

RECLAIMING THE VOCATION OF GOVERNMENT

A statement from a Lutheran World Federation (LWF) consultation

Introduction

How Lutheran churches relate to governments is not a new focus:

- In his *Large Catechism*, Luther taught that through civil authorities and government “God provides us daily bread....They should be alert and courageous enough to establish and maintain order in all areas of trade and commerce in order that the poor may not be burdened and oppressed....”¹
- *Lutheran Churches – Salt or Mirror of Society?* (LWF, 1977) presented case studies of how churches in different parts of the world were relating to governments, and corrected how the “two kingdoms” tradition has often been misused.
- *Church and Nation Building* (LWF, 1983) examined the churches’ role in newly emergent governments.
- In other publications, as well as in numerous statements and resolutions, the LWF has repeatedly called governments to account for their actions or lack thereof, especially with regard to human rights and peacemaking.
- The 10th LWF Assembly Message (2003) observed that, under economic globalization, “governments are becoming powerless and less willing to safeguard the well-being of their people.”

The LWF “Call to Participate in Transforming Economic Globalization” (affirmed by the 2003 Assembly) states as one of the key challenges today:

Although Lutherans have developed theological perspectives on how government is a means by which God’s work is done, most of this has been developed in much different contexts and realities than those prevailing today under economic globalization. In many places today, governments are experienced as the enemy or have lost much of their sovereign power, such that it is quite difficult to hold them accountable. How can we as churches be more effective in preparing members to participate as citizens in political life, and to engage in public policy advocacy with and on behalf of our global neighbors? How can churches, with civil society, *hold governments more accountable?*

To address this challenge, the LWF Department for Theology and Studies convened a small consultation in Geneva, 22-24 January, 2004, of representatives from LWF churches in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin and North America. In their deliberations, they concurred that the underlying challenge today is that of “Reclaiming the *Vocation* of Government,” and proposed the following for attention and action, particularly in LWF member churches.

As you read the following, reflect on

- How is government viewed by people *in your context*? Why?
- What are the *particular challenges* your government faces, especially under the pressures of economic globalization?
- How is *your church* interacting with government? How should it be? Obstacles?
- How is your church *preparing members* for political participation and advocacy?
- How should the *theological basis* in this statement be revised or expanded?

Please send your responses to: kbl@lutheranworld.org.

¹ Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism,” *The Book of Concord*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 419.

Governments today

The crises of governments today, in quite different locales and political situations, must be honestly named and faced. For example:

- In countries that have been occupied, colonized or subjected to totalitarian rule, democratic or civic cultures have been difficult to develop.
- Some countries struggle with virtually no government, or with fragile ones that are ineffective, or they are “governed” by those engaged in illicit drug trade or other “business.”
- Lack of transparency and persistent corruption characterize governments in many parts of the world.
- In many countries, a government is little more than a political party, serving the self-interests of its party members, but not the common good of all who live there.
- Those who actually run a government typically are the un-elected government functionaries who are not accountable to voters, and who often remain even when elected leaders change.
- With the increasing privatization of the public domain, the private sector is sometimes paid to carry out the functions of government.
- Strong, stable governments have increasingly become pressured by powerful economic special interests, from within and beyond their borders; these governments struggle to maintain the social contracts they have honored in the past.
- Some challenge the whole concept of a nation-state as it has developed over the past 400 years.

Throughout the world, beginning in local communities, governments continue to be important players, expected to protect and further the common good. Yet their ability to do so has waned significantly due to policies of economic globalization, such as privatization, deregulation and debt restructuring. Governments face multiple, conflicting obligations. They have a responsibility to protect and further the well-being and security of their people and natural resources. They are under increased pressure to adhere to the requirements of international financial institutions and other lenders, investors and trading partners. In situations where governments and democratic traditions are fragile and ineffective, fulfilling these obligations can seem impossible.

