

# Guidelines for Participation in Civic Events



A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations  
of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

April 2004

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for Participation  
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## Introduction: The Assignment

The Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) and President Alvin Barry, in their report to the 2001 convention of the Synod based on 4,300 responses received from a Synod-wide study of *The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship*, used the term "civic events" in a section titled "Cases of Discretion."

Pastors, teachers, and other officially recognized church workers are often asked to participate in activities outside of their own and other LCMS congregations. Some of these are civic events. Offering prayers, speaking, and reading Scripture at events sponsored by governments, public schools and volunteer organizations would be a problem if the organization in charge restricted a Christian witness. For instance, if an invitation requires a pastor to pray to God without mentioning Jesus, he cannot in good conscience accept. Without such a restriction, a Lutheran pastor may for valid and good reason participate in civic affairs such as an inauguration, graduation or a right to life activity. These occasions may provide opportunity to witness to the Gospel. Pastors may have honest differences of opinion about whether or to what extent it is appropriate or helpful to participate in these or similar civic events. In these cases charity must prevail.

There are also "once-in-a-life-time" situations. It is virtually impossible to anticipate all such situations or to establish rules in advance. Specific answers cannot be given to cover every type of situation pastors and congregations face. These situations can be evaluated only on a case-by-case basis and may evoke different responses from different pastors who may be equally committed to LCMS fellowship principles. The LCMS has always recognized this.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 2001 Convention Workbook, 50. This "Report on Synodical Discussions," together with *The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship* which was also prepared by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations and President Barry, was commended by the synodical convention "for continued use and guidance" in 2001 Resolution 3-07A "To Commend 'The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship' and CTCR Report on the Synodical Discussions."

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The President of the Synod, Dr. Gerald Kieschnick, asked the CTCR in November 2001 to prepare "Guidelines for Participation in Civic Events." He requested that the CTCR prepare these guidelines in consultation with the Council of Presidents and that they be presented to the 2004 convention of the Synod.<sup>2</sup>

In giving this assignment to the CTCR, President Kieschnick stated:

The Synod needs guidance on such questions as:

- What constitutes a "civic event?"
- What are the implications of the Lutheran understanding of the "two kingdoms doctrine" for participation in "civic events" which include prayers, Scripture readings, hymn singing, etc.?
- What are the guidelines which should inform participation of LCMS pastors, teachers, and church workers in "civic events" including events which also involve participants from non-Christian religions?

The members of the CTCR are aware of certain events following September 11, 2001, and decisions made about them. The CTCR recognizes that the readers of this document are also aware of them. The CTCR in no way intends to render judgments about the decisions relating to these events and so has attempted to avoid using language and terms in this document that would suggest that it has done so. The Commission therefore asks the reader to receive this document on its own basis, and not in the light of decisions made about these past events—which would be a misuse of this document. The CTCR wishes to move beyond these events and it offers these guidelines as a way of promoting unity in practice within our Synod in the future.

In this document the Commission will discuss a point that it observed in its February 2003 response to questions from a synodical dispute resolution panel—namely, that the section on "Cases of Discretion" "does not explicitly address the issue of 'offering a prayer by an LCMS pastor in a "civic event" in which prayers would also be offered by representatives of non-Christian religions.'"<sup>3</sup> The Commission will first provide some preliminary considerations in response to the questions posed by the President of the Synod. It will then present some guidelines for the application of the guidance offered in "cases of discretion" based on the Synod's understanding of what the Scriptures and Lutheran Confessions have to say.

<sup>2</sup> A semi-final draft of these Guidelines was shared with the members of the Council of Presidents in December 2003. They were then discussed by the Council of Presidents with the staff of the CTCR on February 9, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> The full text of this opinion is as follows:

**Question:** Would offering a prayer by an LCMS pastor in a "civic event" in which prayers would also be offered by representatives of non-Christian religions be in and of itself a violation of the paragraph under "Section V, point B. Cases of Discretion"

In offering these guidelines the Commission is mindful of the biblical exhortations that, on the one hand, we must always be "prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you" (1 Pet 3:15) and, on the other hand, that we must be on guard against those who teach "a different gospel" (Gal 1:6) and those "who create dissensions and difficulties in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught" (Rom 16:17).

in the CTCR document "The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship," a document adopted by the 2001 Convention of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod "for continued use and guidance?" **Answer:** No. Section V, B. does not explicitly address the issue of "offering a prayer by an LCMS pastor in a 'civic event' in which prayers would also be offered by representatives of non-Christian religions." The CTCR is presently considering assignments with respect to this issue, including the formulation of guidelines for participation in civic events and the definition of "civic event."

**Question:** What are the implications of the concluding two sentences – "Pastors may have honest differences of opinion about whether or to what extent it is appropriate or helpful to participate in these or similar civic events. In these cases charity must prevail." – for making decisions regarding participation in the "civic events" described in the paragraph? **Answer:** The decisions of pastors regarding the offering of prayers, speaking and reading scripture in events outside of their own and other LCMS congregations are to be made on the basis of the Synod's agreed upon application of the scriptural principles of fellowship. It is virtually impossible to anticipate all such occasions or to give specific answers to cover every type of situation which may arise. Invitations to participate in these events can be evaluated only on a case-by-case basis and may evoke different responses from different pastors equally committed to LCMS fellowship principles. In these situations, honest disagreement regarding participation in certain events may arise. In such cases pastors will respect and honor in Christian love decisions regarding participation which differ from their own, even while they carry on conversations with the brother(s) with whom they have the disagreement (2004 Convention Workbook, 73).

