



# ADULT STUDY

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## PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 6

# Faithful Citizenship: An Adult Lenten Study

*Church and Family as Schools of Civic Virtue*

## What Have We Learned?

Lent is coming to a close. Easter is just around the corner! Take a moment to think about the various global issues that we've examined in these sessions. We briefly considered several topics in context with our three themes: covenant, community, and the common good. We thought about ways that we can broaden our outlook and discipleship by going outside the comfort zone of individualism in order to be "audaciously open" to the needs of others.

From the moment of birth, we are in community with other people, and we are shaped by our innumerable human encounters and experiences. In turn, we influence an innumerable number of people during our lives.

Individualism is not always negative, and covenant and community are not always positive. The Ku Klux Klan and similar hate groups, and other subtler examples of exclusion (like neighborhood agreements to keep minorities out of certain residential areas), are all negative examples of covenant, just as the urge to achieve "the common good" has been connected to American injustices like segregation, war against Native Americans, and other examples.

The needs of the individual certainly take precedence if some aspect of community is dysfunctional

or broken. Mount gives the example of a woman in an abusive marriage whose minister nevertheless told her to endure her suffering in the example of Jesus. When asked what her response was, she said, "I changed churches." Clearly not all religious communities are healthy, and pastors are fallible people who can get things wrong.<sup>1</sup>

But even with these caveats, the themes of covenant and community are very strong and positive. In fact, for Jews and Christians, covenant describes and defines our very relationship with God and with one another. Covenant also keeps us sensitive to the needs of others. Rather than focusing on our own well-being at the expense of other people, we view ourselves as fellow sufferers with others.

## Family Values and Faithful Citizens

In this last session we look at family and church as places to learn "civic virtue." Let's look at family first.

The demands of family and work are such that many people are too busy to volunteer and to serve the community. Eric Mount writes, "Voluntary associations, service clubs, churches, bowling leagues, unions, PTAs, neighborhoods, networks, and political parties that constitute people's communities of conversation and the cells of democratic citizenship have gotten squeezed

out by the demands of work and the claims of family.”<sup>2</sup> And yet our busyness has also truncated family time: the traditional supper table has been replaced by the computer, fast food, the microwave, and the television.

In the contrast between individualism and community, anyone who is part of a family or living community knows that group living is a potentially effective “cure” to excessive individualism. “Family” can be a couple and children, but “family” also includes one’s parents, siblings, step-siblings, in-laws, and other configurations. Oftentimes, conflicts happen when a family member “digs in” and is too individualistic in his or her position. Ideally, the family is the place for mutual love, the working out of problems, the settling of disputes, the talking out of confusing issues, and the mutual helpfulness that keeps the family in good shape. In other words, the family is a microcosm for what can be happening in our communities as well!

Let’s also look at church. In her book *Welcoming Children*, Joyce Ann Mercer writes about how children can have their very identities formed as they grow in a church congregation. Teaching children, in turn, is what she calls a “religious practice of stewardship,” just as parenting itself is a religious practice because children are gifts of God. The child’s identity is formed around faith in God, whose teachings of love, justice, compassion, and mutuality run counter to many societal values of consumerism and individualism.<sup>3</sup>

Mercer cautions that community, identity, and formation have potential problems, like the imposition of identities and reduced freedom in determining community membership. Congregations are not always the kinds of communities that help create positive identities. Likewise, the racism, classism, homophobia, and sexism that exist in congregations might become part of identity formation contrary to genuine faith formation. Mercer also cautions that certain kinds of parenting programs may focus on the traditional family structure rather than the very wide variety of family configurations that we find in today’s world. Altogether, we must always take care to call on the Spirit to guide our fallible church.<sup>4</sup>

Eric Mount sees church congregations as, ideally, places to learn civic virtue. “To become part of a community is to take on a distinct identity,” he writes, “and for Israel and for the Christian community, that

identity had a covenantal shape. Graced by being given an unearned identity as people of God, they had a vocation that obligated them to God and to each other.” The community happened within the context of work and others.<sup>5</sup>

Donald W. Shriver served as codirector of a research project that confirmed the importance of socially responsible congregations in spurring citizens toward work for the common good. Concentrating on several North Carolina cities and drawing from a sample of nine hundred residents, most of whom had some relation to religious bodies, the survey tested citizens for “ethical maturity” in terms of four virtues:

1. Disposition to act on their beliefs and to collaborate with others in doing so
2. A regard for the common public good even if it meant some sacrifice of private good
3. Openness to other people regardless of their race, sex, age, or other social identities
4. General trust in the likelihood that other people would help meet their personal needs.

