

Civic Action and Pastoral Leadership
Final Project
Shannon Hoagland
May 17, 2021

Governing Scripture

1 Peter 2:15-17. For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. Act as free men, and *do not use your freedom as a covering for evil but use it as bondslaves of God. Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.*

Deuteronomy 16:18. *You shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment.*

Background

The ELCA is a non-diverse denomination, ranking second in a recent study of racial diversity among religions.¹ Many ELCA congregations are located in middle and upper-middle class areas, where broaching topics such as Black Lives Matter can be seen as a political issue, rather than a matter of righteousness and living out Jesus' call in the world. In addition, many pastoral and lay leaders of the church are ill-equipped to navigate these hot-button issues in a public context. I have heard from other seminary students, throughout this course and others, that their ministry contexts are "not ready" to engage in active participation regarding justice and righteousness issues. Thus, this series of small group sessions is intended to help engage with the question: *How could I encourage civic action engagement in our small, white, rural/suburban, conservative Lutheran church?* The goal of this learning event is to serve as a first step on the path to greater conversation, that will have the potential to engage not only the "politically liberal," but the entire congregation. In that greater conversation, we seek to discover our own beliefs as to how can we engage our congregation in conversation and action with what the Scripture is calling us to do as those with civic power and general resources. Do we (should we) see a place for the Spirit in our government? Do we (should we) see a place for ourselves in our government?

Overview of Learning Project

A five-part "Meet the Government" series for all learners middle-school age and older (focused on adult learners).

During each of the first four monthly meetings, attendees will engage one elected member of local government (perhaps the clerk of courts, watershed district manager, supervisor of elections, school board member, mayor). The elected official will tell the congregation about their job, including, if they are comfortable, how/if their faith has played a role in coming to their current job and/or how their job and faith are intertwined. They will also share opportunities for engagement (i.e., clerk of courts could

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups/>

share re. the volunteer guardian ad litem program; the mayor could share his mentoring program; supervisor of elections could share re. voter registration drives, volunteering as a poll worker).

The overall theme would be one scriptural passage regarding civic action, which we would carry through the entire series. The leader (could be the same person each week, or a different congregation member leading each week) would talk with the elected official in advance regarding both the faith component and the volunteer opportunities, and based on that conversation, would start each week with conversation regarding the theme scripture and/or additional scripture that ties in to the specific speaker.

As the final conversation of the series, the goal is to engage in conversation to see if any congregation members wanted to pursue justice-based engagement opportunities, including perhaps some of those presented by the speakers. Your group may also decide to embark on further learning opportunities, or other follow up discussions based on the learning from the series.

The hope would be that this series would “Ignite” and “Curate,” which would lead to Spirit-led action by the congregation.

The following pages are the guidelines to be given to the congregation leaders who will be leading the discussion groups. There is a fair amount of flexibility in the process, in hopes that the guidelines provide structure to the conversation, while allowing the leadership of a specific congregation to meet the needs and interests of the community.

Faith and Government Series

Leader Guide - Overview

Congratulations on taking first steps to engage your congregation in conversation regarding civic engagement and faith. This leader guide is intended to provide structure and a pathway for your conversation, but can and should be adjusted to what works best for your congregation.

Overview.

This series is comprised of five monthly meetings, focused on the interaction between faith and civic action. The overarching theme will be the Biblical bases for civic engagement by Christians. While it can be easy to get distracted by the immediate needs, the goal is to use these sessions to consider where the Holy Spirit might be calling us to engage in our communities.

Each of the first four weeks will follow the same cadence:

1. Opening with reading of scripture and prayer
2. Guest speaker
3. Book discussion
4. Wrap-up

The fifth week will be a discussion of learnings and opportunities for further engagement, based on the Biblical callings.

1. Opening with reading of scripture and prayer

We suggest one of the following two passages be read, or otherwise used as the basis for spiritual contemplation at the beginning of the gathering. You may choose to do some sort of *lectio divina* or other group-based contemplation. If there are other passages that speak to you or your congregation, you can certainly use those instead. The goal is to use the same scripture throughout the series, and consider how God's Word speaks to us through changing scenarios.

1 Peter 2:15-17. For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil but use it as bondslaves of God. Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.

Deuteronomy 16:18. You shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment.

