

The Role of Religion in Public Life: Facilitator's Guide



Pennsylvania Council of Churches
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Table of Contents

How This Guide Is Organized.....1

Session One: What Is the History of Religion in Public Life in the United States?.....2

Session Two: A Theological Perspective on Religion in Public Life in the United States.....6

Session Three: A Christian Perspective on Civic Engagement.....10

Session Four: Civics 101.....14

Session Five: Role of Government/Role of Citizenship from a Faith Perspective.....19

Session Six: How Christians Can Live Out the Call to Faithful Citizenship.....24

Appendix A: Group-Building Guidelines.....29

The Role of Religion in Public Life Facilitator's Guide

When Jesus was asked to state the greatest commandment, he replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart ... And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself." In this complex age, one way we love our neighbors is to help shape the laws and policies that define how we live together in God's world.

—From the Home Page of the PC(USA) Washington Office (www.pcusa.org/washington).

God calls us to be full participants in civil society. This is not new to 21st Century society—we find its roots in ancient Israel.

The Pennsylvania Council of Churches has taken this call to heart as well. Through the public advocacy ministry, the Council strives to: 1) empower people of faith, through education and skill-building, to make a difference for the common good in the public square; and 2) advocate on behalf of the Council's member church bodies before Pennsylvania's legislative and administrative branches of government.

When we advocate for justice, we translate the church's deep convictions about justice, peace and freedom from words into reality. Through our advocacy efforts, we can discover a whole new way to share God's love in the world!

Given our call to faithful witness and advocacy in this radically different time, the Council believes that this resource will provide context and important information to support this vital work of the church for such a time as this.

How This Guide Is Organized

This guide is designed to accompany "The Role of Religion in Public Life: A Primer." It is designed to be used over six sessions, each lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. It can be used for a Sunday School series, or separately over a time established by the group using it. It could also be used for an adult retreat over a full day or a weekend when combined with worship and fellowship time.

There are six "chapters"—one section for each session—that include:

- **Facilitator Orientation**—background information to prepare for session
- **Preparation outline**—a basic checklist for materials needed for each session
- **Opening Prayer**
- **Introductions** (approximately 5 minutes, though this may need to be adjusted based on the size of the group)
- **Welcome and Overview** (approximately 5-10 minutes, perhaps slightly longer for Session One and introduction of Group Building Guidelines—included in Appendix A)—This provides a basic framework for the day's session. There is a narrative provided, or as the facilitator you may wish to do this in your own words.
- **Reflection and Group Sharing** (approximately 20-25 minutes)—This is where participants may be asked to read and reflect on information from "The Role of Religion in Public Life: A Primer," and to share their thoughts on the readings and/or the day's concept. A set of questions is provided to help get discussion started for each session.
- **Review of Discussion** (approximately 10 minutes)—This is a time for the group to summarize important learnings and observations for each session.
- **Wrap-Up Preparation for Next Session** (approximately 5-7 minutes)—This is an opportunity for the group to quickly review and express new learnings, surprises, insights, etc. through a series of questions
- **Closing Prayer**

Session One: What Is the History of Religion in Public Life in the United States?

Facilitator Orientation

This first session invites participants to read a brief history of how the role of religion evolved in the public arena from early colonial times until now. This history begins with William Penn's vision of a society based on religious tolerance in the New World from the point of view of one who had been persecuted for his beliefs in his native England (Penn was a member of the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers). It continues with the founding of Pennsylvania on the basis of religious freedom, and notes that he wasn't alone—that he joined Roger Williams, a Puritan and founder of the colony of Rhode Island as a haven for those who suffered from religious persecution. Their efforts appear to contradict claims that the United States was founded as a Christian nation, as does the "Establishment Clause" of the Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." This history also addresses the concept of "separation of church and state" as shorthand for the Establishment Clause.

First Amendment Center senior scholar Charles Haynes writes, "The philosophical ideas and religious convictions of Roger Williams, William Penn, John

Leland, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and other leaders were decisive in the struggle for freedom of conscience."¹ He notes that the guiding principles that they laid out are even more important today with approximately 3,000 religious groups than they were at a time of mainly Protestant "pluralism" in the 17th century. In fact, religious scholar Dr. Diana L. Eck, of Harvard University and Director of the Pluralism Project, says, "The United States is the most religiously diverse nation in the world. Therefore it is absolutely vital, in this environment, that every citizen understand religious liberty, freedom of conscience, and the appropriate role of religion in public life."

Up until very recently, both "liberals" and "conservatives" have continued to embrace the principle of separation of church and state. In 1960, then candidate John F. Kennedy made it clear that he was running for president as an American, not a Catholic, and the late Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater once said that "By maintaining the separation of church and state, the United States has avoided the intolerance which has so divided the rest of the world with religious wars."

Preparation Outline

You should feel free to adapt this session as necessary to your circumstances.

- In preparing for or assisting with this session, please:
 - Have additional copies of the Group-Building Guidelines for anyone who needs them, and post any additional guidelines set by the group.
 - Have additional copies of the "Primer."
- Have the following aids available at the session:

- For discussion times: a flip chart with easel, or other blank paper with masking tape (for hanging paper), and markers, or a chalk board or white board (if used, be prepared to copy down notes at end of session).
- For the activity: blank paper and pencils or pens for all participants.
- Just prior to the session:

¹ Charles Haynes, "History of Religious Liberty in America" (written for Civitas: A Framework for Civic Education. Copyright 1991, Council for the Advancement of Citizenship and the Center for Civic Education), reprinted by permission © 2019, Pennsylvania Council of Churches

at <http://www.newseuminstitute.org/first-amendment-center/topics/freedom-of-religion/religious-liberty-in-america-overview/history-of-religious-liberty-in-america/>.

- Arrange the group seating into a circle, if possible, to enhance group participation.
- Place one set of handouts at each seat.
- Set up two pieces of flip chart or other blank paper—one labeled “Emerging Questions” and the other “Emerging Insights from Group Activity”—or print these two headings on the chalk or white board. It may be helpful to also post the following questions as a starting point for participants when you get to this process.

In what we have read and discussed today:

- What did I learn that was new today?
- What surprised me about my learnings today?
- What new insights did I gain from the reading and discussion?
- Has what I've learned today changed the way I think about religion in our public life today?
- Why does it matter to me?

Keep track of time and help to keep group discussions consistent with the Group-Building Guidelines. You may need to adjust the time for each component in advance to fit the time available to you.

Opening Prayer

Invite the group to join you in the opening prayer below or one of your own.

Eternal One, history reminds us that it has never been easy to balance lives on the edge of faith and civic involvement. We are called to live faithfully according to the precepts of our tradition, but sometimes our neighbors are not tolerant of our beliefs, and actions by our elected and appointed officials often run counter to our

understanding of your call to be faithful. Open our eyes to the wisdom of those who have come before us, that what they have put into place can help us to find the balance we need in a world where divisions run deep and our beliefs sometimes harden us in our ways. Guide us to see the divine light in all people so that we can work together for the welfare of all. Amen.

Introductions

Each participant briefly introduces her/himself.

Welcome and Overview

Please read or summarize:

*Welcome to this first session discussion in **Civics 101 for People of Faith**, where we will discuss the history of how the role of religion evolved in the public arena from early colonial times until now.*

In today's discussion, we will move from the time of William Penn and Roger Williams, who founded colonies based on a philosophy of religious freedom and tolerance, to the Establishment Clause and the concept of “separation of church and state” as envisioned by our founding fathers (yes, they were pretty much all men), to how this has evolved at a time when the United States has

become one of the most pluralistic societies in the world, with around 3,000 different religions all seeking to live somehow in harmony, but often in tension.

Before we get started, let's please take a few moments to read the handout on Group-Building Guidelines. We'll be using these guidelines throughout this study series, especially during our discussion times.

Refer participants to the “Group-Building Guidelines” handout and give them a few minutes to read the guidelines. After they have done so, ask if there are any questions, additions, etc. then guide people into the Reflection.

