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# Churches Holding Governments Accountable

**A resource for reflection, discussion and action**

**The Lutheran World Federation – A Communion of Churches**
**Geneva, May 2010**

# Churches Holding Governments Accountable

***A resource for reflection, discussion and action***

Karen L. Bloomquist, John R. Stumme and Martin L. Sinaga

on behalf of

The Lutheran World Federation
— A Communion of Churches
Department for Theology and Studies

**Geneva, 2010**

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## Preface

Grounded in its long history of diaconal engagement with some of the most vulnerable persons and situations in the world, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and its member churches have long been addressing significant social, political, economic crises and injustices. This has included flagrant human rights violations; systemic sexism, racism and casteism; stigma and discrimination (e.g., against those affected by HIV and AIDS); the forced migration and exploitation of large populations; political conflicts fueled by old ethnic, political and interreligious rivalries; increasing competition for natural resources; self-serving, corrupt leaders; and how neoliberal globalization and debt have resulted in greater impoverishment for many.

As part of their advocacy calling, the churches have said much to denounce injustices:

> Advocacy is a prophetic activity of the churches, in which we accompany and support our sisters and brothers who struggle mightily for justice and peace in the context of injustice and violence against fellow human beings and the rest of creation. Advocacy involves speaking up for those who are silenced in their efforts to rectify injustice. It demands our engagement with the issues and initiatives of those who struggle for life, justice, equity, rights, and peace. Advocacy is a mission activity of the church in the world. It is one way in which the church participates in the ongoing mission *dei*. [1]

In carrying out this advocacy, many church leaders and members have nonetheless been hesitant to go further in carrying out this advocacy and actually

[1] The World Council of Churches, "Praying, speaking out and acting together: Theological Reflection on Advocacy," Report Global Platform for Theological Reflection, Manhasset, New York, November 2009, at **www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/2009pdfs/GPTR2009report.pdf** , 3.

to engage with governments—challenging what they are doing, or not doing to rectify injustices. Churches have often overlooked or been unaware of the strong theological grounds for holding governments accountable for the common good of all. Clarifying this is the purpose of this resource, so that churches might become more confident of how the faith they confess provides impetus for this important work in their respective contexts.

In October 2009, a small number of persons from LWF churches around the world (Argentina, Canada, Hong Kong–China, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Liberia, Madagascar, Malaysia, Namibia, Philippines, Taiwan–Republic of China, South Africa, United States, Zambia and Zimbabwe) were convened in Geneva by the LWF Department for Theology and Studies. Discussions at that consultation and the communiqué that was developed and affirmed by the LWF Council (**www.lutheranworld.org**) became the basis on which this resource was developed.

You are encouraged to have this translated into your language and make it available for discussion in local settings. Please notify us (**mre@lutheranworld.org**) of any such translations, so that along with this English version they can be posted and downloaded from our Web site, at **www.lutheranworld.org**

## *Introduction*

People sometimes express their opposition to or reluctance for the church to engage with government:

> "The church should stay out of politics; politics and religion don't mix."
> "The church does not understand how government operates, or how to change it."
> "We can't confront and criticize government."
> "The church might get absorbed, co-opted or even corrupted by the government; the church will lose its integrity."
> "The church will lose its favor with the government, or even be persecuted."
> "In some places, Christians who speak out regarding government corruption and human rights abuses are being persecuted, tortured and even killed."
> "Churches were key in dismantling apartheid, but since then have slacked off in holding government accountable."

On the other hand, if churches remain silent, they may neglect their prophetic calling:

> Inspired by Jesus and the prophets who confronted those in power and called for changes in unjust structures and practices, we pray that God may empower us to help transform all that leads to human greed, violence, injustice and exclusion.[2]

Martin Luther was deeply convinced that God holds political authority (i.e., governments) accountable.[3] He lived in times preceding the era of democratic

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[2] The Lutheran World Federation, "Prophetic Diakonia: For the Healing of the World," Report from an LWF consultation, Johannesburg, South Africa, November 2002, at **www.lutheranworld.org**, 6.