2. Guest Speaker

Each of the first four meetings will focus on a local elected official serving as a guest speaker. These can be at any level – school board, clerk of courts, election supervisor, water conservation officer, city council, sheriff, etc. There is no goal to get “high profile” speakers; rather, the desire should be

to engage with local officials who evidence that “ordinary people” can be active and make a difference.

Each guest speaker should be provided with an overview of the series in advance, and asked to discuss three primary matters:

- I. Overview of their job and obligations of their elected position;
- II. If they are comfortable, how/ if their faith has played a role in coming to their current job and/or how their job and faith are intertwined; and
- III. Opportunities for congregational/ public engagement through volunteerism, with respect to matters related to the elected official’s job or other activities.

You may want to have a discussion with the elected officials in advance of the meeting regarding these three matters, so that you can tailor the rest of the week’s meeting to their conversation.

We suggest asking the speaker to talk for 15-20 minutes, so that the total session is about one hour.

Someone in the group should maintain a list of opportunities for engagement. The goal is to not discuss these, or make any decisions, on a weekly basis, but rather, to review them together in the Week 5 session, with prayerful consideration as to where the Holy Spirit might be leading. Ideally, the result of these conversations will be an impactful, ongoing relationship with an area of concern, focused on seeking justice and peace in the world, rather than a one-time or periodic volunteer opportunity.

3. Book Discussion

The book “Public Church for the Life of the World,” by Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda provides an excellent counterpart to the series. It is written in just five very short chapters, several of which are fewer than ten pages. Yet, it is packed with thoughtful insights and guidance as to how one might approach civic action through the lens of our Baptismal vows.

We suggest that you cover one chapter each week, with the discussion following the speaker to connect the teachings from the book with the speaker’s role and engagement opportunities. The chapters are short and should not take a lot of time for the participants to read in advance. However, if you do not believe participants will read outside of the gathering time, you can also adapt this portion to cover only Chapter 2, which discusses the role of the church in public life, in light of the Baptismal vows: “to hear the Word of God and share in the Lord’s supper;” “to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ through word and deed;” “to serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus;” “to strive for justice and peace in all the earth;” and “to live among God’s faithful people.” Each of these sections is only about four pages, and so the group could break for a few minutes after the speaker to read the section individually, and then return for discussion while the reading is fresh in their minds. Remember to edit the weekly leader guide if you decide to do this option.

Read the chapter in light of each week’s speaker, and adjust the discussion topics as appropriate. There may be certain aspects of a speaker’s role or story that fit well with a learning from the book, and if so, those should be highlighted.

4. Wrap Up

Each session should end with an opportunity to de-brief, cover any lingering questions, and engage in a prayerful sending.

Logistics. Don't forget to consider the logistics.

- Based on meeting time, do you need to provide snacks, beverages, or meals?
- Might child care be an impediment to participation? Can you provide a staffed nursery?
- Are there others beyond your congregation who might be interested in participating?
- Provide sufficient opportunity for individuals to meet one another and build relationships.
- Each week, and each section, may be divided up among various leaders. This not only lightens the burden, but also provides differing viewpoints and perspectives in conversation.
- We suggest having at least one person who is skilled at facilitating conversation. Not only is there a lot to unpack in each week, there is also potential for discussion that could be emotionally or politically charged, including issues surrounding poverty, racism, and self-sufficiency.
- Pray, pray, pray.

WEEK 1 LEADER GUIDE

1. Introduction. Begin with welcome and an overview of the five-part series. Be sure to highlight the conversation that will take place in Week 5, and the prayerful consideration that we would like to give to opportunities to seek justice and peace in all the world. Opening with introductions, reading of scripture and prayer.

1 Peter 2:15-17. *For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil but use it as bondslaves of God. Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.*

Deuteronomy 16:18. *You shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment.*

2. Guest speaker. Introduce the speaker, including their current elected capacity. Allow time for questions.

Break

3. Book Discussion, Chapter 1. Your group may have questions or topics for discussion that are meaningful to them. The following are intended to guide conversation, but you should feel free to cover all, some or none of these, as your setting calls.

What does it mean to be “public,” versus “personal” or “private”?

- For the good of all? Or just for the good of a select group?
- Hidden? Secret? Not open for discussion with others?
- Is your relationship with Jesus public, private, and/or personal? Are these mutually exclusive?