Reflection and Group Sharing

Encourage participants to let their minds and bodies relax and to invite the spirit of the divine into this prayerful time. After a moment of silence, slowly read the following prayer or offer one of your own:

Holy one, open our hearts and minds; help us as we seek wisdom and a spirit of understanding this day. Amen.

After the prayer, invite one or more participants to read William Penn's words from the ***Pennsylvania Charter of Liberty, Laws Agreed Upon in England***, then words from a letter from the Danbury (CT) Baptist Association to newly elected President Thomas Jefferson from the Primer—and then invite the group to reflect silently for a minute or two.

Here are some ideas/questions to get you started:

- Many who came to settle in the colonies were doing so to escape persecution for their religious beliefs. Some, like the Puritans, sought purity in beliefs, and engaged in persecution of those who held different beliefs. Others, like William Penn and Roger Williams, sought to create a society where all could “live peaceably and justly in civil society.” What are your thoughts on these two approaches?
- Today, many claim that the United States was founded as a Christian nation. The efforts of people like Penn and Roger Williams appear contrary to that claim, as does the constitutional principle of religious liberty as embodied in these words in the

First Amendment to our Constitution: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...” Simply stated, this “Establishment Clause” is meant to prevent government from promoting religion or interfering with its practice. Do you believe that the U.S. was founded as a Christian nation? How does this fit with Thomas Jefferson's response to the Danbury Baptists regarding a “wall of separation” or the words in our Constitution?

- What does the “wall of separation between church and state” mean to you?
- What does “freedom of conscience” mean to you?
- What are your thoughts about how notions of religious freedom and separation of church and state have played out over the years in the United States? Do you think leaders like John F. Kennedy and Barry Goldwater (as described beginning on p. 4 of your primer) were the exception or the rule, and if so, why?
- According to religious scholar Diana Eck, the United States has evolved from a mostly Protestant Christian population in colonial times to perhaps the most religiously diverse society in the world, with around 3,000 different religious groups. How do you believe that has affected the way we see the role of religion in our society vs. how our founders and early settlers may have viewed it?

Review of Discussion

If you have conducted discussion as a group, take this time to survey the group and record on a flipchart, white board, or chalk board what participants see as important observations or learnings that came from the discussion.

If there were small groups, ask for a representative from each group to briefly summarize the group's observations and record them.

Wrap-Up and Preparation for Next Session

Be prepared to record questions/responses and encourage participants to contemplate the responses over the coming week.

- Are there any questions from the group as it completes reflection/discussion time?
- Questions for the group to assess learning/discovery

- What did I learn that was new about the history of religion in public life in our country?
- What surprised me about my learnings today?
- What new insights did I gain from the reading and discussion?
- Has what I've learned today changed the way I think about religion in our public life today?

- Why does it matter to me?

Remind participants to read the next week's portion of their primer, ***The Role of Religion in Public Life***, in preparation for the next session.

Closing Prayer

Invite the group to join you in the closing prayer below, one of your own, or one from another participant.

God of all people, sometimes we forget that you are, indeed, the God of all people, and not ours alone. We live in a place to which many fled when they faced persecution for their beliefs, and now we witness persecution of our neighbors for their beliefs. Remind us, O God, that you created each unique person in your image, and because we share this common heritage, we are all sisters and

brothers, neighbors in a creation that you called good. Lord, your Son commanded that we love you with all our hearts and with all our souls and with all our strength and with all our minds, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Help us to remember that our neighbors are as numerous as the population of the earth. Guide us to see your face in the face of everyone we encounter, no matter how different, and help us to share your love with all we meet. Amen.

Session Two: A Theological Perspective on Religion in Public Life in the United States

Facilitator Orientation

This second session invites participants to consider how our theological outlook and the way others view the role of religion in public life in the United States may differ. This section of *The Role of Religion in Public Life* Primer begins:

In recent years there has been a growing concern over government actions and proposals that threaten the separation of church and state. Many are familiar with the ongoing legal battles over the display of religious materials on government property and in other public places, and over passage of legislation that enshrines discrimination on the basis of religious beliefs.

While we might note that Christian Scripture does not speak specifically to the issue of separation of church and state, Matthew does suggest that Jesus draws a distinction between one's allegiance to God and to government in these words: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."² We might also note that Jesus did, in fact, engage with his world on a very political level as he stood against the Roman Empire and the Jewish hierarchy. But contrary to what some believe, Jesus was not acting as he did to create a new religion called Christianity—he was working to confront his fellow Jews and to confront the powers that oppressed Jews and other marginalized persons.

Christians throughout the ages found themselves being persecuted and oppressed, and many of these Christians escaped from the state religion of their home countries to the safety of the American colonies, only to become oppressors to others who didn't share their same practices and beliefs, as we witnessed with the early Puritans in New England.

Given the growing diversity of religious traditions in the United States, it is important that we maintain the "wall of separation" intended by our nation's founders so that a majority in one faith tradition cannot threaten or interfere with the free practice of other traditions. A 2002 publication entitled "A Shared Vision: Religious Liberty in the 21st Century" asserts that the separation of church and state remains the "best means of assuring robust religious liberty and to creating a climate of mutual respect in a religiously diverse culture."³ It suggested that, "we must reaffirm our dedication to providing what Roger Williams called a 'haven for the cause of conscience.'"

There is a danger when we fail to maintain a healthy distance between the institutions of religion and government.

Preparation Outline

You should feel free to adapt this session as necessary to your circumstances.

- In preparing for or assisting with this session, please:
 - Have additional copies of the Group-Building Guidelines for anyone who needs them, and post any additional guidelines set by the group.

- Have additional copies of the "Primer."
- Have the following aids available at the session:
 - For discussion times: a flip chart with easel, or other blank paper with masking tape (for hanging paper), and markers, or a chalk board or white board (if

² From Matthew 20:17-21 (NRSV).

³ Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, <http://bjconline.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/A-Shared-Vision.pdf>.

used, be prepared to copy down notes at end of session).

- For the activity: blank paper and pencils or pens for all participants.
- Just prior to the session:
 - Arrange the group seating into a circle, if possible, to enhance group participation.
 - Place one set of handouts at each seat.
 - Set up two pieces of flip chart or other blank paper—one labeled “Emerging Questions” and the other “Emerging Insights from Group Activity”—or print these two headings on the chalk or white board. It may be helpful to also post the following questions as a starting point for participants when you get to this process.

In what we have read and discussed today:

- What did I learn that was new today?
- What surprised me about my learnings today?
- What new insights did I gain from the reading and discussion?
- Has what I've learned today changed the way I think about religion in our public life today?
- Why does it matter to me?

Keep track of time and help to keep group discussions consistent with the Group-Building Guidelines. You may need to adjust the time for each component in advance to fit the time available to you.

Opening Prayer

Invite the group to join you in the opening prayer below or one of your own.

God of all people, we know your love extends to all, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, ability, sexual orientation or identity, or any other condition of our lives. Sometimes, however, we believe that as Christians, we have the corner on your love, forgiveness, and indeed, on salvation through you, and we act in ways that harm our brothers and sisters from different or no religious traditions. You commanded that we love you, and love

our neighbors as ourselves, and you did not define our neighbors as only those who believe and practice as we do. Help us to see your face in every person we meet. Guide us to reach out in love and in an effort to learn and begin to understand our neighbors' beliefs. Remind us that if we are to live together in peace, we must learn to accept and embrace our differences, and not to act in ways that prevent our neighbors from the practice of their faith traditions. Amen.

Introductions

Each participant briefly introduces her/himself.

Welcome and Overview

Please read or summarize:

*Welcome to this second session discussion in **Civics 101 for People of Faith**, where we will discuss the theological perspectives and flesh out the concept of the separation of church and state—and why this is so very important in our religiously diverse society.*

In today's discussion, we will look at religion in public life in broad theological terms. Of course, scripture does not speak specifically to the issue of separation of church and state, though Matthew does suggest that Jesus draws a

distinction between one's allegiance to God and to government in these words: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." We know, however, the fate of many early Christians who continued to practice their faith under the reign of a hostile Roman government, and we also know the fate suffered by some early settlers in our own country for practicing their faith.

