

Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-Being of All

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's social statement Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-Being of All is intended to provide sustained theological guidance for how Christians and the church understand and participate in civic life. Written in a context of political polarization, declining trust in democratic institutions, and increasing confusion about the role of religion in public life, the statement does not seek to resolve political disagreements. Rather, it aims to shape the moral and theological framework within which such disagreements are engaged.

Source: §I. Introduction and Purpose

At the heart of the statement is the conviction that civic life matters to God. Public institutions, laws, social practices, and shared forms of life are not spiritually neutral arenas but contexts in which neighbor-love, justice, and human dignity are at stake. Civic life is defined broadly to include governmental structures, elections, public discourse, advocacy, and community participation at local, national, and global levels. The statement emphasizes that contributing to the well-being of society is not limited to formal political office but includes many forms of public responsibility.

Source: §II. What Is Civic Life?

The statement grounds civic responsibility in Lutheran theology, particularly in the doctrines of vocation and neighbor-love. Christians do not engage civic life in order to earn righteousness or bring about salvation. Instead, civic engagement is understood as a response to God's grace and as a concrete expression of care for the neighbor. Baptism places Christians within the world as servants of others, and civic responsibility becomes one arena in which daily discipleship is lived out.

Source: §III.A Vocation, Baptism, and Discipleship

A recurring theme in the statement is the insistence that politics is not ultimate. Human sin, finitude, and brokenness permeate civic life, making perfect justice impossible. No political system, ideology, or policy can finally overcome these realities. As a result, the statement repeatedly calls for humility, realism, and discernment in civic engagement, warning against both withdrawal from public responsibility and the temptation to place ultimate trust in political power or outcomes.

Source: §III.B Sin, Finitude, and Human Limits

Before addressing specific forms of advocacy or action, the statement emphasizes the formation of Christians for civic life. Congregations are called to be communities that nurture habits of truth-telling, careful listening, patience, courage, and compassion, especially in contexts marked by polarization and misinformation. Civic engagement is framed not only in terms of actions taken, but also in terms of the character and virtues Christians bring to public life.

Source: §IV.A Formation for Civic Participation

The statement offers an extended reflection on power and authority in civic life. Power is described as morally ambiguous: it is necessary for maintaining order, protecting the vulnerable, and pursuing justice, yet it is also susceptible to abuse, domination, and exclusion. Governments and public institutions are therefore affirmed as necessary for the common good, while also being subject to moral critique and accountability that transcend partisan interests.

Source: §IV.B Power, Authority, and Accountability

Justice, as articulated in the statement, is concerned not only with fair processes but with the actual effects of social arrangements on people's lives. The well-being of society is measured in part by how it treats those who are marginalized, harmed, or excluded. This understanding leads the statement to affirm advocacy for policies and practices that address systemic injustice, repair historical harms, and expand meaningful participation in civic life.

Source: §V.A Justice, the Common Good, and Advocacy

While the statement encourages advocacy, it also carefully delineates the role of the church as an institution. The church is not a political party, governing authority, or ideological movement. Its public voice is moral and theological rather than coercive. Social statements are offered as teaching and guidance tools, not as binding directives that require uniform political agreement among members.

Source: §V.B The Church's Corporate Public Voice

This institutional restraint is underscored in the statement's rejection of Christian nationalism. The document warns against identifying Christian faith with any nation, culture, or political movement, arguing that such identification distorts the gospel and undermines religious freedom and democratic pluralism. The reign of God cannot be equated with any political project or national identity.

Source: §V.C Christian Nationalism and Pluralism

The statement also addresses religious freedom within pluralistic societies, particularly in the context of constitutional democracy. It affirms the importance of protecting religious liberty for people of all faiths and none, while cautioning against using claims of religious freedom to deny others' dignity or rights. Christian freedom, grounded in the gospel, is carefully distinguished from civic rights negotiated in public life.

Source: §VI.A Religious Freedom and Constitutional Democracy

In its concluding vision, the statement situates civic engagement within a larger horizon of Christian hope. Political action is always provisional and incomplete, and no policy or movement can finally redeem human relationships or heal the world. Yet the statement also rejects cynicism and disengagement. Christians are called to participate responsibly in civic life, not because they expect to perfect society, but because love of neighbor demands faithful presence and action in the present.

Source: §VII. Conclusion: Hope, Humility, and Responsibility