LEADER:** *If members of your group are ready to tackle a justice issue in their community, review the ideas in "Digging Deeper," on the next page.*

# digging deeper

You may be ready to tackle a justice issue in your own community. A number of excellent resources are available to help you find the issues that have fallen between the cracks (see Resources on pp. 14–15). Request free sample copies of these from the ELCA Resource Information Service at 800-638-3522.

Another resource is the Lutheran Office for Governmental Affairs located in Washington, D.C. Visit <http://www.loga.org> for legislative updates and action alerts on issues that the ELCA staff is working on (for example, banning land mines, reauthorizing the food stamp program, and funding the Special Supplementary Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children [WIC]). Ask for the number of your state public policy advocate at your state capitol. These resource people are ready to assist as you explore the intersection of faith and politics.

After selecting the resources that best fit your group, select one or two justice issues in your community that have implications for women, children, or families. Examples include education, health, poverty, domestic or child abuse, housing, or environmental abuse.

For each issue chosen, brainstorm to come up with a list of actions that your group might undertake to promote justice, love, and healing in your community. Remember: it's OK to crawl before you walk. Sometimes the smallest steps can lead to significant changes. Help your group feel good about any new action it takes.

Remember: it's OK to crawl before you walk.  
Sometimes the smallest steps can lead to  
significant changes.

# resources

## Women of the ELCA resources

*Available from Augsburg Fortress Publishers  
P.O. Box 1209, Minneapolis, MN 55440-1209  
800-328-4648  
Fax: 800-772-7766  
Web site: [www.augsburgfortress.org](http://www.augsburgfortress.org)*

***Stand Up for Justice!*** provides practical ideas for becoming an advocate for women in the United States and around the world. 6-0001-6495-5

***Called to Ethical Decision Making: No Easy Answers*** is a two-hour workshop exploring the Lutheran ethical approach and the complexities involved in ethical decision making. It offers workshop participants practical experience in ethical deliberation. 6-0001-6486-6

***Who? Me? Women of Faith Making a Difference*** offers a step-by-step process to address justice issues—such as violence, abuse, education, and housing—that have a direct effect on women, children, and families. 6-0001-6479-3

***“For the Healing of the World: Speak Out for Women”*** addresses barriers that stand in the way of justice and healing for women around the world and shows how we can be involved in breaking down those barriers. 6-0001-6491-2

## ELCA advocacy resources

*For ordering information for the printed resources, call the ELCA Resource Information Service at 800-638-3522 or your synod’s resource center.*

***“The Basic Principles of Advocacy”*** is a quick guide to advocacy in the ELCA.

***That We May Speak: Our Ministry of Action*** offers a step-by-step guide to help congregations gain insight and understanding about advocacy, develop a plan of action, and begin a ministry of advocacy. The four sessions in the resource cover these steps: (1) focus on Scripture, the catechism, and social statements of the ELCA; (2) explore the tough questions about politics and the church; (3) engage church leaders in conversation on the role of public policy; and (4) build skills in the ministry of action.

***“Talking Together as Christians about Tough Social Issues”*** helps leadership teams of pastors and laypeople organize discussion of social issues from a perspective of faith so that it does not lead to conflict and division. Code 6-0001-1197-5

Visit the Web site of the **ELCA's Division for Church in Society** at <http://www.elca.org/dcs/advocacy.html> for additional help on becoming an advocate for justice.

Visit the Web site of the **Lutheran Office for Governmental Affairs** at <http://www.loga.org/> to get legislative updates and action alerts on social issues.

## ELCA social ministry resources

*For ordering information for the printed resources, call the ELCA Resource Information Service at 800-638-3522 or your synod's resource center.*

**"Proposal Writing and Fundraising Training"** offers effective tips and techniques for raising money to develop or support social ministry programs, community development projects, and faith-based organizing efforts.

**"Living God's Grace and Sharing the Faith: Grace in the City's Neighborhood Breakfast"** is a congregational profile of a transformational social ministry program.

**"To Serve as Jesus Served: A Guide to Social Ministry for Congregations"** explores the best ways to establish social and community ministry projects, fund-raising techniques, planning, and volunteer recruitment. Also included is a theological framework for doing social ministry. \$9.95. Code 0-8066-0043-8

***Called to Care: Biblical Images for Social Ministry*** stresses that social ministry is more than charity: It wrestles with the very structures and systems that deprive and oppress. This book examines not only the usual justice texts but also those that seem to counter this position; it shows how the Bible addresses practical, contemporary concerns and fears. \$17.00. Code 0-8006-2470-X

Visit the Web site of the **ELCA's Division for Congregational Ministries** at <http://www.elca.org/dcm/socialministry/resources.html> for additional resources.



*Called to Be Political* is one program in the Listen, God Is Calling series produced by the Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to help women's groups explore together what God is calling them to be and do.

credits

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