We've seen what can happen when radical religious traditions become enmeshed with governments around

the world. Given the growing diversity of religious traditions in the United States, we may want to look closely at maintaining the “wall of separation” that was intended by our nation’s founders, so that a majority in one faith tradition cannot threaten or interfere with the ability of others to practice freely within their own traditions, and no one feels threatened because of government policies concerning their religious practices.

Before we get started, let’s please take a few moments to read the handout on Group-Building Guidelines. We’ll be using these guidelines throughout this study series, especially during our discussion times.

Refer participants to the “Group-Building Guidelines” handout and give them a few minutes to read the guidelines. After they have done so, ask if there are any questions, additions, etc. then guide people into the Reflection.

Reflection and Group Sharing

Encourage participants to let their minds and bodies relax and to invite the spirit of the divine into this prayerful time. After a moment of silence, slowly read the following prayer or offer one of your own:

Holy one, open our hearts and minds; help us as we seek wisdom and a spirit of understanding this day. Amen.

After the prayer, invite one or more participants to read words from Pliny the Younger, a quote from Carl L. Becker’s “Religious Freedom: The Other Revolution,” followed by words from a 2002 publication entitled “**A Shared Vision: Religious Liberty in the 21st Century**,” all in the Primer—and then invite the group to reflect silently for a minute or two.

Here are some ideas/questions to get you started:

- While Scripture does not speak specifically to the issue of separation of church and state, Matthew suggests that Jesus draws a distinction between one’s allegiance to God and to government in these words: “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Are there other passages that come to mind for you, or other concepts that arise in Scripture that speak to this?
- What are your thoughts after reading the words of Pliny the Younger and considering what you know

about the fate of many early Christians who persisted in practicing their faith despite persecution? And what about the punishment meted out by the Puritans in our own country in colonial times? How do you think you might have lived in light of the threat of persecution?

- What do you think about the assertion in “**A Shared Vision: Religious Liberty in the 21st Century**” that the separation of church and state remains the “best means of assuring robust religious liberty and to creating a climate of mutual respect in a religiously diverse culture?”
- Is there a healthy balance that can be achieved when contemplating “freedom of conscience” and the freedom to practice of one’s religion in an environment where beliefs and practices of some appear to clash with the beliefs and practices of others? If you believe there is, how would that look?
- What are your thoughts about elected officials’ attempts to impose specific beliefs, limitations, etc. through imposition of laws that reflect a specific religious viewpoint? Do our elected officials have a responsibility to respect a diversity of religious beliefs, and if so, why is that important?

Review of Discussion

If you have conducted discussion as a group, take this time to survey the group and record on a flipchart, white

board, or chalk board what participants see as important observations or learnings that came from the discussion.

If there were small groups, ask for a representative from each group to briefly summarize the group's

observations and record them.

Wrap-Up and Preparation for Next Session

Be prepared to record questions/responses and encourage participants to contemplate the responses over the coming week.

- Are there any questions from the group as it completes reflection/discussion time?
- Questions for the group to assess learning/discovery
 - What did I learn that was new about the history of religion in public life in our country?
 - What surprised me about my learnings today?

- What new insights did I gain from the reading and discussion?
- Has what I've learned today changed the way I think about religion in our public life today?
- Why does it matter to me?

Remind participants to read the next week's portion of their primer, *The Role of Religion in Public Life*, in preparation for the next session.

Closing Prayer

Invite the group to join you in the closing prayer below, one of your own, or one from another participant.

God of love, we find ourselves at a moment when some in our society play upon fears around our religious differences. It almost feels like history repeating itself, when some of our nation's founders witnessed the treatment of religious minorities early in our history and worked to build a place where all religions would be welcomed, accepted, and permitted to practice their beliefs

without dictate or interference from our government. You call us to love our neighbors, and you do not specify the conditions for that love. Christian, Jewish, Muslim, atheist, Democrat or Republican—in your eyes we are all neighbors, and we are all created in your image. Guide us to get to know our neighbors who are different, and perhaps even to learn more about what they believe so that we might better understand our differences. Amen.

Session Three: A Christian Perspective on Civic Engagement

Facilitator Orientation

This third session invites participants to consider how Christians have viewed participation in the public square historically and through to the present.

We know that Christian faith and scripture both speak to government. Scripture is teeming with stories of people of faith accepting the challenge of God's call to speak truth to power and step into the political world. Jesus' life and, indeed, his death exemplified the cost of speaking truth to power.

Perhaps the most influential work on the role of Christians in contemporary culture is H. Richard Niebuhr's book *Christ in Culture*, which proposes five models, including: 1) Christ against culture; 2) Christ of culture; 3) Christ above culture; 4) Christ and culture in paradox; and 5) Christ the transformer of culture.⁴ Brief descriptions of each model are included in the Primer.

Of course, Biblical figures lived in another time and in a vastly different political climate from the experience of contemporary Christians, who co-exist with peoples of many faiths within a representative democracy where citizens have greater freedom and responsibility to bear witness. But we have always been called to "Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy" (Proverbs 31:8-9).

Over the years, one of the central questions of political philosophy has been the purpose of government. One common thought is that the purpose of the state is to protect rights and to preserve justice. This raises a couple of questions: Which rights and whose rights? What constitutes justice? Government is also entrusted with managing the shared resources of the people and ensuring that decisions are made with justice and transparency, and that the most vulnerable among us are

protected. If government works as intended, its services, such as public safety and security, health, community and human services and public education, benefit the common good and address the needs of all citizens.

Public advocacy efforts by the faith community have mostly focused on easily recognizable issues like poverty and hunger. Recently there has been some shift of attention to the conditions that cause citizen cynicism and disengagement from government, because these conditions often silence the voices of the persons our government is charged to serve and protect. We need to become more aware of the distortions of power and the inordinate role of money within governing structures at every level. Many elected officials have violated the public trust by elevating themselves, enhancing their personal power, and becoming more responsive to moneyed interests than to the voices of common persons, often rendering the power of ordinary citizens secondary to that of special interests.

While the fruits of Christian persistence in seeking justice can be found in movements including the abolition of slavery, civil rights, human rights, the environment, and the death penalty/criminal justice, to name a few, the influence of money and the perception that individuals are powerless to change the system seems to discourage the kind of Christian activism we witnessed during the civil rights movement. However, there is a growing realization that Christians must hear anew the call to be faithful citizens, as evidenced by the rising movement called "Repairers of the Breach." The name, of course, comes from the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 58:12): "Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in."

⁴ "Christ and Culture" – An Overview of a Christian Classic, February 25, 2015,

Preparation Outline

You should feel free to adapt this session as necessary to your circumstances.

- In preparing for or assisting with this session, please:
 - Have additional copies of the Group-Building Guidelines for anyone who needs them, and post any additional guidelines set by the group.
 - Have additional copies of the “Primer.”
- Have the following aids available at the session:
 - For discussion times: a flip chart with easel, or other blank paper with masking tape (for hanging paper), and markers, or a chalk board or white board (if used, be prepared to copy down notes at end of session).
 - For the activity: blank paper and pencils or pens for all participants.
- Just prior to the session:
 - Arrange the group seating into a circle, if possible, to enhance group participation.
 - Place one set of handouts at each seat.

- Set up two pieces of flip chart or other blank paper—one labeled “Emerging Questions” and the other “Emerging Insights from Group Activity”—or print these two headings on the chalk or white board. It may be helpful to also post the following questions as a starting point for participants when you get to this process.

In what we have read and discussed today:

- What did I learn that was new today?
 - What surprised me about my learnings today?
 - What new insights did I gain from the reading and discussion?
 - Has what I’ve learned today changed the way I think about religion in our public life today?
 - Why does it matter to me?
- Keep track of time and help to keep group discussions consistent with the Group-Building Guidelines. You may need to adjust the time for each component in advance to fit the time available to you.

Opening Prayer

Invite the group to join you in the opening prayer below or one of your own.