It is no wonder that mistrust, cynicism and anger over government seem to be deep and widespread. Political apathy and disenfranchisement are pervasive. Some go so far as to discredit and demonize *all* government.

Why should churches care?

It is tempting for churches either to ignore or to give up on the role of government. Many Lutherans have wrongly assumed that their faith only has to do with private life apart from the public realm of political, economic and civic life. As state churches or through “civil religion,” some churches have lost their prophetic voice and ability to challenge government. Other churches have experienced repression or been silenced by ruling regimes. Many live in multi-religious contexts where as Christians they are in a distinct, sometimes persecuted minority, and are hesitant or afraid to speak up.

Challenging as these situations are, they cannot be the last word, especially for Lutheran churches. We stand in a theological tradition, based on an understanding of God’s twofold rule,

that insists that government is to be an important means through which God is acting to maintain and promote justice and peace, and to keep life human. Sixteenth-century Lutheran preachers criticized rulers when they failed to carry out their responsibilities and called them to account for such failure. Christians do not claim to have special insight into policy matters, but they must be sufficiently attentive to such in order to assure that government serves the good of all people and creation, and not only special interests. “The church does not invent or control the function of government; it does however vigilantly proclaim what that function is.”²

The vocation of government

In Lutheran tradition, government has often been referred to as one of the “orders” or “mandates” of creation through which God’s intended purposes are to be carried out, but often with static or uncritical implications. “Vocation” has usually applied to how Christians live out their baptismal calling in specific places of responsibility, for the sake of the neighbor.

Proposing that government has a “vocation” is intended to counter the tendency to see government as totally separate or alien from Christian life. The God-given *purpose* for government must be reclaimed, a purpose that is actually secular in scope: to protect and promote the common good of all. Rather than a law unto itself, government is “institutionally accountable to the moral direction (not legislated directives) of the universal will of God the Creator and Preserver for the common good...”³ It is an important arena of life in which “neighbor love” – for multitudes of “neighbors”-- is realized.

Theologically, this vocation of government is necessary because of the ever-present reality of sin. This is manifest, for example, in blatant self-interest and misuse of power at the expense of the common good. Government is intended to restrain such effects of sin, but also itself becomes corrupted by sin. All human institutions are imperfect and, at most, approximate what God’s law and justice require. The institutional church is not exempt from these realities of sin.

It is not that churches are to “christianize” governments, but to hold them accountable for what they should be about, and to work for changes to assure that governments serve the good of all, especially the most vulnerable. Christians pursue this based on the premise that government is a means through which the providence of God is at work for the sake of a more just ordering or governance of society, expressed as the “common good.”

Governments are to exercise public stewardship of the common good. Their vocation is to protect and further the quality of life of people, communities and creation, by defending and promoting:

- The human dignity of all persons (e.g., human rights)
- Ecological sustainability (e.g., protection of the “global commons”)
- Economic justice (e.g., responsible, equitable distributive measures)
- Cultural integrity (e.g., of indigenous peoples)
- Participation in political and economic processes
- Religious and other freedoms

² Mary Jane Haemig, “The Confessional Basis of Lutheran Thinking on Church-State Issues,” *Church and State: Lutheran Perspectives*, eds. John R. Stumme and Robert W. Tuttle (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 11.

³ William H. Lazareth, *Christians in Society: Luther, the Bible, and Social Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 71.

These basic commitments imply certain obligations of government that include

- Safeguarding and fostering human security
- Protecting people's livelihoods, cultural integrity and the "public commons"
- Fostering a civic culture of truthfulness, transparency, fairness, trust-building
- Promoting solidarity with all those who are vulnerable, especially the poor
- Furthering the participatory, holistic development of communities
- Regulating business, markets and finance in the public interest.

Governments must ensure that basic human needs are met,⁴ although non-governmental actors may provide some of the actual services. Because of the broad scope of economic globalization and the interdependence of all life, governments have responsibilities that go beyond their borders. Compliance with existing human rights agreements is necessary, as well as the development of new, effective inter-government policies and agreements.⁵ At a minimum, international financial institutions and trade organizations⁶ need to be reformed.