# Preliminary Considerations

## 1. Civic Events: A Complex Issue

The term "civic event" can be used to refer to a wide variety of gatherings and activities (e.g., a meeting of a board of aldermen; the dedication of a new community center; a Rotary or Kiwanis meeting; a rally to call attention to the problems of pornography, support American troops, or defend the right to life and liberty, etc.). A civic event, in general, might be defined as a public gathering sponsored by a governmental, community, or special interest agency or group for the temporal good of the society. LCMS pastors<sup>4</sup> have participated in civic events and have done so in good conscience without violating what the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions say about fellowship.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, a worship service is defined as follows: "Any occasion on which a public worship of God occurs—that is, in which the Word of God and prayer are used by a regularly designated worship leader of the church—is understood to be a 'service.'"<sup>6</sup> Some

<sup>4</sup> While the guidance offered here focuses specifically on pastors, it also applies by extension to all rostered church workers in the Synod.

<sup>5</sup> Even in the case of such "civic" events devoid of religious elements, there may, of course, be occasions when it would be unwise for an LCMS pastor to participate—such as a political rally that (for one reason or another) might result in confusion regarding the teaching of Scripture and the Lutheran church regarding the proper relationship between church and state or the distinctive role of the pastor as a servant of Christ and a minister of the Gospel. And when a pastor concludes that it would be possible for him to participate in a civic event, he should keep in mind that his very presence there—and the public witness given by his participation—introduces at least to some extent a "religious dimension" to the event. This serves as a reminder that it is often very difficult in practice to make a clear and clean distinction between events that are "purely civic" and those that are not. In principle, however, there ordinarily should be no objection to participation in such "purely civic" events.

<sup>6</sup> In a 1973 opinion titled "What Is a Service?" (with which the CTCR concurred) the Synod's Commission on Worship responded in part as follows to the question, "Is a wedding ceremony a 'service' in the same sense as, for instance, Sunday morning worship?"

...any occasion on which a public worship of God occurs—that is, in which the Word of God and prayer are used by a regularly designated worship leader of the church—is understood to be a "service." This would therefore include not only those occasions regularly designated as worship services (e.g., the ordinary Sunday morning worship noted in the question above) but also occasions—such as weddings, funerals, dedications, baccalaureates, etc.—which may have an ad hoc assembly different from the regular congregational worship assembly.

It should be noted, moreover, that there are other types of "service" than just the "public" occasions for worship. Thus when the congregation's (or its delegated representative's—e.g., mission board, association of congregations, etc.) officially desig-

events share so many characteristics of each that it is difficult to make a determination.<sup>7</sup>

The Commission has been asked to address questions about when it would be proper for members of the LCMS ministerium to participate in civic events when they are invited to exercise recognizably religious functions such as offering a prayer, the reading of a portion of the Bible, or the giving of a religious message. The very inclusion of such religious functions in civic events presumes the degree to which civic and religious elements often come together in American life and society. Since the beginning of the Synod, LCMS pastors have generally understood that they may accept such invitations so long as the clergy of other religious groups are not involved.<sup>8</sup> The invitation of LCMS pastors to exercise religious functions in civic events, when the clergy of other Christian denominations and even the leaders of non-Christian religions are also invited to participate—as is happening with increasing frequency today—raises more difficult questions.

## 2. Civic Events and Ecclesial Responsibilities

Whatever a pastor does in any private or public capacity must serve his obligation to Christ, who has entrusted him with the care of his flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:1–4) and with the mandate to proclaim the Gospel to the whole world (Mt 28:16–20; Lk 24:46–47). Theologically and historically Lutherans have tended to disavow a politically activist role for their clergy that would compromise their unique calling as ministers of the Gospel.

nated worship leader (chaplain, pastor, etc.) carries out his regularly appointed ministerial functions (private Communion, etc.) in which the Word of God and prayer (also at times exposition of the Word and/or singing of hymns) form the major portion of such function, this also is rightly understood to be a congregational “service,” albeit only a private or semiprivate one.

The use of the Word of God and prayer as an entity in itself (as a corporate worship of God) constitutes a “service.” This is not to be confused with a similar use of the Word and prayer as an integral part of a broader program (e.g., the opening or closing devotion of a meeting).

<sup>7</sup> See David L. Adams, “The Church in the Public Square in a Pluralistic Society,” *Concordia Journal* 28 (October 2002), 364–90.

<sup>8</sup> Not at issue here is the participation of LCMS pastors as co-officiants in public worship services convened as a result of civic events or concerns. One such case that comes to mind is the service in the National Cathedral following September 11 in which a crucifix served as the processional cross for the resident Episcopal clergy with those of other denominations and religions. Participants were vested and gave religious messages in accord with their traditions. Billy Graham delivered the sermon and the President of the United States gave an address. This occasion was publicized as a religious service for the nation, even though the President had sponsored it. The LCMS has a clear position against “taking part in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations or of congregations of mixed confession” (LCMS Constitution, Article VI, 2, b.).

To be sure, Christian witness is made in the world, but its unique evangelistic purpose is not to reform the world or readjust its structures. At the same time, Christians perform acts of service for the sake of their neighbor in all spheres of life and society. An important aspect of the pastor's calling is to equip God's people for such service and witness in and to the world.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. The Exclusive Claims of the Christian Faith

Essential to the Christian faith and the faithful performance of pastoral responsibilities is the firm conviction, based on the clear teaching of Scripture, that Jesus is the only way of salvation. Christianity is distinguished by its exclusivist claims centering in Jesus Christ (see, e.g., Jn 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Cor 8:4–6). Jesus is the appearance in flesh of the God of Israel, who as Israel's Redeemer did not recognize the existence of other gods and so disallowed worship of them as vain and offensive to him. This is what "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex 20:3; Deut 5:7) means.