God of justice, throughout our history we have consistently heard your call to “Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.” You told your ancient people that fasting means more than sackcloth and ashes—it means to loose the chains of injustice, set the oppressed free, and share our food and shelter. Indeed, you charged us to rebuild

ancient ruins, raise up the foundations of many generations, and become repairers of the breach and restorers of streets to live in. Your call is not for the faint of heart, because we know that the life and death of Jesus, whom we call the Christ, exemplified the cost of speaking truth to power. Still, we know the power we hold when we speak with one voice, guided by your call to love our neighbor, and we know that our voice is needed now more than ever. Give us the strength we need to live into the role you have set before us. Amen.

Introductions

Each participant briefly introduces her/himself.

Welcome and Overview

Please read or summarize:

*Welcome to this third session discussion in **Civics 101 for People of Faith**, where we will discuss the theological imperative for Christians to be engaged in civil society.*

We will discuss what our forebears had to say, from the prophets through today, as well as the purpose of government and the responsibilities we place upon our elected officials. We will also talk about the things that

tend to distort power—particularly the role of money in our political system.

I think we are all aware of the many admonitions from the Hebrew prophets to do justice, free the captive, feed the hungry, and clothe the naked—and that we are to repair the foundations that support justice in our society. The father of the Reformation, Martin Luther, practiced this when he wrote over a thousand letters to civil authorities in an age of no computers or internet! He also challenged clergy to preach against economic injustice and any policies aimed at hurting the poor. He even issued what might be a very early Christian call to nonviolent civil disobedience, saying that if Christians were called by civil authorities to disobey God, they must resist.

More recently, H. Reinhold Niebuhr addressed the role of Christians in contemporary culture, and Karl Barth is often cited as having said that we should read the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other, but that we should read the newspaper through the lens of the Bible.

While traditionally Christians have considered that government and our elected officials bear responsibility for

acting with justice and transparency, with particular care to protect the most vulnerable, these days we find much disagreement over the role of government, and often find that the differences break down along partisan lines—and often, along religiously conservative and religiously progressive lines. However, the scriptural imperative still is there to love and care for our neighbor.

During contentious times like we find ourselves in today, Christians and other people of faith have historically stepped into the breach and have advocated for justice in movements like civil rights, human rights, abolition of slavery, and women's suffrage, looking back to the words of the prophets and the actions of Jesus as their guide.

Before we get started, let's please take a few moments to read the handout on Group-Building Guidelines. We'll be using these guidelines throughout this study series, especially during our discussion times.

Refer participants to the “Group-Building Guidelines” handout and give them a few minutes to read the guidelines. After they have done so, ask if there are any questions, additions, etc. then guide people into the Reflection.

Reflection and Group Sharing

Encourage participants to let their minds and bodies relax and to invite the spirit of the divine into this prayerful time. After a moment of silence, slowly read the following prayer or offer one of your own:

Holy one, open our hearts and minds; help us as we seek wisdom and a spirit of understanding this day. Amen.

After the prayer, invite one or more participants to read words from the Primer, including: 1) Quote from Cynthia Moe-Lobeda's book in *Public Church: For the Life of the World*; 2) The five proposed models for the role of Christians in contemporary culture in H. Richard Niebuhr's book *Christ in Culture*; and 3) A description of the rising movement called “Repairers of the Breach.” Invite the group to reflect silently for a minute or two.

Here are some ideas/questions to get you started:

- How has your reading of Scripture informed how you approach your own role in civic engagement?
- How do you view the purpose of government? Is your view influenced by your understanding of Scripture and your understanding of the faith tradition you practice, and if so, how?
- Do we, as Christians, have a responsibility to speak out for those who are most vulnerable—the poor, seniors, children, disabled persons, racial and ethnic minorities, those who are sick and/or injured, and if so, why? Do you believe that responsibility extends to persons who practice different faith traditions, and if so, why? And if not, why not?
- What do our responsibilities as Christians in the public sector entail? Are thoughts, prayers, statements, etc. enough, or is greater action required? In either case, why or what?
- Do you believe faith-inspired movements have been successful in the public arena over the years? What

movements do you see as successful? In what ways have they been successful—influencing others, provoking the change sought, etc.?

- Do you believe that all faith-inspired movements have been for good? Are there examples of faith-inspired movements that may not have had “the common good” at their core?

- If you believe that Christians are called to act on behalf of our vulnerable neighbors, are there times that you believe that the Christian community has failed to act in accordance with this call? How so?
- As Christians, how would you define justice?
- Do you believe there are limits on what people acting based on their faith can/should do in the public arena? If so, what are they?

Review of Discussion

If you have conducted discussion as a group, take this time to survey the group and record on a flipchart, white board, or chalk board what participants see as important observations or learnings that came from the discussion.

If there were small groups, ask for a representative from each group to briefly summarize the group's observations and record them.

Wrap-Up and Preparation for Next Session

Be prepared to record questions/responses and encourage participants to contemplate the responses over the coming week.

- Are there any questions from the group as it completes reflection/discussion time?
- Questions for the group to assess learning/discovery
 - What did I learn that was new about the history of religion in public life in our country?
 - What surprised me about my learnings today?

- What new insights did I gain from the reading and discussion?
- Has what I've learned today changed the way I think about religion in our public life today?
- Why does it matter to me?

Remind participants to read the next week's portion of their primer, *The Role of Religion in Public Life*, in preparation for the next session.

Closing Prayer

Invite the group to join you in the closing prayer below, one of your own, or one from another participant.

Gracious God, you created us to live in community, caring for and loving our sisters and brothers as you love us. You call us to treat others as we wish to be treated. We cannot stand idly by when we see our neighbors suffering for lack of basic needs, or living in fear of violence and persecution, for we certainly would not wish to suffer in

these ways ourselves. We know that we have a responsibility to work for justice for all. We also acknowledge that because you created us as unique individuals with differing gifts, this work may take different forms for different people. Grant us the courage and the strength to seek the ways that we can engage in your world to make it a safer and more loving place for all of creation. Amen.

Session Four: Civics 101

Facilitator Orientation

This fourth session is meant to serve as a refresher course for participants to recall what they learned about government, either as students or as responsible adults—or as an introduction to government for those who have no working knowledge of our system of government.

Most tend to describe the United States as a democracy, but scholars don't always agree. Some say we are a federal republic, where there is a [division of powers](#) between the federal government, and the government of the individual subdivisions. While each federal republic manages this division of powers differently, common matters relating to security and defense, and monetary policy are usually handled at the federal level, while matters such as infrastructure maintenance and education policy are usually handled at the regional or local level. Others say we are a representative democracy—given our size, direct democracy is impractical. Others might say we are a constitutional federal representative democracy, because the courts are in place to exert restraint when it might be needed.

Regardless of what we choose to call our government system, there are some basic things we must understand which are described in significant detail in the Primer.

1. There are four basic levels of government in the United States: 1) local/municipal; 2) county; 3) state; and 4) federal. Each level has certain responsibilities.

2. The Separation of Powers devised by the framers of the Constitution was designed to do one primary thing: to prevent the majority from ruling with an iron fist. Based on their experience, the framers shied away from giving any branch of the new government too much power. The separation of powers provides a system of shared power known as [Checks and Balances](#). The three branches under this structure at both the federal and state levels are: 1) Legislative (Congress/General Assembly); 2) Executive (President/Governor & departments); and 3) Judiciary (Supreme Court and lower courts).

We also have a system under which laws are passed that is very similar at both the federal and state levels that requires significant review and approval by both the legislative and executive branches. The legislative branch also issues various resolutions, typically involving noncontroversial topics, and the executives sometimes issue executive orders.

It would help to review carefully this chapter in the Primer before leading this session. You may also want to consider having access to the internet to show the video “I’m Just a Bill” from Schoolhouse Rock, providing a brief and humorous illustration of how laws are made.⁵

Preparation Outline

You should feel free to adapt this session as necessary to your circumstances.

- In preparing for or assisting with this session, please:
 - Have additional copies of the Group-Building Guidelines for anyone who needs them, and post any additional guidelines set by the group.