[3] See Gary M. Simpson, "Retrieving Martin Luther's Critical Public Theology of Political Authority for Global Civil Society Today," in Karen L. Bloomquist (ed.), *Theological Practices That Matter*, Theology in the Life of the Church, vol. 5 (Geneva and Minneapolis: The Lutheran World Federation and Lutheran University Press, 2009), 153ff.

citizenship or the consent of the governed. Nonetheless, he repeatedly expressed the concern that rulers be held accountable to God and to God's will that people live in peace and dignity. Earthly government is intended to be a means through which God works to sustain and further life in community. Thus, churches, along with others is civil society, must remain alert to and be critical of any governments when they violate human rights, or fall short of furthering the common good and justice, especially for those most vulnerable.

> If you are in the ministry and you are not willing to rebuke your gods [rulers] openly and publicly, as your office demands, at least leave off your private backbiting, calling of names, criticizing, and complaining. …[4]

Today, then, we might ask, ***to what should governments be "held accountable"***?

***To "God"?*** In today's multi-religious world, it can be difficult, even controversial, to call for governments to be accountable to God. Although there may be some common ground in how different religious traditions view this, this ultimate claim by itself can quickly become divisive. Furthermore, many dictatorial regimes have claimed to be sanctioned by God.

***To certain church or religious interests*****?** Churches have legitimate concerns for religious freedom. They hope that governments will have more positive attitudes or policies toward them, especially in contexts where relationships between churches and governments have been difficult or even hostile. In multi-religious contexts, churches may yearn for more just or fair treatment by governments. In settings where governments are prohibited from favoring any religion, churches may still have legitimate self-interests which they seek to protect or further. Yet, as important as these concerns may be in particular contexts, this is not the main accountability focus here.

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[4] Martin Luther, "Psalm 82," in Jaroslav Pelikan (ed.), *Luther's Works,* vol. 13 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 50.

***To the "common good"?*** Although some governments may talk about the "common good," in situations where identity politics are rampant, this may imply only what will further the interests of certain political factions, classes/castes or ethnic groups; "common good" may serve as a cover for preserving order at the expense of the most vulnerable. Through its diaconal ministry toward those in need, regardless of who they are, the church shows the government what needs to be done for the sake of all.

Beyond factors such as the above lie values, principles or goals shared with many faiths, as well as secular traditions, which aim to further the flourishing of life and the livelihood for all persons and their communities. These are based on norms of dignity and justice for all persons, regardless of their religion, ethnicity, social status or gender. Priority needs to be given to those most vulnerable or in need, including the whole of creation. This expansive concern for the welfare of all goes beyond self-serving interests toward ***neighbor love for all, and to which governments and their policies and practices most need to be held accountable.***

The faith basis for these values is apparent, for example, in the biblical prophets, the teachings and practices of Jesus and in confessional writings of churches. Yet, it is important that this be articulated in terms not specific to any one faith tradition, so as to become a basis for cooperating with a wide array of faith and civil society partners.

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.[5]

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[5] "Reclaiming the Vocation of Government," in Karen L. Bloomquist (ed.), *Communion, Responsibility, Accountability,* LWF Documentation 50/2004 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2004), 218.

Thus, government's obligations include, for example:

- 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.[6]

Government should be like the operating system of a computer: provide the rules, conventions, protections and basic services necessary for a society to function. Yet, as computers can become corrupted, so too can governments be co-opted by special interests that twist the rules, corrupt lawmakers and get laws written for their own benefit.

### *How then can such different kinds of governments be held accountable?*

To begin with, it will hardly be credible for churches to attempt to hold governments accountable, if they themselves are not accountable. This implies being transparent about how they exercise power, use financial and other resources and make decisions and implement actions in ways that are just and fair to all. Through such transparency, churches can and should be held accountable when they fall short.