No other problem plagued Israel from her founding as a nation under Moses to her exile in Babylon as much as worshipping gods who had no existence except as idols. As Psalm 96:5 says: "For all the gods of the peoples are idols; but the LORD made the heavens." "Hear, O Israel," says Deuteronomy 6:4, "the LORD our God is one LORD." "They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods; with abominable practices they provoked him to anger" (Deut 32:16). The God who required that all other gods be abandoned is known as Father and Savior only through Spirit-wrought faith in Jesus Christ—true God in the flesh. Only in and through Jesus do we have the definitive revelation of the true and only God. Thus only the Triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—is the object of our worship and the hope of our salvation.

Obviously, Christian witness to the one true God is not limited to church-sponsored or church-related situations. On the contrary, Christ's mandate to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins to all peoples and nations requires that his people look for opportunities to speak the truth of the Law and the Gospel in non-churchly situations (Lk 24:46–47). It can hardly be otherwise, as the history of the church demonstrates from apostolic times until now. Speaking the Gospel (by both pastors and lay people) is the church's ordinary means for evangelism. Preaching the Gospel outside of church boundaries is based on the doctrine of the universal atonement by which Christ offered himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. Those who reject the Gospel are included in that sacrifice,

<sup>9</sup> For a helpful discussion of a Lutheran "two-kingdom" approach to the church's interaction with society based on Robert Benne's "four connections" model, see pages 62–90 of the CTCR's report *Render Unto Caesar...and Unto God: A Lutheran View of Church and State* (September 1995), available also online at [www.lcms.org/ctcr/](http://www.lcms.org/ctcr/).



though without faith they do not benefit from it. Even in our worship we Christians take seriously the universality of our witness to the atonement, as when we confess in the Preface to the Holy Communion that "we should at all times and in all places give thanks to you, holy Lord, almighty Father, everlasting God, through Jesus Christ our Lord."<sup>10</sup> Christians are instructed and encouraged always to "be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you," and to do so "with gentleness and reverence" (1 Pet 3:15).

At the same time, when Christians witness to Christ—which is the response of faith worked by the Holy Spirit—they must never compromise the integrity of the Gospel. Salvation in Christ excludes all other options. Believers confess Christ alone and reject all false gods, even as they make the most of every opportunity to bear witness to Christ's saving work in word and in deed. Martin Luther's understanding of God's twofold rule in the church and in the world offers help in dealing with the tension inherent in the dual commands to preach the Gospel everywhere and at all times and, at the same time, to guard against its compromise.

#### 4. Two Kingdoms: Both God's

Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms deals primarily with the *activity of God*, that is to say, his two distinct ways of ruling and working in the church and in the world. Understood in this way, this teaching also accurately reflects the reality in which the Christian is now living. Christians are obligated to attest to the uniqueness of the Gospel, as mentioned above. But they also have a divinely-given responsibility to live within this world where they work for the betterment of their neighbor. Though the form of this world is passing away, it remains God's creation in which he still acts for the benefit not only of believers but also for those who reject him. Christians have a charge from God, therefore, to work for the good of the community and the nation in which they live. Although God's two ways of ruling (in the world through God-given human reason and conscience, and in the church through the divinely-given means of grace) are distinct and have dissimilar purposes and outcomes, they are also in some respects coterminous. The church is not necessarily present everywhere in the world, but the world is present wherever the church is present. Thus, Christians are constantly provided with God-given challenges and opportunities for service in and witness to the world, including through their active participation in a variety of civic events and activities. They recognize that the church alone has the claim to be God's people on earth, but

<sup>10</sup> *Lutheran Worship Altar Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), 284ff.

they share a common humanity with other people, believers and unbelievers alike. In a word, Christians are obligated to love their neighbor and to devote themselves to the common good.

Christians have a dual relationship with adherents of non-Christian religions. On the one hand, they work with unbelievers for the maintenance of the good and morality in the world. Therefore, Christians sometimes join with non-Christians in opposition to moral evils present in the world, such as abortion, euthanasia, pornography, child abuse, homosexual behavior, and so on. Lutherans thank God for, and have long affirmed, the blessing of "civil righteousness" ("the righteousness of reason" or "the righteousness of works") that exists also among unbelievers in the left-hand kingdom on the basis of the natural knowledge of God through conscience and creation. Lutherans observe with gratitude that this "righteousness of reason" manifested even in the lives of unbelievers "can talk about God and offer God acts of worship with external works; it can obey rulers and parents....it can keep back the hand from murder, adultery and theft....In this way outward discipline is preserved, because all people alike ought to know that God requires civil righteousness and that to some extent we are able to achieve it."<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, Christians confront their fellow human beings in the world with their moral and spiritual inadequacy before God. Ironically, the very works God demands, rewards and praises in the civil realm—e.g., outward obedience to parents, rulers, and civil laws—he condemns, rejects and judges as wholly deficient for salvation in the realm of faith, the kingdom of Christ.<sup>12</sup> Christians delight, therefore, to proclaim the Gospel in which all the blessings of Christ that unbelievers do not possess by nature are given to them by God through faith in Christ.