What is the role of the church? [You may want to do this in two or three steps – role of the ELCA, role of the congregation, role of the parishioners, and consider how or if those are aligned.]

- Does church have a vocation in the public sphere?
- How do we serve as the “cloud of witnesses”?

If feasible, connect public/private discussion and guest speaker’s message. Consider courage of the guest speaker to share their private/personal faith story publicly, as an elected official. What does it look like when we connect or allow overlap between the public and private/personal?

4. Wrap Up.

Re-read scripture from the introduction, and allow time to sit with that. Open for questions and discussion. Provide overview of next week’s chapter and guest speaker. Prayerful sending (including prayer for the elected official and all elected leaders as they serve our community).

*After the meeting, create list of volunteer/ justice / service opportunities.

WEEK 2 LEADER GUIDE

1. Introduction. Begin with welcome and a brief overview of last week, this week, and the rest of the five-part series. Opening with introductions, reading of scripture and prayer.

1 Peter 2:15-17. *For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil but use it as bondslaves of God. Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.*

Deuteronomy 16:18. *You shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment.*

2. Guest speaker. Introduce the speaker, including their current elected capacity. Allow time for questions.

Break

3. Book Discussion, Chapter 2. Your group may have questions or topics for discussion that are meaningful to them. The following are intended to guide conversation, but you should feel free to cover all, some or none of these, as your setting calls.

This is a dense chapter, with connection of the baptismal vows to our life as a public church. There will not be time to discuss the entire chapter.

How does the church “serve all people”?

How does the church “strive for justice and peace in all the earth”?

Why are we much better at one of these than the other?

What does it mean when we say that justice is both a demand and a gift from God?

How can we (or should we) speak publicly in solidarity with the poor and oppressed? How is that different from service to the poor and oppressed? [i.e., speaking out against injustice, versus providing food at a food shelf?]

If feasible, connect the concept of striving for justice and the guest speaker’s message. Should our elected public officials be striving for justice? For some roles, such as judges, that will be a clear direction, but other roles may be just as critical, if not as obvious. An elected city council member seeks public transportation for a middle class area, but not a poorer area, which is viewed as unsafe. How does that decision look in light of God’s call for justice? Think broadly of the impact of elected officials’ actions on the lives of individuals in the community.

4. Wrap Up.

Re-read scripture from the introduction, and allow time to sit with that. Open for questions and discussion. Provide overview of next week’s chapter and guest speaker. Prayerful sending (including prayer for the elected official and all elected leaders as they serve our community).

*After the meeting, update list of volunteer/ justice / service opportunities.

WEEK 3 LEADER GUIDE

1. Introduction. At this half-way mark, begin with welcome and a brief overview of the prior two weeks, this week, and the rest of the five-part series. Opening with introductions, reading of scripture and prayer.

1 Peter 2:15-17. *For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil but use it as bondslaves of God. Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.*

Deuteronomy 16:18. *You shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment.*

2. Guest speaker. Introduce the speaker, including their current elected capacity. Allow time for questions.

Break

3. Book Discussion, Chapter 3. Your group may have questions or topics for discussion that are meaningful to them. The following are intended to guide conversation, but you should feel free to cover all, some or none of these, as your setting calls.

What are our obstacles to “serving all people”?

What are our obstacles to “striving for justice and peace in all the earth”?

- Theological justifications?
- Emotional conditions?
- Social pressures?
- Political realities?

How do these obstacles look in light of the calling of Scripture?

If feasible, connect personal obstacles, political obstacles, and the guest speaker’s message. How does our election process enhance or eliminate obstacles to justice? How can we support our elected officials in seeking justice in their official capacity?

4. Wrap Up.

Re-read scripture from the introduction, and allow time to sit with that. Open for questions and discussion. Provide overview of next week’s chapter and guest speaker.. Prayerful sending (including prayer for the elected official and all elected leaders as they serve our community). It may be helpful to provide a reminder that next week’s chapter discusses the scriptural basis and God’s power for overcoming obstacles, as the discussion of obstacles can be disheartening for some.

*After the meeting, update list of volunteer/ justice / service opportunities.

WEEK 4 LEADER GUIDE

1. Introduction. Begin with welcome and a brief overview of prior weeks, this week, and next week's wrap-up of the five-part series. Opening with introductions, reading of scripture and prayer.

