

# How the ELCA Social Statement Understands the Church's Corporate Engagement in Civic Life

*(A Short Summary of the ELCA 50 page Social Statement)*

The 2025 ELCA social statement understands the church as a **public, moral community** whose life inevitably intersects with civic realities, but whose identity and authority are fundamentally different from those of political institutions. The statement consistently resists portraying the church as a political actor in the narrow sense, even while insisting that the church cannot be politically irrelevant.

At the most basic level, the statement affirms that the church's **primary calling is theological and pastoral**, not governmental. The church exists to proclaim the gospel, form disciples, and nurture faith. Civic engagement, therefore, is never the church's central mission, nor is it a substitute for Word and Sacrament. Nevertheless, because the gospel shapes how Christians understand justice, dignity, and neighbor-love, the church inevitably bears public witness in the world. Silence, the statement suggests, can itself become a moral stance when it allows injustice or harm to persist unchallenged.

In this sense, the statement sees the church as a **formative community** before it is an activist one. The church's most important civic contribution is not lobbying or issuing policy demands, but **shaping Christians who are capable of faithful, thoughtful participation in civic life**. Congregations are encouraged to be places where members learn how to engage political questions with humility, theological depth, and respect for disagreement. Teaching, preaching, prayer, and moral discernment are identified as foundational forms of civic engagement because they shape the character and conscience of believers.

At the same time, the statement does not restrict the church's public role to internal formation alone. It explicitly affirms that the church, as an institution, may **speak publicly and collectively on matters of moral concern**, especially where human dignity, justice, peace, or the well-being of vulnerable people is at stake. This public speech is understood not as partisan alignment, but as moral testimony grounded in Christian convictions. The statement treats social statements themselves as one of the church's legitimate instruments of public engagement — a way of offering theological guidance rather than binding political directives.

With respect to **political advocacy**, the statement does encourage advocacy, but in a **qualified and carefully framed way**. Advocacy is described as one possible expression of the church's concern for the common good, particularly when advocacy seeks to protect those who are marginalized or harmed by existing social arrangements. The statement

envisioning advocacy as rooted in moral reasoning and theological reflection rather than in party platforms or ideological loyalty. It encourages advocacy that is transparent about its values, attentive to complexity, and open to revision in light of new insight.

Crucially, the statement draws a distinction between **advocacy and partisanship**. While it affirms that the church may advocate for policies it believes advance justice and well-being, it explicitly rejects identifying the church with any political party, candidate, or governing coalition. The church is not to function as a voting bloc or pressure group that equates faithfulness with support for specific political actors. Advocacy, in the statement's account, is issue-focused rather than party-driven, and always provisional rather than absolute. However, one might ask if this distinction between advocacy and partisanship is really possible since a church's advocacy will inevitably reflect the church's partisan leanings.

The statement also emphasizes that the church's corporate engagement must be shaped by **respect for conscience within the body of Christ**. Because faithful Christians can and do disagree about political strategies and policy solutions, the church's public witness should avoid coercion or moral absolutism. Even when the church speaks clearly on moral concerns, it is called to do so in a way that leaves room for faithful disagreement and ongoing discernment among its members. This is especially important given the church's role as a worshiping community that gathers people across political divides.

Another significant theme is the statement's insistence on the church's **institutional independence from the state**. The document strongly rejects any attempt to merge Christian identity with national identity or to sacralize political power. Its rejection of Christian nationalism reflects a deeper conviction that the church's authority is moral and theological, not coercive. The church bears witness through persuasion, service, and example — not through control of law or force.

The statement further understands the church's civic engagement as **collaborative rather than solitary**. It encourages the church to work alongside ecumenical partners, interfaith communities, and civic organizations where shared concerns exist, while remaining clear about its own theological identity. This cooperative posture reflects the statement's understanding of civic life as pluralistic and its commitment to seeking the well-being of all, not merely the advancement of Christian interests.

Finally, the statement situates all corporate civic engagement within a horizon of **theological humility and eschatological reserve**. Political action is necessary, but never final. Advocacy may achieve partial goods, but it cannot usher in the reign of God. The church is therefore called to act without illusion — committed to justice, yet aware of the

limits of politics and the persistence of sin. The church's public witness is framed as a response to God's love for the world, not as a strategy for saving it.

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### **In Short: What the Statement Encourages and What It Resists**

#### **The statement encourages the church to:**

- Form Christians for thoughtful civic participation
- Speak publicly on moral issues affecting human dignity and justice
- Engage in issue-based advocacy for the common good
- Collaborate with others in pluralistic civic life
- Model humility, dialogue, and respect for conscience

#### **The statement resists the church becoming:**

- A partisan political actor
- A voting bloc or ideological pressure group
- A proxy for the state or a tool of national identity