Christians pray for the well being of all. They pray for the confirmation of faith in believers and its creation in unbelievers. They pray for the sustenance of good government and for all those in authority. Christians even include enemies in their prayers. Within the corporate worship services of the church these and other kinds of prayers are offered.

Christian prayer is offered also outside the context of the fellowship of believers. Christ and Stephen prayed for their persecutors, and Jesus prayed publicly at the tomb of Lazarus "on account of the people standing by, that they may believe that thou didst send me" (Jn 11:42). Paul prayed in the midst of the storm in front of his captors: "And when he had said this, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke

<sup>11</sup> Apology of the Augsburg Confession, XVIII, 4, 9; cf. IV, 22-25. *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 234, 124.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Thesis 10 in Martin Luther's "The Disputation Concerning Justification" (1536), *Luther's Works*, American Edition [LW] (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 34:152.

it and began to eat" (Acts 27:35). Elijah sacrificed in the presence of and in defiance of the priests of Baal (1 Kings 18). In each case it was obvious that these prayers were directed to the one true God. However, not every context outside of the fellowship of believers may be appropriate for public prayers.

### *Excursus: Church and State and the Issue of Civil Religion*

*Though the phrase "separation of church and state" is sometimes interpreted to mean that one cannot have anything to do with the other, throughout history these two entities have often been seen—in both right and wrong ways—as parts of one reality, even in this country. In the ancient pagan world, the king was seen as the representative of the gods (as in the Babylonian religions), and in some cases he was given a divine status first as a son of a god and then as a god himself (as in Rome). Alexander the Great was thought to have been conceived by a god. On account of the antiquity of their religion, Jews were given an exemption from emperor worship. Christians at first may have taken advantage of this, but later they were denied it when Christianity was recognized as a separate religion from Judaism. Roman patriotism included worship of the emperor.*

*The early Christians refused to honor Caesar as "god and lord," and failure to perform this act was interpreted as a lack of loyalty to the state. For Christians these titles belonged to Christ alone. Constantine's act of political genius was granting Christianity legal status and imperial support, thus laying the groundwork for the Christianizing of the Roman empire which was officially implemented under Theodosius the Great. As a result of these developments, Christianity became the state religion of most of Europe.*

*In Christian Europe bishop and sovereign shared religious responsibilities, a union that Luther used to his advantage. However, this alliance between throne and altar also had disastrous results for confessional Lutheranism when for over two hundred years (beginning with the early 17th century) the Electors of Brandenburg used their authority to force the Lutherans into union with the Reformed.*

*Under National Socialism in the 20th century, the established churches (with notable exceptions) served the government's aims and so all the Lutheran, Reformed, and Union churches became a Volkskirche, a church of the people in the sense that the church existed for cultural, governmental and political purposes as determined by the leaders of the state.*

In countries dominated by Roman Catholicism, on the other hand, the government has often been seen as serving the primary interests of the church. Until as late as 1931, for example, the Spanish constitution affirmed that "the Apostolic Roman Catholic religion is that of the state" and "the nation binds itself to maintain the cult and its ministers."<sup>13</sup> In his influential work *Church and State* (1841), William Gladstone strongly defended the propriety and necessity of religious establishment from a Protestant point of view. The record of history, therefore, reveals not only a widespread recognition that church and state are and must be in some way related, but also the poignancy of the perplexing question raised by English reformer Robert Harrison in 1583: "But how far the bounds of each do extend, therein lieth the chief point"<sup>14</sup>—a point still hotly debated today.

If the "genius" of Constantinianism was to establish Christianity as the official religion of the empire, the genius of America's founding fathers was to seek to establish and foster what has been aptly called a "functional interaction" and "institutional separation" between church and state, one that recognizes and respects the boundaries between the two but refrains from defining them too strictly in order to allow for healthy interchange between them. While the free exercise clause in the United States Constitution guarantees its citizens the right freely to express their religious beliefs, the establishment clause prohibits the federal government from sponsoring or officially supporting a particular religion. These two clauses serve as evidence of the founders' conviction that government works best when its people are free to express their (not another's) religious beliefs and values. When the government sponsors an event in our pluralistic context, therefore, we should not be surprised to see representation from a variety of religions.

In an article published in 1967, Robert Bellah used the term "civil religion" (first used by Rousseau in *The Social Contract*) to refer to the undeniable and inevitable "religious dimension" of American political life.<sup>15</sup> He soon repented of using the term because of the endless (and in his view generally fruitless) debates it sparked over how "civil religion" should be defined and—depending on what definition one uses or chooses—whether it is a healthy or unhealthy force in American society. As

<sup>13</sup> Neelah S. Tjernagel, "European Experience in Church-State Relations," in *Church and State under God*, ed. Albert G. Huegli (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 159.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Harrison, "A Little Treatise upon the first Verse of the 122 Psalm" in *The Writings of Robert Harrison and Robert Brown*, ed. Albert Peel and Leland H. Carlson (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1953), 118. Cited in Huegli, 196.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96 (Winter 1967), 1-21.

Martin Marty has observed, "There are as many civil religions as there are analysts, be they friend or foe."<sup>16</sup> While some (like Bellah) maintain that public and formal recognition of a "higher power" (which most Americans would still refer to as "God") to which the state is ultimately accountable can continue to serve in a positive way to promote a sense of national humility, unity and accountability, others believe that the notion of "God" (for better or worse) has outlived its usefulness in the social and political realm.