1 Peter 2:15-17. *For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil but use it as bondslaves of God. Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.*

Deuteronomy 16:18. *You shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment.*

2. Guest speaker. Introduce the speaker, including their current elected capacity. Allow time for questions. You may wish to note that this is our final guest speaker.

Break

3. Book Discussion, Chapter 4. Your group may have questions or topics for discussion that are meaningful to them. The following are intended to guide conversation, but you should feel free to cover all, some or none of these, as your setting calls.

Dwell in the sentence: "When the public church is gathered and sent forth for the sake of the world, therein lies power to heed God's call, continuing in the covenant God makes in Holy Baptism."

[p. 55] How does that speak to us?

What in your faith inspires, motivates, or empowers you to "seek justice and peace in all the earth"? [p. 61]

How do we listen for God's call? How do we distinguish between the call of the Holy Spirit, and the call of the world or our own desires?

If feasible, connect the concept of hearing a call, following a call, and the guest speaker's message. Depending on the message, this may not be as direct as connections with previous chapters. If not, consider asking when people have felt a call, and how they have responded? Have there been times they have heeded a call, or ignored a call?

4. Wrap Up.

Re-read scripture from the introduction, and allow time to sit with that. Open for questions and discussion. Provide overview of next week's chapter and guest speaker. Prayerful sending (including prayer for the elected official and all elected leaders as they serve our community).

*After the meeting, update list of volunteer/ justice / service opportunities. Send this to the group two or three days prior to the Week 5 meeting, and ask that each member of the group prayerfully consider whether any of these opportunities provide an opportunity to seek justice, rather than merely serve.

WEEK 5 LEADER GUIDE

1. Introduction. Begin with welcome and a brief overview of prior weeks, and this week's conversation (which will hopefully be the start of more). Opening with introductions, reading of scripture and prayer.

1 Peter 2:15-17. *For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil but use it as bondslaves of God. Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.*

Deuteronomy 16:18. *You shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment.*

2. Book Discussion, Chapter 5, and Discernment. The goal of this week is to consider how (or if) our church is being called to strive for justice and peace in our community and/or the world. Depending on the size of the group, you may want to break into smaller groups for all or a portion of the conversation. A few warnings to consider, as you work to discern an area in which your congregation may have an impact:

- There is a distinction between a service project, and striving for peace and justice. For instance, if you decide that your congregation is being called to work on behalf of foster children, note the distinction between a holiday gift drive (service project) and providing ongoing mentoring, support, care, prayer and guidance to foster children, while seeking to understand and eradicate or mitigate the underlying issues, such as poverty, homelessness, child abuse.
- Be cautious of imposing your list of needs upon another group. If you choose to work with foster children, for instance, perhaps your next step is to talk with experts in the field, and then with the children, to discern needs and opportunities.
- Remember that you are embarking on a journey, not an event. What you do should be sustainable.
- It is okay if you land in a place of continued discernment, without a path, or if individuals are already working in their own ways and choose not to engage with congregational efforts. We do not get (or need) to force the Holy Spirit to call us.

As you discuss the opportunities and areas of need, consider the following:

“The heart of discernment is to hold ‘what is’ and ‘what could be’ in light of the life-giving, life-saving, life-sustaining mystery of God’s ongoing work toward the redemption and flourishing of creation.” (p. 65) Discuss in your group “what could be,” and how we get there.

Your discussion may end with a decision to engage in follow-up conversations, with small groups formed to consider various opportunities for engagement, or with a focus area identified and next steps in place. Your discussion may end with everyone leaving, and no plan in place. Each of those is a blessed, God-directed place in which you may land.

Be sure to acknowledge differences among individuals as you proceed in conversation. It is unlikely that everyone in the group will feel the same calling, dedication or devotion to seeking justice in any particular respect. We need to be cautious to avoid the implication that those who want to participate more fully than others are somehow better people or better Christians. This is also a wonderful opportunity to remind people that our Lutheran tradition is based on the belief that we are saved by faith, and our salvation is through Christ, not through our own works.

3. Final Reflection. What does it mean to you to be part of a public church with a public vocation in the world today? What could it mean to our congregation if we became a public church with a public vocation in the world today? (p. 74)

4. Wrap Up. Open for questions and discussion. Provide opportunity for participants to share their learnings and thoughts, and hopes for future justice-focused actions. Prayerful sending.