

You belong here!!!

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Those words are sprinkled across Gethsemane's social media pages, they live on the wall in the narthex, I use them frequently in my newsletter articles and on posts I make for the website or online. You belong here. Those words ring true for everyone – and as they state in those three simple words, and in more depth around them they are true for the wondering, scared, funny, widowed, peaceful, gay, single, bored, democrat, republican or otherwise.

Each member of our church has a stance and strong feelings about the status of our nation as it is currently. We each see the injustices of our world differently, with different ideas for how these injustices came to be and what a resolution should look like. With so many feelings, there is no questioning, then, that much of the conflict we feel is generated when confronted with church and state, faith, and politics.

According to a new Pew Research Center survey “The percentage of U.S. citizens who trust the federal government to do what is right fell steadily from 77% in 1964 to 17% in 2019.” This study shows that regardless of who controls the White House, senate, or congress, confidence continues to erode. Yet, **you belong here!**

In June 2020, the ELCA adopted the “Government and Civic Engagement in the United States: Discipleship in a Democracy.” The message begins with an introduction which states: “Lutherans care about governments because it is a gift from God intended for the safety and flourishing of human life. Yet too often and in too many ways, this gift has been abused.”

The introduction continues by stating the government *of* the people has come to be seen as 1. Distant and oppressive, 2. Increasingly controlled by a small minority of elites, and 3. Unjust in who benefits and who pays.

The Lutheran idea of an orderly government “created and instituted by God” comes from the Augsburg Confession and Martin Luther himself in Article XVI: *But when commands of the civil authority cannot be obeyed without sin, we must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29).*

A task force for an ELCA social statement for the role of church in government has been working together since the fall of 2020. Study materials, listening events and a statement draft of the social statement will be made available to gain input from ELCA members and a final proposal is expected at the 2025 Churchwide Assembly.

But- **you belong here!** So, what about now? These weeks slip by, but 2025 seems like forever from now to hear what the church's social statement is for church and state, faith, and politics – and what if #WhatsNext for Gethsemane is squirmy for us?

You belong here. And it might be.

Casey sees a therapist bi-weekly- it has been wonderful. I fought for years to get him into regular counseling because I *knew* he needed it, and they (doctors) told me he was just a regular kid who sometimes had temper tantrums. **He still belonged.** Sometimes when Casey and I are having difficult

conversations he gets visually uncomfortable: tapping, pacing, fidgety. His tone, his words, and his attitude however turn angry and short. **He still belongs.**

These difficult conversations are not going away. No amount of anxious squirming, idle chatter, or simply wishing them away will rid the world of tough conversation. Dietrich Bonhoeffer can be quoted saying *“Politics are not the task of a Christian.”* The Bible is the living word and is always talking to us, teaching us, gifting us new interpretations and opportunities to grow it is why Lutherans read the Bible so often and are always digging into it. Bonhoeffer may have said politics are not the task of a Christian, and yet he is known by many as the anti-Nazi Pastor during World War II.

Although Romans 13:4 has been used to demand unquestioned support of tyrannical regimes, it affirms that government is “God’s servant for your good” creating a standard against which government is to be held accountable. The ELCA has many social statements affirming God’s love for all of His people and outlining Lutherans’ sordid history socially in the past. Before these social statements were created and adopted imagine the conversations. What conversations were necessary for the ELCA to adopt the “Church and Criminal Justice” statement in 2013? The statement on “Peace” in 1995? The ELCA statement on “Human Sexuality” in 2009? Or “Race, Ethnicity and Culture” social statement in 1993? Some would say- if we have that, why do we need the “ELCA Anti-Racism Pledge”? Why indeed. Yet, Gethsemane has its own ignoble past, as do many (if not all) churches, and without the uncomfortable conversations that make us squirm, tap, pace, fidget, change our tone, want to shrink within ourselves, and question everything we think we know there can be no growth or new understanding of ourselves, each other, or the *living word*.

In recent years, conversations such as immigration, racial justice, police reform, COVID-19 response, LGBTIQ rights, and women’s rights have become more and more politicized and polarized. They will make us feel all the feels. They will make us question things, people, and places. **You belong here.** You always have and you always will for as long as you want to- and so does everyone else. The ELCA Social Statement on Church in Society states “It is through a public process guided by the Holy Spirit that Christians come to discern what action should be taken when they are dealing with complicated issues.”

You belong here. Through these next months while we figure out coming back together again, while we plan our interim months, as we move into What’s Next if we can all remember we belong here: happy, sad, transgender, Black, married, single mom, orphaned, refugee, adopted, rostered, retired, over worked, silly, rich, poor, houseless, or otherwise.

“The first service one owes to others in a community involves listening to them. Just as our love for God begins with listening to God’s Word, the beginning of love for others is learning to listen to them. God’s love for us is shown by the fact that God not only gives God’s Word but also lends us God’s ear. . . . We do God’s work for our brothers and sisters when we learn to listen to them.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer