

Called to be political

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



Like it or not, Christians are called to be political. This resource explores that call, looking at personal reflections of Lutheran women, the Bible and the writings of Martin Luther. 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.

“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.”

“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?”

“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.”

“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 do you identify with most and why?

Why do you think people are reluctant to “be political”?

Perhaps your voice was missing. What perspective needs to be included?

What do Lutheran women say about faith and politics?

Four Lutheran women were asked to describe why they are politically active. Read their reflections as you begin answering the question for yourself. How are you, a Christian, called to be politically active?

Shirley Paulson, DePere, Wisconsin

It started with [Gather](#) magazine. A woman in my circle was moved by an article about child sex trafficking. Another had heard that a survivor of human trafficking would be talking at a church near us. Several of us attended that event and felt called by God to do something.... This is how I began being politically active—for a specific cause, connected with friends who felt like I did, praying and learning and finally acting to end human trafficking.

We co-sponsored an awareness event with our Synodical Women’s Organization; we read books and learned about other efforts in our community. We connected with people across the state by signing up for alerts with our Lutheran Office of Public Policy which led to participation in a work group for a state task force on human trafficking. We wrote resolutions to synod assemblies and the WELCA Triennial Convention. We called, along with our Catholic and Methodist sisters, for a time of prayer to end human trafficking.

I discovered that my state assembly person also cared deeply about the issue which led to me testifying in support of a bill at the state capitol. We continued to pray, educate, connect and act. We learned that going beyond mercy to also doing justice (Micah 6:8) isn’t so hard and that it is deeply satisfying work.

What does being politically active look like? It looks like a nervous grandmother testifying at a state assembly hearing. It looks like a busy young mom agreeing to lead a local advocacy group to connect others who care about ending gun violence. It looks like a woman in midlife using one of her vacation days to spend at the capitol talking to legislators about health care. It looks like a retiree devoting her life to learning about and teaching others about the hunger and poverty which disproportionately harm children. It looks like ordinary people reading candidates’ websites and then voting for those who pledge to work for issues they care about. It looks like love in action.

Elyssa J. Salinas-Lazarski, Chicago, Illinois

For me, being political begins with listening. I grew up listening to political opinions—first, my family’s, and then others’. I read widely: Mary Wollstonecraft, Betty Friedan, Plato, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Gloria Anzaldúa. I listened to and read their stories—and learned that different experiences lead to different perspectives.

As a doctoral student, I know that being political comes with the responsibility of doing what I do best—research. I would not hand in a paper without proper research, so I should take that same care when making a political decision. As a student, I am required to listen even as I research, and this listening resounds with humility because I do not have all the answers. It brings me back to the end of Micah 6:8, “. . . walk humbly with your God.”

Being political is not about being the one with the one right answer. It’s about seeing that there is

a bigger picture that includes the stories of other people: people who don’t look like me, people who don’t think like me, people whose livelihoods require something different of them than mine does of me.

Being political for me is about listening, because from my vantage point as an able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender, married, white-passing Latina who has had the privilege of education, I know I do not have the experience to answer all my political questions. And so I surround myself with people and opinions that help me see past my own reflection to another story because being political is not about me.

Being political is about working together to build a better world for all the children of God, setting aside differences to recognize Christ in each one of us and taking action to protect one another.

Dr. Linda Thomas, Chicago, Illinois

I am womanist (black feminist) who is unashamedly Christian. I am also unapologetically political. My theological standpoint is foundationally the imago dei. Humans, all homo sapiens, are made in God’s image. Correspondingly, this means that I look like God and God looks like me. This claim is not exclusive to myself as I believe that all people are made in God’s image. Nevertheless, rarely do Christians imagine God as a black woman. As such, the significance of my claim is this: it is theologically plausible, an act of defiance and overtly political because historically people fail to see me and others who look like me as God does.

I believe that all people, regardless of their faith/ religion, are children of God and are thus, siblings divinely created with diverse ascribed attributes, some of which are construed in such a manner that siblings are not treated with equity and inclusion, but instead experience erasure, discrimination ... and the

list can go on. These are everyday realities, especially for people who live with overlapping oppressions.