- Have additional copies of the “Primer.”
- Have the following aids available at the session:
 - For discussion times: a flip chart with easel, or other blank paper with masking tape (for hanging paper), and markers, or a chalk board or white board (if

⁵ I’m Just a Bill, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-eYBZFEzf8>

used, be prepared to copy down notes at end of session).

- For the activity: blank paper and pencils or pens for all participants.
- Just prior to the session:
 - Arrange the group seating into a circle, if possible, to enhance group participation.
 - Place one set of handouts at each seat.
 - Set up two pieces of flip chart or other blank paper—one labeled “Emerging Questions” and the other “Emerging Insights from Group Activity”—or print these two headings on the chalk or white board. It may be helpful to also post the following

questions as a starting point for participants when you get to this process.

In what we have read and discussed today:

- What did I learn that was new today?
- What surprised me about my learnings today?
- What new insights did I gain from the reading and discussion?
- Has what I've learned today changed the way I think about religion in our public life today?
- Why does it matter to me?
- Keep track of time and help to keep group discussions consistent with the Group-Building Guidelines. You may need to adjust the time for each component in advance to fit the time available to you.

Opening Prayer

Invite the group to join you in the opening prayer below or one of your own.

God of wisdom, your ways are often mysterious—not unlike the ways in which our government entities work at every level (or in some cases, don't seem to work). It can be confusing—we want the pothole that destroyed our tire fixed; who do we call? Who can make sure that our neighbors who lack resources are able to eat, remain housed, and have the medications they need? How do we

change a law that we believe hurts some at the expense of others? Our forebears worked hard to create a system that should work, but in practice often doesn't because of partisan politics or powerful forces that seem to call the shots. Because we are called to civic engagement, we must understand our governing structures. Enlighten us, O God; help us to understand so that we may act wisely. Amen.

Introductions

Each participant briefly introduces her/himself.

Welcome and Overview

Please read or summarize:

*Welcome to this fourth session discussion in **Civics 101 for People of Faith**, where we will discuss how our government works—or is supposed to work. For many of you, this session will serve as a refresher course to help you recall what you learned in your civics or government classes, but for some of you who may not have had these classes, it may actually serve as an introduction to government.*

Our system of government has been described in several ways—which I hope you have read about in your

Primer—but for the purposes of this session, I will refer to it as a democracy, or a representative democracy, since this is the way most Americans seem to think of it. It is a representative democracy because we elect persons to serve and make decisions on our behalf—direct democracy would be impractical in a nation of our size. However, this system is not absolute, and here is where a better description might be that we are a federal republic where there is a division of power. Some powers are held and exercised at different levels, and the courts are in place to provide a check against the enactment of truly unjust laws.

There seems to be genuine and significant confusion for many about how our government works. There are four basic levels of government in the United States: 1) local/municipal; 2) county; 3) state; and 4) federal. Each level has certain responsibilities. Federal government activities often tend to dominate the news—we are often made most aware of words from our presidents, debates in Congress around the most contentious issues, and the like. Unless there is something particularly pressing or contentious happening at any of the other levels, it may get lost in all the political “noise.” Perhaps the most forgotten and unnoticed level is county government—even though counties are often responsible for things like voter registration, child welfare, and public defenders for indigent persons accused of crimes. Local governments tend to fix the potholes, provide police, and plan for economic and other development. These are important functions, and we must understand them to be truly effective as advocates.

We also have a system of “Separation of Powers” that prevents a majority from running roughshod over the

minority. The Executive Branch provides a check on the Legislative Branch when it vetoes legislation. The Legislative Branch provides a check when it prevents the Executive Branch from taking unilateral actions it sees as improper or overrides a veto. The Judicial Branch acts as a check on both other branches when it issues decisions regarding laws that are being challenged. With regard to passing laws, the federal and state systems are very similar in that they both require significant review and approval by both the legislative and executive branches. This is simply illustrated in a video that some of you may have seen growing up—“I’m Just a Bill” from Schoolhouse Rock, which we will watch right now.

Of course, this is a much abbreviated review of a complex system that we must learn to navigate in order to know where to go when we want to advocate for action or change. We’ll get into this somewhat in our discussion today, but I encourage you to at least review this portion of your Primer and to do further research so that you can be well-educated about our system.

Reflection and Group Sharing

Encourage participants to let their minds and bodies relax and to invite the spirit of the divine into this prayerful time. After a moment of silence, slowly read the following prayer or offer one of your own:

Holy one, open our hearts and minds; help us as we seek wisdom and a spirit of understanding this day. Amen.

After the prayer, invite one or more participants to read the following from the Primer: 1) the indented section under “Separation of Powers” on p. 13 and ending on p. 15; and 2) the paragraph beginning with “Laws begin as ideas” on p. 15 through the first sentence of the next paragraph. Invite the group to reflect silently for a minute or two.

Here are some ideas/questions to get you started:

- How much do you remember of the study of government from your school days? Is this something that was addressed in depth, was it addressed only in passing, or was it studied at all?
- What are your thoughts on our form of federal government—democracy, federal republic, representative democracy, etc., and how does this inform your understanding of government?
- What is your understanding of the different levels of government—local, county, state, federal? Do you feel you have a good grasp on the responsibilities of the different levels, and if not, what would it take to promote better understanding?
- Have you engaged in issues at the different levels of government, or has most of your focus been on one level?
- What level do you think affects our day-to-day lives the most? Does it differ from issue to issue, and how? How might it differ based on your race, ethnicity, faith, etc.?
- What is your understanding of the roles of the different branches of government—legislative,

executive, judicial? What about how they might apply at each level of government?

- What is your understanding of the Separation of Powers? How do you think it applies when considering the different levels of government? How about its application when considering the three branches?
- Do you believe the balance of power among the different levels and among the three branches has shifted over the years? If so, in what ways?
- Do you understand how legislation is made at each level, and if not, why is that the case? It might be good, and fun, to show the old "I'm Just a Bill" from Schoolhouse Rock as quick illustration about the

process for lawmaking at the federal level, and note that the process is very nearly the same for the state. Do you think it usually works this way, and why or why not?

- Do you think there are actions taken and/or practices that have become commonplace over the years that have affected how our government works—such as lobbying, campaign contributions, rules (like the Senate 60-vote rule), etc.? Have the effects, in your opinion, been positive or negative, and why? How have these actions/practices affected the ability of individual constituents and entities without money/power to engage in the process?
- What changes would you suggest to make government work better for everyone?

Review of Discussion

If you have conducted discussion as a group, take this time to survey the group and record on a flipchart, white board, or chalk board what participants see as important observations or learnings that came from the discussion.

If there were small groups, ask for a representative from each group to briefly summarize the group's observations and record them.

Wrap-Up and Preparation for Next Session

Be prepared to record questions/responses and encourage participants to contemplate the responses over the coming week.

- Are there any questions from the group as it completes reflection/discussion time?
- Questions for the group to assess learning/discovery
 - What did I learn that was new about the history of religion in public life in our country?
 - What surprised me about my learnings today?

- What new insights did I gain from the reading and discussion?
- Has what I've learned today changed the way I think about religion in our public life today?
- Why does it matter to me?

Remind participants to read the next week's portion of their primer, ***The Role of Religion in Public Life***, in preparation for the next session.

Closing Prayer

Invite the group to join you in the closing prayer below, one of your own, or one from another participant.

God of courage, if we profess to live in a country ruled as a democracy, we must also embrace the true meaning of the word—rule by the people. It is easy to be complacent when we are feeling comfortable and safe, not realizing the

struggles of our neighbors and our communities. We are called and have a role to play in our society, but when we neglect or abandon that role, we open the door to rule by the wealthy and powerful few at the expense of the many. Remind us that we are all part of one body, one creation—and that when parts of the body are ailing, the whole body

suffers. Guide us to understanding a system that can profoundly impact the lives of all, so that we might know

better how to see and fix what isn't working to create a just system that works for all. Amen.