The prevailing political culture and kind of government are also of relevance. Some churches find themselves in long-established democratic

[6] Ibid., 219.

political cultures, with governments that usually function well, where this is a space for citizens and civil society groups freely to express themselves and advocate for public policies, and to hold governments accountable when they fall short of goals such as the above. For others, the space and freedom for doing so is far more limited, especially under totalitarian governments, or where democratic cultures are new or not well established. For still others, governments may be rather weak or ineffectual, especially in relation to powerful economic influences. Often, tribalism or ethnicity is an obstacle to holding governments accountable. Churches in some minority situations may feel unable or too vulnerable do so, or hesitant to collaborate with others in civil society in pursuing this. Holding government accountable requires a stable enough state, a strong enough church (at least, in terms of its faith) and adequate public space in which churches, along with others, can advocate for the well-being of all.

Yet, we need theological clarity as to why and how Christians and churches are to hold governments accountable. Thus, what follows are some theological bases, particularly from the Lutheran tradition, that undergird this calling.

## A theological perspective[7]

### Unaccountable government

Why, some might wonder, should Christians care about holding governments accountable? The answer, however lengthy it might be, begins—and ends—with what is at the heart of living out our baptismal calling: we care about government for the sake of the neighbor. Unaccountable governments destroy human life and society. Children, men and women suffer and die unjustly at their hands. Our neighbor cries out to us.

Unaccountable governments lead to tyranny; despots, bound by neither the law nor the will of the people, seek to control all of society and do what they please. They use murder, torture and other atrocities to eliminate opposition and create an environment of fear. Corruption, manipulation, deception, brutality and cruelty characterize their regimes. Unaccountable governments act with impunity.

Over the last century, our world has provided plenty of examples of the terrible evil of completely unaccountable government. Some dictatorships have been responsible for the deaths of millions of people. In some, thousands have simply disappeared; in others, the people were impoverished. Colonial powers carved up their holdings regardless of the people living in them, and despotic ruling classes built their power on racial or ethnic oppression. Whether such regimes are from the "right" or the "left," whether they are secular or religious, they all create a living hell for their citizens.

Our memory of these unspeakable evils makes thinking, talking and acting about accountable government a serious moral matter. The threat of tyranny may be near or distant, but it remains the ominous background

[7] This section was drafted by Rev. Dr John R. Stumme.

to creating, maintaining and strengthening accountable government. Our foremost and unyielding moral responsibility must be to prevent tyranny—so that the neighbor is not harmed. This is the message of the negative prohibitions of the Ten Commandments—"Do not murder. Do not steal"—that are meant to create a society in which the neighbor is protected. "Love does no wrong to a neighbor," St Paul tells us, "therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom 13:10). Our cry toward tyranny, "Nunca más"—"Never again"—arises from love.

Governments do not want to be held accountable, as Martin Luther recognized. Rulers, he wrote, "declare that whoever rebukes them is seditious, rebels against the authority ordained by God, and defames their honor." He called this tactic "a new device," but it is both very old and very contemporary. He continued, "Their ultimate desire is to be able to do whatever they wish, without hindrance or rebuke, without shame and fear, and with honor and glory, so that they become that noble, praiseworthy folk […] 'who live according to their own self-will and do what they please'" (2 Pet 3:3).[8] Luther's insight into the self-serving and self-protecting dynamics of political power makes us aware that holding governments accountable is very difficult as well as necessary.

Luther was also aware of the dangers of anarchy, of situations in which governments do not have the authority and power to provide peace and justice for society. The one who would do away with law and sword, he wrote, "would be loosing the ropes and chains of the savage wild beasts and letting them bite and mangle everyone, meanwhile insisting that they were harmless, tame, and gentle creatures; but I would have the proof in my wounds."[9] Luther's strong rhetoric aptly fits many situations today where government is practically

[8] Luther, op. cit. (note 4), 43.