In a key finding, this study indicates that citizens scored higher on the above four virtues the more they shared three lifestyle habits: (1) increasing involvement in broadly defined political work in their communities, (2) worship in a religious community that encouraged high ideals of justice in personal and community life, and (3) frequent resort to conversation and support by a circle of friends whom they trusted most.

The meaning of these findings for the life and witness of churches is very clear. For growth in their ability to serve the common good in and outside the church, Christians need encouragement to hope for justice in their regular worship together, the chance to share and strengthen their hopes for society in a circle of friends, and experiences of collaborative effort for the common good in secular society. These three relationships have a circular, mutually reinforcing effect on each other.

An equally striking conclusion of this research was that people involved in three-sided social relationships (congregation, friends, and secular politics) do not complain that their individuality and personal integrity are compromised by these relationships. Quite the contrary: both their sensitivity to other people and their sense of their own personhood grow in these experiences. They

are more themselves the more they are connected with the lives of other selves.

These findings ought to echo one of the key teachings of Jesus: “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 10:39). Many pastors, as well as other members of the helping professions, can testify that in experiences of helping to bear the burdens of other people (Gal. 6:2), their own burdens somehow become more bearable.

## What Can We Do?

Many denominations have addressed the major issues of our time. Do a web search for your own denomination and discover different ideas concerning the topics of our sessions. For instance, Roman Catholic bishops write that “the Church’s obligation to participate in shaping the moral character of society is a requirement of our faith” in their statement “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship.” But “the Church equips its members to address political and social questions by helping them to develop a well-formed conscience.”<sup>6</sup>

One exciting though challenging aspect of faithful citizenship today is when citizens seek to address root causes of social problems. Many people spend time helping in a soup kitchen—a very helpful and positive thing to do!—and in volunteering in other kinds of service ministries to persons in crisis. An additional step is to address the roots of problems. For instance, what causes hunger in your community? What are deeper issues that give rise to problems like unemployment? Can your community be rallied to address such issues?

A pastor’s theology and spirituality can go a long way toward establishing a vision of faithful citizenship. Imagine that a pastor has this theological vision: a congregation shapes its members’ identities in a way that grows people’s Christian civic virtue. If a pastor has developed that vision, then she has the hard work of articulating that vision in such a way that it catches fire in the congregation, inspires key laity to share and disseminate the vision, and begins to inspire people to respond in personal and familial ways. Inculcating a sense of civic virtue takes patience, strong leadership, and certain theological values on the part of the pastor and other congregational leaders. But also nothing good and lasting comes about without prayer and the power of God’s Spirit.

## The Challenge of Sabbath

Let’s look at some Bible passages. The Sabbath, a deeply important biblical concept, is also important in our thinking about civic virtue and provides an important connection for the themes of family, church, and identity formation. In *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Walter Brueggemann writes that the Sabbath developed after the exile in Babylon as “a political assertion of disengagement [for Jews] from the economic system of productivity that never has enough . . . disengagement from the socioeconomic political enterprise, that in its endless productivity, offers safe, secure rest and well-being . . . That disengagement refers also to culture-produced expectations for frantic leisure, frantic consumption, or frantic exercise.”<sup>7</sup> Sabbath is a divine command to live differently than most of us live our lives! See also Brueggemann’s book *Sabbath as Resistance*, great for group study.<sup>8</sup>

### Misplaced Praise?

Warren R. Copeland, author of *Doing Justice in Our Cities*, has served as mayor of Springfield, Ohio, and as a member of its city commission. He and his wife are often praised as “good Christian people” for becoming legal guardian of a teenager—the child of someone they knew in the community—but he wonders why they aren’t similarly praised for serving in the public life of their community! Isn’t civic engagement important in a “good Christian”? He worries, too, that participating in a voluntary organization is perceived as more of a “good cause” than, for instance, dealing with local and federal laws about important matters like housing.\* There are many ways of being a faithful citizen.

\* Warren R. Copeland, *Doing Justice in Our Cities: Lessons in Public Policy from America’s Heartland* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 123–24.