I am called to love my neighbor as I love myself, thus I am intentional about loving my body, mind, and spirit. I have a spiritual director, I go the gym, I eat whole food and I work to decolonize my thinking. These too are acts of defiance—to live resistance boldly, I love myself well because I want to love my neighbor into her/his/their full potential.

I am political because I am a Christian and the God in every one of my cells calls me to love myself and my siblings—all of them. I am called to love into fullness of being and resist any structural violence that thwarts the development and thriving of any person. I cannot be non-political because Jesus was political and I want to be like him, especially during his three years of public ministry where he was a community organizer who sought the interests of

people asking, “what do you want me to do for you?” He did not say, “I know what you want. I know what’s best for you.” He asked a question and then listened for the answer. Moreover, Jesus questioned authority.

When we question authority in the name of the Triune God we are involved with holy engagement for the sake of the people of God. I am unashamedly Christian and unapologetically political out-heterosexual, cisgender, temporarily able-bodied black woman made in God’s image who is called to remember the politics of Jesus.

I do not let any system intentionally or unintentionally dismiss or walk over me. My mentors are Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman and they

accompany me everywhere I go and are an active part of my everyday life. They are saints who practiced rebellious spirituality as Jesus did during his three years of ministry. Accordingly, as the Sankofa Bird looked backward while flying forward, I am called to remember my ancestors, that great cloud of witnesses who have gone before me. They taught me how to love of the earth, neighbor, sibling, always recognizing the Triune God and remembering both my baptism and the Last Meal that we eat in remembrance of Jesus, the political activist and community organizer.

The Rev. Jan Schnell Rippentrop, Williamsburg, Iowa

Pastor Rippentrop answered the question through the lens of JustChurch (JustChurch.com), a brave worshipping community engaged in acts of justice that flow from worship. The Bible, theology, and worship call JustChurch to be political.

The Bible calls JustChurch to be political. Consider Luke 3. Luke calls out the political leaders of the region—the people you’d think would receive the Word of God if “good order” ruled the day—and then Luke subverts this expectation: “the Word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” What? John was not on the “Who’s Who” of the ancient world. He was a “Who’s that?” Yet Luke names him as the recipient of the Word of God and identifies him in the Hebrew Bible’s tradition of naming a prophet: 1) name, 2) parentage and 3) location.

Luke leaves no room for mistake: God’s Word subverts political powers and goes to the unlikely saints who will change the world from the margins (wilderness). This one example is replicated throughout the Old and New Testaments. Neither God, nor the Word, nor the Spirit avoids or is oblivious to political powers. Rather political powers, especially where they cause marginalization, provide the very context in which, often against which, the Word comes and liberates. Read any book of the

Bible again with this lens; the political context of Christian faith and action is inescapable.

There is a central Christian theological cornerstone that Lutherans have long called “the theology of the cross.” It means that God accompanies creation through suffering and draws creation to liberation and into God’s glory. Christians point to the Christ Event (Jesus’ suffering on the cross, death and resurrection) as the paradigmatic example of this path through suffering, all kinds of deaths, and liberation. Yet the Christ Event is more than an example; it also generated a reality: the Triune God is certain to accompany all of creation—including humanity—through the deepest suffering to the greatest delight.

Both Christian rituals and the Christian life take the shape of a theology of the cross. Take the highest holy days of the church year for example. Maundy Thursday→Good Friday→Easter Vigil→Easter journey through suffering to freedom. The Christian life gets to reflect Christ’s life. Christ, incarnate in the world,

identified—even to the point of death—with humans. Jesus ate with sinners, healed women and lepers discarded by society, confronted economic systems of oppression and spared widows from certain death. Seems like Jesus' love looked like justice in public, and Cornell West famously reminds us that Christian love still outfits itself as justice: "Justice is what love looks like in public." Christians, living in God's love, will look in public like communities doing justice that benefits those who our society structurally and institutionally sidelines.

Worship calls us to be political. The shape of worship, baptism, and communion call Christians to be political. Christian worship has this shape:

- we Gather together;
- we hear and interpret the Word;
- we receive the Meal;
- we are Sent into the world.