Session Five: Role of Government/Role of Citizenship from a Faith Perspective

Facilitator Orientation

This fifth session goes into much greater detail about how “good government” might be defined from both the faith and secular perspectives. From the faith side, expressed succinctly: According to scripture, good government promotes justice and righteousness and upholds the needs of the poor and vulnerable. On the secular side, a brief summary of a description provided by the United Nations Development Programme in its 1997 policy paper entitled “Governance for Sustainable Human Development”: Put simply, good government ensures justice for ALL and permits ALL to have a voice in how it accomplishes this. It is accountable and transparent concerning how it functions. It operates under a commonly understood rule of law, and manages resources efficiently and effectively. While one addresses primarily the mechanics, and the other the desired outcomes, following the mechanics would almost certainly ensure the desired outcomes.

You will find that there is some overlap between the concepts addressed in this session and the last session, but the important thing to address in this session is the broader understandings around the role of citizenship from a faith perspective, while the final session gets more into the “nuts and bolts” of actually being engaged.

You should carefully read this section of the Primer to ensure you have a good grasp on the important areas to consider that are part of the role we must each play as citizens. We must understand that:

- 1) We are called by God to be active and engaged in community with all of God's people.
- 2) We must understand our system of government—every level, separation of powers—and how it all works.
- 3) We must get to know our public officials and what they stand for, and we must get to know candidates so that we can make informed choices.

- 4) We must be well-informed. We need to read and listen to multiple sources of news and study the issues that are most important to us.
- 5) If things aren't going as we believe they should, we should question our elected officials and policymakers and determine why that is the case, and what might be needed to turn thing around.
- 6) We must participate. At a very basic level, that means voting, but there is much more that will be discussed in the final session.
- 7) We must lead when called to do so. Sometimes we may find that others are feeling unmotivated or discouraged, and a little push may be what is needed to start a movement.

There are some reasons why we fail to be faithful citizens. One is lack of understanding—either we don't understand how government systems work, or we confuse charity with faithful action as citizens. The latter isn't bad—in fact, it's necessary—but as United Methodist pastor Rebekah Jordan Gienapp writes, “What happens when a problem is so large or complicated that it can't be solved through charitable efforts alone?”⁶ The other reasons include:

- 1) Limited time (Just choose the issues that are most important to you and do something!)
- 2) Feelings of fear or intimidation (Our elected officials hold no power beyond what we are willing to cede to them.)
- 3) Can we really make a difference? (When we join with others, we can raise a mighty collective voice that absolutely can make a difference—even if it is only to prevent something much worse from happening.)
- 4) The Establishment Clause/“separation of church and state” is designed to keep the state from establishing an official religion—something that many of our

⁶ <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/5477/should-christians-engage-in-advocacy>

nation's earliest settlers came to escape. While it was not meant to limit "freedom of conscience," some are now using the term to justify ignoring anti-discrimination laws or denying services. Perhaps we

might want to discuss exactly how we believe this concept should apply—for example, should it apply only so long as no harm is done to one group by another in practicing freedom of conscience?

Preparation Outline

You should feel free to adapt this session as necessary to your circumstances.

- In preparing for or assisting with this session, please:
 - Have additional copies of the Group-Building Guidelines for anyone who needs them, and post any additional guidelines set by the group.
 - Have additional copies of the "Primer."
- Have the following aids available at the session:
 - For discussion times: a flip chart with easel, or other blank paper with masking tape (for hanging paper), and markers, or a chalk board or white board (if used, be prepared to copy down notes at end of session).
 - For the activity: blank paper and pencils or pens for all participants.
- Just prior to the session:
 - Arrange the group seating into a circle, if possible, to enhance group participation.
 - Place one set of handouts at each seat.

- Set up two pieces of flip chart or other blank paper—one labeled "Emerging Questions" and the other "Emerging Insights from Group Activity"—or print these two headings on the chalk or white board. It may be helpful to also post the following questions as a starting point for participants when you get to this process.

In what we have read and discussed today:

- What did I learn that was new today?
- What surprised me about my learnings today?
- What new insights did I gain from the reading and discussion?
- Has what I've learned today changed the way I think about religion in our public life today?
- Why does it matter to me?
- Keep track of time and help to keep group discussions consistent with the Group-Building Guidelines. You may need to adjust the time for each component in advance to fit the time available to you.

Opening Prayer

Invite the group to join you in the opening prayer below or one of your own.

God of harmony, we understand that "Government is a means through which God works to preserve creation"...that you "ordain government to help maintain a peaceful and just social order in a sinful world"...and that "Government has a distinct divine calling 'to maintain peace, to establish justice, to protect and advance human rights, and to promote the general welfare

of all persons.'" What we see isn't always what we understand government should be. We know we have a role to play in partnership with you to ensure a government that serves all people, but we feel overwhelmed and don't know how best to accomplish it. We need your guidance. We need your gentle prodding. We need to know that we are not alone, and that you are with us in this work. Be with us, O God, as we seek to be faithful citizens and good neighbors to all. Amen.

Introductions

Each participant briefly introduces her/himself.

Welcome and Overview

Please read or summarize:

*Welcome to this fifth session discussion in **Civics 101 for People of Faith**, where we will discuss the role of government and the role of citizenship from a faith perspective. You will probably note some overlap between what we've discussed in previous weeks and what we will be addressing in our final session next week.*

This session goes into much greater detail about how "good government" might be defined from both the faith and secular perspectives. From the faith side, expressed succinctly: According to scripture, good government promotes justice and righteousness and upholds the needs of the poor and vulnerable. On the secular side, a summarized description provided by the United Nations Development Programme is: Put simply, good government ensures justice for ALL and permits ALL to have a voice in how it accomplishes this. It is accountable and transparent concerning how it functions. It operates under a commonly understood rule of law, and manages resources efficiently and effectively. While one addresses primarily the mechanics, and the other the desired outcomes, following the mechanics would almost certainly ensure the desired outcomes.

So what is the role of citizens viewed through the lens of Christianity?

- *We must understand how government works. This is self-explanatory—we can't know where to focus our efforts on the issues that matter to us if we don't know what level or branch of government is responsible.*
- *It helps to know our elected officials—who represents us at each level. This is connected to understanding how government works, but extends beyond that. Knowing who they are permits you to do research on their positions on issues before communicating with them. Developing a relationship with your elected officials and their staffs can help to make your work with them more productive.*
- *We need to be informed. There are so many ways—print media, radio, television and cable, electronic media. Make sure to follow what is happening at every level from local to state to national to*

international. Seek out balance—don't just pay attention to the news that supports your personal politics. It helps to understand positions other than your own and why others hold those positions—plus it helps to understand weaknesses in your own positions.

- *Questioning the consequences of legislation is healthy. Even some elected officials don't understand the implications of the legislation before them, relying on colleagues, staffers, or special interest lobbyists (where these interests may benefit directly). Find organizations you can trust and read fact sheets, white papers, and summaries of legislation that interests you. If you find potential outcomes that seem disturbing, let your elected officials know as soon as possible—some have been known to change positions based on such contacts!*
- *Participation is related to questioning, but is much broader. It includes contacts with your elected officials, but also includes writing letters-to-the-editor, attending public meetings, offering public comments on proposed legislation or policy, getting involved in voter registration, education and getting out the vote, attending educational forums or debates, and participating in rallies and vigils.*
- *Leadership isn't for everyone due to time or circumstances, but if you are really passionate about an issue, helping to organize others is a wonderful way to participate.*

There are reasons why so many don't answer the call to be faithful citizens, however. Time and circumstances—work, family, and other obligations may mean that there is little time to do all the things just described. Most of us, however, can at least vote—and occasionally pick up the phone to call a legislator supporting or opposing legislation.

Some reasons for inaction are self-imposed, however. Feelings of fear or intimidation sometimes prevent us from taking action. It's important to remember that elected officials are there to serve US—it isn't easy to confront them when we have differences, but we must not permit them to talk down to us. Sometimes we question whether or not we can make a difference. If everyone were to ask

that question and determine that we can't, then we never will. A strong, collective voice can be heard, and may make a difference even if it only prevents a really negative outcome. Some fear violating separation of church and state. This concept is there to protect us from government interference in our practice of religion, not to separate our faith from how we participate in the public arena. Our

faith can and should inform our politics—but we must refrain from trying to impose the dictates of our faith upon others who may not hold the same beliefs.