A thorough treatment of the highly complex topic of American "civil religion" lies well beyond the scope of this document. What seems indisputable, however, is that in an increasingly religiously diverse population, traditional Christianity no longer influences the shape of "civil religion" in America in the way that it once did. "Jesus" is heard less often in public prayers and the word "god" is sufficiently indeterminate to allow the word to include the non-Christian monotheism of Islam and Judaism and the polytheism of Hinduism or the principles of Buddhism, which replaces a personal god with a human condition. Add to the mix Satanism and Wicca along with atheists and agnostics, who in spite of their denials of God, want to be considered as serious participants in the religious mix, and one can see how incredibly difficult and complex questions about "church and state" or "religion and politics" have become in America today.<sup>17</sup>

## 5. The Problem of Syncretism

The American cultural context with its freedom of religion and its corresponding emphasis on tolerance raises the spectre of syncretism becoming an increasingly attractive option. Syncretism is "the reconciliation or union of conflicting (as religious) beliefs or an effort intending such" (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary*).<sup>18</sup> Throughout her history Israel often succumbed to the temptation of worshipping many gods (polytheism) and of mingling conflicting elements of these false religions into their own (syncretism). The worship of multiple deities led to syncretism. Solomon,

<sup>16</sup> Martin Marty, "Civil Religion and the Churches Behaving Civilly," *Theology Today* 32 (July 1975), 175.

<sup>17</sup> "At various times and places in our past, American Civil Religion has been in turn Calvinistic, Anglican, Methodistic, or deistic. As America has become more culturally diverse, more pluralistic, American Civil Religion has in turn become increasingly polytheistic." Adams, 372 [emphases added].

<sup>18</sup> In the first LCMS Constitution the word "syncretism" was used in reference to a combination of Lutheran and Reformed worship practices and later to Freemasonry, which combined Christianity with other religions. See Samuel H. Nafzger, "Syncretism and Unionism," *Concordia Journal* 29 (July 2003), 240-64.

for example, whose own devotion was to the true God, allowed altars to other gods to be built to accommodate the religious needs of his wives. Later he himself came to participate in their idolatry. Many of his successors in Israel and Judah followed suit.

Syncretistic mixtures are not all of one kind. In some cases Christian churches have taken on pagan characteristics—for example, Roman Catholicism's absorption of Voodoo (Vodun) in Haiti, and Santeria in South America. This was happening already in the Old Testament among the Samaritans (2 Ki 17:24–33). An especially clear example of intentional syncretism today appears in Baha'i, which believes in and advocates the unity of all religions. Many more subtle forms of syncretism exist in contemporary religion and culture (whether intentional or unintentional), as people pick and choose perceived "truths" from a veritable smorgasbord of religious sources in an effort to find or create a blend of "religious truth" that meets their own personal desires, tastes, or needs. Our pluralistic and syncretistic cultural context makes it all the more urgent that Christians be prepared to bear bold witness to the Gospel without any compromise of its radical and exclusive claims.

## Summary

In view of the complex state of affairs in which Christians find themselves today, it is necessary to emphasize once again the difficulty (if not impossibility) of offering guidelines that address every specific situation, or of providing absolute definitions of terms that are used, applied and understood in many different ways (e.g., "civic events," "religious events," "civil-religious events," etc.).

Some "civic events," for example, clearly do not intend to advance the cause of one particular religion, though the civil protection and promotion of various religions (including Christianity) and the celebration of religious liberty may be byproducts or results of the event. Other "civic events," however, may include more obvious and explicit religious elements—e.g., religious discourses, prayers, and songs—that will complicate or even negate the possibility of participation by LCMS pastors.

We understand and accept that Lutheran pastors may not under any circumstances participate in joint prayer or worship together with clergy of non-Christian religions, even in events that may be portrayed as primarily or partially "civic" in nature and purpose. By "joint prayer or worship" we mean worship activities that assume, and falsely so, that Christians and non-Christians may actually join together in "worshiping the same God" apart from a common faith in and confession of Jesus Christ.

According to Scripture, acceptable, efficacious, and God-pleasing prayer and worship are possible only through faith in Jesus Christ, God's only Son and the world's only Savior.

It is never permissible for Christians to pray and worship *together with* non-Christians ("joint prayer or worship"). Civic events present a different set of circumstances. In these situations adherents of non-Christian religions may have also been invited to participate. It is understood that LCMS pastors who participate in civic events of any kind will take care to ensure that their prayers clearly and faithfully reflect Scripture's teaching regarding the nature of the true God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the exclusivity of access to God through faith in Christ alone. In many situations it is more appropriate for a Christian to give a public witness to his/her faith in the Triune God rather than to offer a prayer (cf. 1 Pet 3:15; Mt 28:18-20; Lk 24:46-48; see also Acts 19:8, where Paul preaches in a Jewish synagogue for three months). And of course it may be possible, and even beneficial, for LCMS pastors to participate in certain religious events (e.g., religious dialogs, ecumenical meetings, ministerial association meetings, scholarly conferences, "pro-life" rallies sponsored by religious groups), as long as such events do not involve assumptions, requirements or activities that are at odds with the biblical, confessional commitments made by LCMS pastors.

More is involved in this assignment, therefore, than merely trying to distinguish between "purely civic" and "purely religious" events, or attempting to identify and classify those that fall somewhere within the continuum between the two. To be sure, it may be helpful, so far as possible, to distinguish between events that are primarily "civic" or "religious" in nature. But we also need to consider the specific characteristics of each event—its purpose (or purposes), its program, its participants, the potential perceptions accompanying it and the opportunity for clear and faithful witness provided by it—as we make appropriate decisions about the possibility or advisability of participation by LCMS pastors. In so doing, we seek to set forth guidelines for practice that are already inherent in the principles of our theology for the purpose of fostering a unity in practice in the Synod.