The Hebrew word *shema* means “hear” or “listen.” It is the first Hebrew word in the famous affirmation of Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our

God, the LORD alone.” God’s lordship, affirmed in the Shema, became part of Judaism’s very life that included daily prayers and Sabbath rest and reflection. We might call the Shema a key to Sabbath reflection on one’s life and faith. Deuteronomy 11:18–20 calls God’s people to reflect on God’s blessings at home and away, during all our days and all our children’s days.

Today, respectfully bringing the Sabbath into our Christian practice, we can rediscover the Sabbath in a new way; congregations can support families about the importance of stopping the rush of activities to talk, think, study, and pray about their lives. For some families, the practice of “making Sabbath” in the home may be as basic as committing to one family meal per week. Taking this time can allow families and congregations to establish a “faithful ecology” that encompasses Christian identity and strong relationships.

Rev. Roderic Frohman writes that his church, Third Presbyterian Church in Rochester, New York, teaches ways of Sabbath rest/worship/reflection that help build civic virtues:

Sabbath 1: Community outreach programs and faith development content are carefully linked to nourish and drive each other.

Sabbath 2: Outreach teams (such as food cupboard ministry) double as weekday communities of faith development/civic engagement when volunteers eat together and reflect on their practice of ministry.

Sabbath 3: A ministry team members’ families become “at home” faith communities as they engage in “table talk” about their ministry.

Sabbath 4: Youth programming is focused as action/reflection on ministry in the community.

## Abraham’s Civic Virtue

In Genesis 18, we find a story about Abraham’s audacious hospitality shown to three strangers. God has just announced God’s intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. In verses 22–33, we find this famous exchange:

So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD. Then Abraham came near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and

not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” And the LORD said, “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.”

This dialogue continues in the same vein as Abraham asks whether forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty, or ten righteous individuals would appease the Lord’s anger, and each time the answer is yes. Here is another side of Abraham’s audacious openness. We should not interpret this passage to imply that the world’s social ills are the result of God’s punishment. But we can learn from the example of Abraham as he sees the plight of a city. True, his family members live there, but otherwise Abraham does not have a significant vested interest in the fate of the city. He could take a common attitude and distance himself from the city: “those people get what they deserve” or “those people aren’t my problem; I’ve problems of my own.” Instead, Abraham feels compassion for the people. He is audacious in addressing God, saying in effect, “You are the God of justice and righteousness. Would such a God destroy the righteous as well as the wicked? Why wouldn’t God be more concerned for people, more merciful?” As we grow in a civic-minded, global vision, we can learn from Abraham and boldly ask God for clarity about God’s will, inquire about God’s concern for justice, and beseech God for direction and guidance for our discipleship.

We can also take a cue from the intercessory role of the righteous. If we are righteous—in the biblical sense of being in a right relationship with God—then we are called to intercede for others in our prayers and our work. The righteous citizens of the city—if there had been any—would have saved all the citizens, because God’s mercy would have been spread generously.

## Final Thoughts

As people seeking God’s righteousness, perhaps we too can be challenged in this Lenten season to influence the world through our faithfulness. Eric Mount notes, “The virtues of faith as openness to the other, love as affirmation of the other and compassion toward the other, hope as the expectant patience to keep public discourse alive, and generous public-spiritedness as the manifestation

of gratitude are essential to the process of table talk that sustains civil society. If our covenantal religious traditions are worth their salt, they will nourish civil discourse to make it more inclusive, more respectful of difference, more attentive to the well-being of the entire community, and more constitutive of shared identity that does not subsume all other identities.”<sup>9</sup>

## Notes

1. Eric Mount Jr., *Covenant, Community, and the Common Good: An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1999), 144.
2. Mount, 5.
3. Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005), 163, 167–68, 245–50.
4. Mercer, 180, 245–50.
5. Mount, 81.
6. *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United*

*States* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2007), 6.

7. Walter Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 846.
8. Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).
9. Mount, 156.

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**Dana K. Horrell** is Coeditor of the *Parish Paper* (<https://www.theparishpaper.com/>), Director of *Faithful Citizen* ([www.faithfulcitizen.net](http://www.faithfulcitizen.net)), and pastor of South Bethlehem United Methodist Church near Albany, New York.

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**Paul Stroble** is adjunct faculty at Webster University and Eden Theological Seminary. A United Methodist minister, he has written twenty-one books, primarily church curriculum.