If we feel reluctant to engage, it may be cause for self-examination to determine why.

Reflection and Group Sharing

Encourage participants to let their minds and bodies relax and to invite the spirit of the divine into this prayerful time. After a moment of silence, slowly read the following prayer or offer one of your own:

Holy one, open our hearts and minds; help us as we seek wisdom and a spirit of understanding this day. Amen.

After the prayer, invite one or more participants to read the following from the Primer: 1) the indented paragraphs from the ***Principles for Public Advocacy*** on p. 18; 2) the United Nations Development Programme “Characteristics of Good Governance” on p. 19; and 3) words from Rebekah Jordan Gienapp (indented) on p. 22. Invite the group to reflect silently for a minute or two.

Here are some ideas/questions to get you started:

- The ELCA’s “*Christian Faith and U.S. Political Life Today*” says: “Government is a means through which God works to preserve creation...God ordains government to help maintain a peaceful and just social order in a sinful world...Government has a distinct divine calling ‘to maintain peace, to establish justice, to protect and advance human rights, and to promote the general welfare of all persons.’” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
- Do you believe that government has a responsibility to protect the common good, to protect the rights of ALL people and provide justice for all, or should it exercise majority rule, enacting laws and practices that reflect the views of the majority that elected those that govern, as these officials understand their views? Why or why not?
- Given the notion of separation of church and state, do you think that Scriptural concepts should play a role in the way our government works, and if so, how? Does it depend on the specific concepts? Are the concepts we believe are important merely religious concepts, or are they common sense, more universal concepts that apply regardless of religious tradition? What is your reasoning for the view you have?
- Does government have a responsibility to uphold the rights of our most vulnerable neighbors? Why would or wouldn’t this be important?
- The United Nations Development Programme provided an excellent non-religious description of “Characteristics of Good Governance” in its 1997 policy paper entitled “Governance for Sustainable Human Development.” Do you think this description provides good guidance that reflects a Christian understanding of the role of government and how it should work? What is the reasoning for your position?
- How well do you think each level of government has performed, based on your understanding of the role of government? Do you believe government does well overall, or poorly, and why?

Review of Discussion

If you have conducted discussion as a group, take this time to survey the group and record on a flipchart, white

board, or chalk board what participants see as important observations or learnings that came from the discussion.

If there were small groups, ask for a representative from each group to briefly summarize the group's observations and record them.

Wrap-Up and Preparation for Next Session

Be prepared to record questions/responses and encourage participants to contemplate the responses over the coming week.

- Are there any questions from the group as it completes reflection/discussion time?
- Questions for the group to assess learning/discovery
 - What did I learn that was new about the history of religion in public life in our country?
 - What surprised me about my learnings today?

- What new insights did I gain from the reading and discussion?
- Has what I've learned today changed the way I think about religion in our public life today?
- Why does it matter to me?

Remind participants to read the next week's portion of their primer, ***The Role of Religion in Public Life***, in preparation for the next session.

Closing Prayer

Invite the group to join you in the closing prayer below, one of your own, or one from another participant.

O God, you instituted government as a sacred trust meant to serve the many, not the few. We believe that in a good society, those with political authority have a responsibility to provide justice for all, and that elected officials are entrusted with managing the shared resources of the people and ensuring that decisions are made with justice

and transparency. Because those in positions of power often violate these principles, you call us to greater understanding of the role of government, and of our own role in holding those in elected and appointed positions accountable for their actions. Help us to move beyond feelings of intimidation, fear of not making a difference, and to find the time to participate as faithful citizens and members of our communities. Amen.

Session Six: How Christians Can Live Out the Call to Faithful Citizenship

Facilitator Orientation

This sixth and final session addresses more specifically how we, as people of faith, can live into the call to be faithful citizens. There are numerous ways that we can live out this call—the list is endless and only limited by one's creativity and commitment.

Session Five discussed the need to be informed. We need to know who the candidates are and their positions, we need to use reliable, non-partisan sources like the League of Women Voters to do this—and we need to assess how well their positions fit with what we believe.

We need to be registered to vote—and the Primer addresses how to get registered. We need to vote in EVERY election (for which we are eligible), for seats at every level and branch of government, and in ballot initiatives—it is the elections at the local level that often have the greatest effect on our daily lives. We need to encourage others to register as well, and help them to understand why voting is so important—the Primer lists four very good reasons for voting.

We must make our views known to our elected officials. Often, a very few contacts can influence their actions because they don't always get the level of feedback we might imagine. It helps to cultivate a respectful relationship with your elected officials and their staffers (even if you disagree with most of their positions) because they are more likely to listen if they know you. **Personal** outreach—through letters, e-mails, faxes, and

phone calls—is significantly more effective than “click and send” messages. In-person visits are probably the best way to get to know your officials, and it's more likely that the visit can be with the official directly if scheduled in-district when the body he/she is a member of is not in session. However, depending on the official, sometimes meeting with a knowledgeable and responsible staffer is just as good, and may even be better.

Letters-to-the-editor and op-eds are both excellent ways to alert your elected officials about an issue that you care deeply about. **By mentioning your elected officials by name**, you can usually guarantee that your submission will catch their attention. They are also tremendous advocacy tools because they reach a large audience, can bring up information not addressed in a news article, and can create an impression of widespread support or opposition to an issue.

Congregations can play a role as well, though as non-profits they cannot engage in partisan politics. They can engage in education around issues. They can hold candidate forums if they include all candidates for a given position. They can hold voter registration drives and support “get out the vote” efforts (rides to the polls, child care, for example) if they are non-partisan. Clergy can even speak about issues from the pulpit, but it is probably best to use lectionary texts and ground their words in scripture.

Preparation Outline

You should feel free to adapt this session as necessary to your circumstances.

- In preparing for or assisting with this session, please:
 - Have additional copies of the Group-Building Guidelines for anyone who needs them, and post any additional guidelines set by the group.
 - Have additional copies of the “Primer.”
 - Have the following aids available at the session:
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- For discussion times: a flip chart with easel, or other blank paper with masking tape (for hanging paper), and markers, or a chalk board or white board (if used, be prepared to copy down notes at end of session).
- For the activity: blank paper and pencils or pens for all participants.
- Just prior to the session:

- Arrange the group seating into a circle, if possible, to enhance group participation.
- Place one set of handouts at each seat.
- Set up two pieces of flip chart or other blank paper—one labeled “Emerging Questions” and the other “Emerging Insights from Group Activity”—or print these two headings on the chalk or white board. It may be helpful to also post the following questions as a starting point for participants when you get to this process.

In what we have read and discussed today:

- What did I learn that was new today?
- What surprised me about my learnings today?
- What new insights did I gain from the reading and discussion?
- Has what I've learned today changed the way I think about religion in our public life today?
- Why does it matter to me?
- Keep track of time and help to keep group discussions consistent with the Group-Building Guidelines. You may need to adjust the time for each component in advance to fit the time available to you.

Opening Prayer

Invite the group to join you in the opening prayer below or one of your own.

God of wisdom, these few weeks have helped us to understand that you do, indeed, call us to be faithful citizens. We have studied history, theology, our systems of government, and discussed our understanding of the role of government and the role of citizenship from a faith

perspective. Given our newfound knowledge and understanding, help us to learn the many ways in which we can live out this call individually and within our congregations. As we learn, guide us also in discovering the gifts we bring to this work, and how we can work together, guided by your love, compassion, strength, and wisdom, to employ them well. Amen.

Introductions

Each participant briefly introduces her/himself.

Welcome and Overview

Please read or summarize:

*Welcome to this sixth and final session discussion in **Civics 101 for People of Faith**, where we will discuss how we can live out the call to faithful citizenship more specifically. As with the last session, you will probably note some overlap with some of the things we have discussed in previous lessons.*

In our last session, we discussed the need to be informed, but this week, we are expanding on that. Knowing about the issues is important, but we can't be good advocates without also knowing where our elected officials and candidates stand on these issues. Their websites and publications can be helpful resources, but we should also consider using reliable, non-partisan sources like the League of Women Voters and looking at reporting from a range of perspectives. Once we have studied their

positions, then we need to assess how well their positions fit with what we believe.

Voting is self-evident, and our elected officials need to know that we are registered and that we vote—not just for president every four years, but for EVERY position in EVERY election, and that our votes are based on their responsiveness to our positions on the issues. It is often that the elections at the local level have the greatest effect on our daily lives. We won't discuss voter registration in detail—that is covered comprehensively in the Primer. And while it is important that we each vote, we need to encourage others to register and vote as well—and to help them to understand why voting is so important. We'll address some of the reasons as we get into our discussion.

Being informed, of course, is only the beginning, because we must use our knowledge to make our views known to our elected officials. If we really want to be heard, it helps

to cultivate a respectful relationship with your elected officials and their staffers (even if you disagree with most of their positions) because they are more likely to listen if they know you. **Personal** outreach using your own words in any form is significantly more effective than “click and send” messages. In-person visits are probably the best way to get to know your officials, particularly if scheduled in-district when they are less distracted by the demands of being in session—and when you are more likely to see your elected official in person. However, depending on the official, sometimes meeting with a knowledgeable and responsible staffer is just as good, and may even be better.

Letters-to-the-editor and op-eds are both excellent ways to alert your elected officials about an issue that you care deeply about. **By mentioning your elected officials by name**, you can usually guarantee that your submission will catch their attention. They are also tremendous advocacy tools because they reach a large audience, can bring up information not addressed in a news article, and

can create an impression of widespread support or opposition to an issue.

Congregations can play a role as well, though as non-profits they cannot engage in partisan politics. They can engage in education around issues. They can hold candidate forums if they include all candidates for a given position. They can hold voter registration drives and support “get out the vote” efforts (rides to the polls, child care, for example) if they are non-partisan. Clergy can even speak about issues from the pulpit, but it is probably best to use lectionary texts and ground their words in scripture. Clergy can also express their preferences for candidates, but there are some caveats. First, it is best NOT to share this from the pulpit, and the recommendation is not to do this at all. Clergy must also make it clear that their choices are theirs and theirs alone—they should never suggest or imply that they represent their congregations in the choices they make. Many choose simply not to declare choices at all because of the potential for problems if they do so.

Reflection and Group Sharing

Encourage participants to let their minds and bodies relax and to invite the spirit of the divine into this prayerful time. After a moment of silence, slowly read the following prayer or offer one of your own:

Holy one, open our hearts and minds; help us as we seek wisdom and a spirit of understanding this day. Amen.

After the prayer, invite one or more participants to read the following from the Primer: 1) the quote from Karl Barth in the box on p. 20; 2) the words concerning why voting is important on p. 27; and 3) the “General Guidelines” for cultivating relationships with legislators (minus the bullets describing how to find your legislators). Invite the group to reflect silently for a minute or two.

Here are some ideas/questions to get you started:

- Your guide names a range of things that Christians should do to be good citizens in our society: understanding how government works, knowing our public officials, being informed, questioning laws and policies, participating in a variety of ways

(voting, writing letters, making calls and visits, etc.), and leading by urging others to be engaged. Do you think there is a hierarchy that exists among these actions, and if so, what do you think it should be? Is there a minimum that one should do to be faithful, and what would that minimum be? Are we called to do all of these, or should our individual gifts play a role in those we emphasize?

- What do you think prevents many Christians from engaging in the political process? Do you think it is time constraints, fear, apathy (not really caring or feeling our actions don't matter), belief that faith should play no role in public life, or something else?
- Do you ever feel overwhelmed by the number of issues that confront us daily? Do you feel as if you must engage in every issue to be faithful, or are you comfortable engaging where and how you can on issues where you feel passion and commitment?
- Do you think there are specific actions that have more or less weight than others in terms of how they

might influence the process? If so, what are some of the issues that should have more weight?

- How are you able to balance what you believe to be right and best for you with how you work to influence governments that must work for all people? Do you ever experience times when your personal beliefs exist in tension with your understanding of the role of government? How does that feel?

- What are the ways you feel called to participate as a Christian, given your past and current understanding of the role of Christians in the civic arena, learnings over these sessions, your own gifts, and any constraints you might have in terms of time and employment?
- What are the ways your congregation might participate in the political process?

Review of Discussion

If you have conducted discussion as a group, take this time to survey the group and record on a flipchart, white board, or chalk board what participants see as important observations or learnings that came from the discussion.

If there were small groups, ask for a representative from each group to briefly summarize the group's observations and record them.

Final Wrap-Up

- Are there any questions from the group as it completes reflection/discussion time?
- Questions for the group to assess learning/discovery
 - What did I learn that was new about the history of religion in public life in our country?
 - What surprised me about my learnings today?
 - What new insights did I gain from the reading and discussion?
 - Has what I've learned today changed the way I think about religion in our public life today?
- Why does it matter to me?
- After participating in "The Role of Religion in Public Life" for the past six sessions:
 - What do you believe are your greatest learnings?
 - What are the biggest "take-aways" that you think might benefit you and/or your congregation?
 - Are there things that you feel were not helpful as you reflected in each of the six sessions?
 - Are there any other questions or comments regarding this time?

Closing Prayer

Invite the group to join you in the closing prayer below, one of your own, or one from another participant.

Gracious and loving God, you have called us to be faithful in all aspects of our lives, including, and perhaps especially, as members of our communities and society as a whole. Being faithful in community means ensuring that our systems of living and governing are carried out in ways that benefit everyone, that justice is served fairly,

and that all of your people can feel safe and loved. Remind us that because you created us to be in community, the critical work we have read about and discussed over our time together is necessary to build an even better, more loving, beloved community where we can all grow and thrive as your children. Help us to take that reminder with us as we leave this time together, that we may truly live as faithful citizens. Amen.

APPENDIX A

Group-Building Guidelines⁷

For creating an open, community-enhancing group during the series, we suggest the following guidelines:

- View everyone as a participant (there are no leaders). While one person will help to facilitate each session's flow, neither this person nor anyone else should view him/herself as the session's "leader." Each of us has a unique voice that can help to reveal unforeseen wisdom. We can create an environment of respect and mindfulness in which every person's voice can shine forth.
- Respond as equals. As we all bear the image of our God who loves us equally, we can commit to valuing each other as equals and we can ensure that our responses to one another reflect this commitment.
- Be authentic. In our day-to-day lives, we often wear many masks. This group time is a blessed opportunity, in the company of our sisters and brothers in faith, to be more fully the people God is creating us to be.
- Bring our whole selves to the conversation. While our intellectual gifts are very valuable, we can use this opportunity to bring our emotions, spiritual and experiential insights, and imaginations to the conversation as well.
- View conversations as barn-raising instead of battle-making. Consider the following as we strive to create a collaborative environment:
 - Really listen to others—avoid becoming distracted and the temptation to formulate a response as someone is speaking.
 - Respond with support—avoid the highly destructive temptation to attack, dismiss, or denigrate others.
 - State what you mean without persuasion— enjoy the freedom that comes from not having to prove that you're right.
 - Remember to use your own voice, don't play devil's advocate—the latter erodes authenticity and trust.
- Question conventional ideas and seek alternative explanations and views. Because human communities and all of God's creation groan under the weighty implications of traditional worldviews, this is a time to bring critical, biblical thought to these views.
- Discover wisdom through stories. For example, in Christian traditions Jesus' parables offer some of the greatest kernels of wisdom in our faith. What are your life parables and what may God be trying to say through them? When we share our life stories, we open ourselves to one another as holy, living texts.

⁷ These guidelines, printed in "Opening the Letter: A Congregational Guide to God's Earth Is Sacred" (http://nccecojustice.org/network/downloads/OpenLetter_final.pdf), are inspired by The Simplicity Circle by Cecile Andrews (published by HarperCollins, 1994) and Simpler Living, Compassionate Life, edited by Michael Schut (published by Earth Ministry and Living the Good News Press, 1999) p. 229.

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