This very shape suggests that world—the city—the polis—is the place where Christians formed in community, by the Word of God, and by the sacramental meal do most of our living. It is the polis to which Word- and Meal-formed Christians are sent.

Polis is the root of political, so political means being related to/oriented toward the city/community—which is exactly where every worship service points Christians. Baptism initiates Christians into a community that knows a lot about that cross-shaped path from sin and death-to liberation and new life.

When Christians live this cross-shaped path in the polis, we are confronted by sinful systems of oppression in the world—sinful systems that smack up against our commitment to the new life that God brings toward God's creation. Communion is not some nice and tidy snack that Christians ingest to feel good. Receiving the body and blood of Christ means one is interacting with the real presence of Jesus Christ. Jesus' presence always orients one in the direction of the cross, that is in the direction of all the suffering for which Christ's body bled and broke—all the suffering that God redeems through resurrection. Communion orients our bodies to all bodies that suffer with eyes to notice and conviction to become part of the path to redemption that God is laying in the midst of that suffering.

What does the Bible say about faith and politics?

Read the following passages. What do they say about our involvement as Christians in society? How do they apply to situations in our own communities?

Leviticus 19:33–34

Isaiah 58:6–7

Psalm 82:3–4

Luke 1:46–55

Proverbs 31:8–9

Luke 10:30–37

What did Luther say about faith and politics?

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 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.

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?

How to Use This Resource

This resource can be used by an individual for personal reflection and study. A small group can adapt this resource for its group. In either approach, have a Bible nearby for reference and allow time to answer the questions posed in each section.

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?

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?

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?

Did you know?

Women of the ELCA resources, such as this one, are available free to individuals, small groups and congregations. Covering a variety of topics, we are bringing Lutheran perspectives and new voices to issues that matter. By making a donation to Women of the ELCA, you will help us continue and expand this important educational ministry. Give online at welca.org/donate or by mailing a gift to Women of the ELCA, ELCA Gift Processing Center, PO Box 1809, Merrifield VA 22116-8009.

Why didn't Luther's message stick?

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

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

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 social statement 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?

God's partners for justice

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?

A closing prayer

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.

God of Justice, you call us to serve our neighbor, to help those whose voices are not heard. 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

Additional resources

ELCA Advocacy

ELCA Advocacy is ready to assist as you explore the intersection of faith and advocacy for policies that impact vulnerable communities and creation. ELCA Advocacy includes a federal policy office located in Washington, D.C. and state advocacy ministries in 14 state capitols currently.

Visit elca.org/advocacy for advocacy resources, legislative updates and action alerts on issues of concern to Lutherans that are grounded in social policy adopted by this church. Issues include domestic and global poverty and hunger, climate change, fair housing, health care, civil rights and migration.

Contact staff directly at washingtonoffice@elca.org with questions or to locate your state public policy office. ELCA Advocacy also engages in corporate social responsibility that addresses the impact of corporations on society through their practices and governance.

ELCA Advocacy Resources

Resources available from elca.org/advocacy include listed ELCA Advocacy priorities, issue fact sheets, and toolkits to advance your advocacy efforts, an advocacy blog and sign up for the ELCA Advocacy network. “Talking Together as Christians about Tough Social Issues” helps congregations organize discussion of social issues from a perspective of faith so that it does not lead to conflict and division.

http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Talking_Together_Social.pdf

ELCAvotes

ELCAvotes initiative provides faith-based resources around voting, helping Lutherans be civically engaged persons of faith. It helps Lutherans understand and speak out about the intersection of voting and elections and racial, gender and economic justice. It also engages and equips ethnic communities to talk about voting rights and race. Learn more at elca.org/votes.

Faith and Society

Through social messages and social statements, the ELCA addresses social concerns, seeking the common good for society, providing moral vision and addressing social and cultural injustices and issues. Visit elca.org/faith/faith-and-society for access to the social messages and social statements. Of special interest may be the social message Government and Civic Engagement in the United States: Discipleship in a Democracy, adopted unanimously by the Church Council of the ELCA on June 24, 2020.

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