Public space and the church

The public space is where various actors in a society engage with one another in shaping the common good. At the time of the Reformation, this space was ruled by church and government. Today these actors include a wide variety of religious (e.g., church and other faith groups), civil society (e.g., non-governmental organizations [NGOs]), economic (e.g., corporations, business associations), academic and media organizations. Together they can preserve and promote a greater sense of human security, collective well-being and a sustainable future.

Whether or not they choose to, churches are actors in this public space. They neglect their responsibility in society when they refuse to engage with other actors in the process of seeking the common good. Here the churches' public witness gives concrete diaconal expression to the Word of God for the life of the world today.⁷

Processes of globalization have changed this public space dramatically. As economic powers and processes have permeated societies, privatizing and commodifying more aspects of life, the public space has tended to shrink or close down. Apathy and cynicism increase. Economic globalization tends to privatize what should remain public and commercialize what should remain private. In the face of this, one of the important callings of churches is to preserve and ensure that there continues to be public space where people are able to affect those policies and practices that keep life human and serve the common good.

Churches holding governments accountable

Churches are called to hold governments accountable to their *vocation*

- Through critical solidarity with marginalized or excluded people
- Naming the issues and root causes of injustice and poverty
- Encouraging truth-telling and transparency in public life

⁴ For example, through social "safety nets," "rehabilitation packages" or other social security provisions.

⁵ For example, between communities or states, by means of international covenants, agreements and codes of conduct, and through international organizations.

⁶ The International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), all of which are inter-governmental institutions.

⁷ See the report of the 2002 LWF consultation, "Prophetic Diakonia: For the Healing of the World" (available from cf@lutheranworld.org).

- Supporting local efforts to increase civic literacy and involvement
- Raising up new models for the development of communities that are participatory, sustainable and people-centered.

Churches need to be honest in confessing that they too may embody some of the ills reflective of governments in their contexts, such as being compromised by powerful political or economic interests, the self-interested pursuit of power, and lack of transparency. Churches also need to be held accountable.

At the same time, the basis for the church's involvement is different from that of most other NGOs. The church is far more than a political party or interest group; its advocacy is far more than lobbying for its self-interests. The church's catholicity means that it is deeply incarnated in its particular locale and at the same time universal in its scope and outreach, for the sake of the whole household of God (*oikumene*). The church proclaims and bears witness to the reign of God as revealed in Jesus Christ that is more definitive and ultimate than the allegiance any earthly government demands. Grounded in this promise, the church is authorized and empowered to hold governments accountable, acting out of hope and courage when others succumb to cynicism and despair.

Therefore, it is recommended that churches:

- Pray regularly for governments at all levels and those who serve in them, that they might faithfully carry out their vocation. Support and affirm the specific ways in which they do this
- Nurture and equip members (through sermons, liturgies, Christian education, etc.) so that they might truly live out their baptismal promise "to strive for justice and peace in all the earth"⁸ through their participation and possible service in political life
- Engage pastorally with church members (and others) who serve in government
- Discuss with political leaders and others in civil society what they expect of the church, and what the church expects of them
- Support and implement diaconal initiatives that model people-centered approaches to the delivery of services and care
- Train members to be able to talk and negotiate with those in government
- Discern what is entailed in reclaiming the vocation of government in their respective context
- Prophetically challenge those in government when they fall short of their vocation
- Propose constructive alternatives as to what policies should be supported and implemented
- Designate and support persons with particular competencies and responsibility for public policy work with and on behalf of the church
- In theological education, develop sensitivity and basic competency in clergy and other church leaders for this aspect of the church's witness in the world
- Organize well-informed advocacy efforts that stay focused on select, prioritized issues
- Join campaigns, alliances and networks to work for new policies consistent with the above commitments.

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⁸ "Affirmation of Baptism," *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987), 201.