# Guidelines for Participation in Civic Events

## 1. Sponsorship.

A civic event is ordinarily sponsored, arranged for, and identified as such by a governmental entity, school, civic official, or civic group or institution that does not derive its authority from a church or church-related organization. It ought not be automatically or simplistically assumed, however, that what the sponsoring entity identifies as a "civic event" is in fact a "purely civic event" devoid of religious characteristics that have implications for participation. By the same token, what may be referred to by the sponsoring entity as a "prayer service" may, in fact, correspond to the LCMS' understanding of a "civic event" (see pages 6–7 above, and footnote 6). In considering the issue of sponsorship, pastors must ask whether participation would identify them (or their congregation or the Synod as a whole) with any questionable positions, activities or goals of the organization sponsoring the event. There may also be occasions when churches or church-related organizations may sponsor or organize an event highlighting primarily civic aims or concerns (e.g., a "right to life" march or rally open to all who share this concern, regardless of religious affiliation, or lack of it). Hence, the question of civic or religious sponsorship does not in and of itself determine the propriety of participation. But, the stated purpose or purposes of the event—along with other considerations noted below—must also be taken into account. This would include consultation with the sponsor(s) of the event.

## 2. Purpose(s).

The purposes for holding a civic event are typically made clear before the event takes place (e.g., the dedication of a building, commemoration of a national holiday, a graduation ceremony, etc.). Generally speaking, participation in events that have as their primary purpose the promotion of civic unity or the common good in society is to be affirmed and encouraged, so long as the purpose or purposes in question are not at odds with



the scriptural, confessional and collegial commitments of LCMS pastors and church workers.

A prayer opening or closing a civic event does not necessarily make such an event a worship service. Participating clergy at graduation ceremonies, for example, ask God's blessing upon the school, its teachers, students and especially its graduates, but parents and others in attendance are not there for the primary purpose of joining together in corporate prayer and worship. They are there to mark a milestone in the graduates' lives.

Even when the specific purpose is made clear, civic events in American culture may take on a variety of forms and characteristics. Some memorial ceremonies, for example (ceremonies commemorating those who have served in the armed forces—especially those who have given their lives), may be intended and understood as civic events without religious overtones or purposes. They may also, at times, take on the appearance or character of worship services, depending on the specific occasion or situation. Given this ambiguity, a high degree of discernment on the part of Lutheran pastors will be necessary in such situations. These services are often sponsored and conducted by civic entities (national and local governments, corporations and community organizations) to remember the contributions of their deceased members and to recognize common bonds tying together various communities involved. Participation in memorial ceremonies, whenever possible and appropriate, gives evidence of a pastor's concern for members of the family and community. Participation must be avoided, however, when leaders of various religious communities conduct these ceremonies in such a way as to give the impression that those present share common religious beliefs, especially in regard to the nature and identity of God, the way of salvation and the hope of everlasting life.

At times of crisis, celebration, or commemoration, governmental or civic entities will occasionally call for public gatherings. They sometimes use religious-sounding terms or the language of the church to describe these events. For example, elected officials organize a "candlelight prayer service" after an incident of violence in a community. In spite of the event's intention or how it is labeled, its activities often betray the titling. "Let There Be Peace on Earth" may be sung, words of encouragement may be offered, ceremonies of support may occur, solemn poems may be read, helium-filled balloons may be ritually released—yet these are not remotely constitutive of a Christian understanding of a worship service. In such instances, pastors are free to participate, and perhaps to pray or offer a message at these overwhelmingly secular events.

Religious colloquies or seminars which are set up for an open and frank exchange of and refutation of different views fall under different

rubrics. Participation by Lutheran clergy is encouraged, and should be viewed as an opportunity to articulate faithfully and winsomely the Gospel-centered scriptural and confessional theology that we treasure as a gift from God to be shared with others.

### 3. Religious Activities and Public Perceptions.

What may at first appear to be a civic event may take on the appearance or character of a religious event when representatives of various religious groups are assigned significant parts of the program. This may allow other Christians, as well as non-Christians, to emphasize their characteristic beliefs. To what extent is it possible in such a setting for an LCMS pastor to bear witness faithfully to the distinctive beliefs of confessional Lutheranism without condoning (or seeming to condone) syncretistic, unionistic, heretical and/or relativistic perspectives? Obviously, if such an event were to involve joint prayer or worship with adherents of non-Christian religions (worship activities in which it is stated or clearly implied that Christians and non-Christians are "joining together in praying to the same God"), LCMS pastors may not participate. Christians may not join together with non-Christians in common prayer and worship to an "unnamed" god, or to a "god" that is identified or perceived as a "composite" of many different "gods."<sup>19</sup> Nor should Christians give the impression that people can pray to the Triune God apart from genuine repentance and faith in Jesus Christ (Prov 15:8; Is 1:10-15; Heb 4:14-16). Therefore, the pastor participating in a civic event that involves a "mixed" religious audience should invite to pray with him those who, through faith in Christ, call upon Jesus. Joint worship and prayer as described above must be rejected as a sinful compromise of the scriptural Gospel of Jesus Christ and its exclusive claims.

More complicated (yet more and more common in our increasingly pluralistic setting) is the question of participation in events at which religious leaders of various faiths bear public witness to their distinctive beliefs through prayer, readings, and a message or address.<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, participation in such events (when no restriction is placed on the nature or content of one's Christian witness) would seem to provide a valuable opportunity to bear witness to Christ and the truth of his Gospel in a public context in which (one may presume) many of those present do

<sup>19</sup> The reciting of the Pledge of Allegiance or the singing of *God Bless America* may rightly be viewed in the civic realm as other than "an act of worship."

<sup>20</sup> As noted above (cf. footnote 3), the "Cases of Discretion" paragraphs do not "explicitly address" the situation of a pastor offering a prayer in a "civic event" in which prayers would also be offered by representatives of non-Christian religions. In this document the Commission explicitly addresses participation in such events and offers guidelines based on the guidance offered in these paragraphs.

not know and desperately need to hear this saving truth. On the other hand, the valid concern exists that participation in such a context might convey a tacit approval of the syncretistic and relativistic perspectives that pervade our culture and society.

Given the realities, challenges, needs and opportunities that exist in our present culture, this may well be an irresolvable tension. As noted above, participation would clearly be impossible if restrictions were placed on the nature or content of a person's contribution (e.g., strictures on "praying in the name of Jesus"). Pastors considering participation in such events will also need to weigh seriously potential perceptions regarding the "public witness" given by their participation (as well as by their non-participation). One cannot rule out the possibility, however, that a clear, faithful, valuable and responsible witness might be given in situations where a conscious, deliberate effort is made on the part of sponsors, organizers and participants to make it clear that those participating do not all share the same religious beliefs or the same understanding of the nature of religious truth (e.g., including in the program for the event a specific disclaimer, making a public announcement to this effect, etc.—helping to make it clear that this is not a case of joint prayer and worship). Even when a careful Christian witness is given, there still may be misunderstanding as happened with Paul and Barnabas at Lystra (Acts 14:8-18). Yet, this Christian witness was proper. Referring to this text, Luther counsels us to do all in our power to prevent misunderstanding from taking place.<sup>21</sup>

The members of the Commission disagree about the issue of so-called "serial" or "seriatim" prayers involving representatives of different religious (Christian and/or non-Christian) groups or churches. Some members of the Commission believe that under no circumstances is it permissible for LCMS pastors to participate in any type of an event in which various Christian and/or non-Christian leaders "take turns" offering prayers, holding that such an activity by its very nature constitutes "joint prayer and worship." The majority of the Commission believes that in some instances it may be possible and permissible for LCMS pastors to participate in such an event as long as certain conditions are met (e.g., when the purpose of the event in question is clearly and predominately civic in nature, and when it is conducted in such a way that does not correspond to the LCMS understanding of a "service"; when no restrictions are placed on the content of the Christian witness that may be given by the LCMS pastor; when a sincere effort is made by those involved to make it clear that those participating do not all share the same religious views concerning such issues as the nature of God, the way of salvation, and the nature of religious truth itself).

<sup>21</sup> Martin Luther, "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate" (1520), *LW* 44:168.

It should be noted in this connection that all members of the Commission agree that, understood from a Christian perspective, prayer is always in some sense "an expression of worship." The question is whether it is possible under any circumstances for an LCMS pastor to offer a prayer in a public setting involving a variety of religious leaders without engaging in "joint prayer and worship." Some believe that this is not possible. The majority believes that it may be possible depending on such factors as how the event is arranged and understood and how the situation is handled by the pastor in question, in order to make it clear that "joint prayer and worship" is not being conducted or condoned.

#### 4. Public Prayer as Intercession.

When governmental entities or civic officials ask pastors and religious leaders to participate in a civic event, it is very often for the purpose of offering a prayer (whether it be an invocation, blessing or benediction). In other words, they are asking first and foremost for a prayer of intercession and not for a "Gospel witness" (although, as discussed below in the next section, public prayer also constitutes a Christian witness). When asked to pray in this way, the pastor needs to take into account a number of concerns and issues. Not the least of these concerns is that the government may be seeking to put "religion" or "the church" into the service of government in ways that must be questioned or challenged by confessing Christians. Depending on the nature of the request or situation, the government may at times (implicitly if not explicitly) seek prayers that merely console or encourage the hearers, rather than calling for self-examination and repentance. Particularly in America, the perception exists (also among some Christians!) that our nation is uniquely God's "promised land," and that it is thereby under his special protection and guidance. The principles of democracy and the practice of capitalism become the "gospel" that America should "preach" to all nations on earth in order to gain the "salvation" of personal freedom from political oppression.

As much as we may treasure (and thank God for) the social and political freedoms that we enjoy in America, and as much as we may strive to protect, improve and promote these freedoms, they dare not be confused or identified with the unique message of God's saving activity in Christ. In offering prayers of intercession for the country or for our government, therefore, the pastor should consider the appropriateness of including also elements such as the following:

- 1) Our nation and government are of secondary importance. God is of ultimate importance. Our government, with its leaders and citizens, is ultimately accountable to God ("one nation under God"). Self-examination as a nation, therefore, is always in order. Are we

conducting ourselves as a nation in ways that please God and conform to his divine purposes for human government?

2) America is not God's "promised land." We cannot unequivocally declare that we are a "good and innocent people" who do not "deserve" whatever tragedies or disasters that may befall us. While pastors should refrain from giving the impression that we can make specific judgments about the "divine purposes" behind particular tragedies or disasters (this is always a matter of God's hidden will), it may be appropriate in certain contexts to offer a prayer of repentance or to call upon God to show us the error of our ways.

3) As Christians we are to pray not only for our "friends" and fellow-Christians, but also for our enemies. Similarly, in our prayers for our nation we pray not only for God's blessing upon America, but for his blessing upon all the nations of the earth, including nations with whom we are in conflict. We pray, for example, that people of all nations would come to a clearer recognition of and conformity with God's purposes for government, that they would have a sincere desire for peace, a true concern for the common good and for the protection of the weak and needy, and that they would provide peace and order so as to allow for the unhindered proclamation of the Gospel.

## 5. Public Prayer as a Christian Witness.

LCMS pastors who participate in civic events of any kind will take care to ensure that their prayers clearly and faithfully reflect Scripture's teaching regarding the nature of the true God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the exclusivity of access to God through faith in Christ alone. While one purpose of such prayer is to ask God's blessing on the church and state, it also by its very nature gives a public testimony to one's Christian faith. While our Lord Jesus Christ prayed aloud at the tomb of Lazarus so that those around him might hear his words to his Father (Jn 11:41-42), he also admonished us to avoid praying in such a way as to be seen or approved by others (Mt 6:5). Therefore it is crucial that this witness not compromise scriptural truth in any way, so that it confesses the Gospel.

Such intercessory prayers offered in the civil realm must avoid terminology that would allow those of other religions to conclude that they have the same faith or belief as the one offering the prayer. If prayer offered as a witness to the Gospel is to serve as a true and effective witness, it must clearly reflect Scripture's teaching regarding the uniqueness and exclusivity of God's gracious provision of salvation through Christ alone. The identity of the true God can be known only by those who first know Jesus and who through him know God.

While one purpose of prayer at civic events is the giving of a Christian witness, the question must be asked whether in certain circumstances participation in other forms, or non-participation, may provide a clearer or more decisive witness to the distinctiveness of the Christian faith. In the Old Testament, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego provided a dramatic example of a godly confession by their refusal to bow before the golden image (Daniel 3). By not participating in emperor worship and refraining from worship in the Pantheon (a building in which each of the Roman gods had equal standing), the earliest Christians gave witness to Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation. Their death as a result of their non-participation provided the blood from which the church grew. On the other hand, Paul did not hesitate to engage in debate and preaching in the midst of pagan idols and idol-worshippers in the Athenian Areopagus, even using their altar "To an unknown God" as an opportunity to call them to repentance and point them to the true God (Acts 17).

## 6. Synodical Commitments.

When offered an invitation to participate in a civic event, pastors will want to take into account the commitments they have made to fellow members of the Synod regarding the implementation of our mutual understanding of the scriptural and confessional principles of fellowship, while at the same time recognizing that there will always be difficult and ambiguous situations when members of Synod equally committed to these principles may come to different conclusions. When this happens, as the Commission emphasizes in the paragraphs "Cases of Discretion," "charity must prevail." There will always be a need for pastors to make pastoral judgments in such situations. In doing so, they need to be given the benefit of the doubt, even as their peers may rightfully approach them with concerns and questions about their decision. In all cases the pastor remains accountable both to God and also to the fellow members of the LCMS of which he is a member. It is for this reason that pastors, when facing difficult decisions in ambiguous situations, should consult with brother pastors and ecclesiastical supervisors when possible.

When pastors err, loving admonition, and honest confession are necessary, as well as the expression of God's full forgiveness given through the Gospel to the penitent. Discussion and comments about a brother pastor's participation in civic events should be done in the spirit of charity and care—all being mindful that they, too, in a difficult and extraordinary situation could overstep proper boundaries and be in need of repentance and forgiveness. If pastors have overstepped proper boundaries, their prayer ought to be that a brother or sister in Christ would approach them in love and call them to godly repentance, so that they too may live under God's

rich grace and forgiveness (Gal 6:1ff.). Thus, what pastors say and do should be done in Christian love and charity—in the words of the Lord Jesus, “whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them” (Mt 7:12).

## Conclusion

In offering these considerations and guidelines for participation in civic events the CTCR is keenly aware of a twofold challenge—accompanied by a twofold caution. On the one hand, it is becoming increasingly evident that the relativistic mindset that has dominated our culture for some time is also impacting religious thinking and practice in significant (and deeply troubling) ways. This often results in an “anything goes” mentality and (ironically, in the name of “tolerance”) an intolerance for religious beliefs and practices that are absolute and exclusive in nature. In this cultural and ecclesial context, it is crucial that guidelines such as these strengthen pastors and congregations in their resolve and in their efforts to refuse to compromise in any way the scriptural and confessional truths that bind us together as a church body and that constitute our individual and corporate witness to Christ Jesus as God’s only Son and the world’s only Savior.

On the other hand, the church’s witness will not be strengthened nor will her confession be bolstered by an over-zealous attempt to address every question of casuistry or to develop rigid rules of conduct for every conceivable scenario or situation that might arise. When it comes to an issue as fraught with complexity, diversity and fluidity as “civic events in America,” there is simply no way to develop guidelines to answer all questions and resolve all problems. Put another way, there is no way to develop guidelines for participation in civic events that relieve pastors of the dual burden (willingly borne for the sake of Christ) of exercising faithful and careful discretion in making judgments about participation in less-than-clear circumstances, and of exercising Christian restraint born of Christian charity: restraint in making hasty or careless decisions about participation that might be misleading or offensive, as well as restraint in rendering hasty or careless judgments about the decisions of others. Clarity in doctrine and practice and charity in our dealings with one another are both essential to the church’s life and witness, if the church is to be about the business given to her by her Lord. Christian charity must prevail hand in hand with confessional clarity, therefore, in order for these considerations and guidelines for participation in civic events to be of service to Christ’s church and to our walking together in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.