[9] Martin Luther, "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed, 1523," in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.) *Luther's Works*, vol. 45 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), 91.

non-existent or so weak that it is unable to protect its citizens from violence, injustice and death. If a first moral obligation in relation to government is to "prevent tyranny," a second is like unto it: "prevent anarchy." For the sake of the neighbor, we are driven to seek accountable government.

**What is your memory of, or experience with, unaccountable government? In what ways was it unaccountable?**

**For what does your government need to be held accountable today?**

### *God and government*

What role does government play in God's care for the world? The question challenges us to seek to understand and approach government in light of our faith in the Triune God. It is an occasion to draw upon certain threads in Lutheran theology.

Luther liked to boast that no one in church history had praised secular authority as highly as he had. "After the Gospel or ministry," he sang out, "there is on earth no better jewel, no greater treasure, nor richer alms, no fairer endowment, no finer possession than a ruler who makes and preserves just laws."[10] It should be underscored that his tribute was to government that is just.

Luther could commend just government because he believed and taught that government is God's good work to order life in society. Lutherans differ from those who say God is absent from the political realm. People encounter the will of the Triune God in the just laws and true blessings of government. "Lawful civil ordinances are good works of God and […]

[10] Luther, op. cit. (note 4), 54.

Christians are permitted" to participate in them.[11] By means of God's gifts of reason and the sense of obligation to do right and avoid wrong, God enables and expects people to order their common life in relative justice, in what Lutherans often call "civil righteousness."[12]

Government is a necessary institution in human life because sin generates self-destructive tendencies in society. When humans place themselves instead of God at the center of their lives, they neglect, threaten or harm their neighbor. God designates government to act with law and sword, that is, through legitimate coercive measures of various degrees, to restrain evildoers and protect the upright, permitting people to live together in relative peace (Rom 13). In doing this, they are "God's servant" (Rom 13:4). The divinely given function or vocation of government is a moral one, carried out within the scope of God's creative activity.

Yet there is more to the story. Government, intended to restrain the effects of sin, is also itself corrupted by sin. Accordingly, its actions are often a mixture of good and evil. It both distorts and accomplishes God's intent. Indeed, government (see "Unaccountable government") may even destroy the society it is meant to preserve and serve (Rev 13). Christians are consoled that tyranny is not the final word, for all governments stand under God's ultimate judgment and mercy, accountable to God for what they do or fail to do to secure and promote just order.

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[11] "The Augsburg Confession—Latin Text—Article XVI: Civic Affairs," in Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 49. In Acts 5:29, Peter and the apostles said, "We must obey God rather than any human authority."

[12] "Civil righteousness" "that reason understands" deals with "the commandments of the second table" of the Ten Commandments. "Apology to the Augsburg Confession, Article IV: Justification," in ibid., 125.

Government indeed has a vital role to play in God's care for the world, but it also has its limits. Regardless of the power it wields or the majesty it evokes, government is not God—the source of all good or the arbiter of human destiny. There are things that government does not and cannot do: save us from sin, make us righteous before God, provide ultimate meaning to life, overcome death, produce eternal peace or usher in the kingdom of God. These are the marvelous gifts and promises of the gospel; they explain why for Luther the gospel comes before his praise of government. What we expect to receive from government as well as our loyalty to it should always be limited. The Augsburg Confession (Article XVI), in speaking of civil government, refers to Acts 5:29 to insist that Christians "owe greater obedience to God than to human beings."[13]

Rulers and regimes as well as we ourselves are mortals, subject to death, as the psalmist reminds us: "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish" (Ps 146:3, 4). And so we confess that "here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (Heb 13:14). As we wait in active hope for God's city to come, we are freed to be passionately committed to the peace, security, justice, freedom and welfare of our temporal cities—for the sake of the neighbor. When we remember that these penultimate goods are always provisional, partial and precarious, we can recognize how precious the governments are that secure them. Luther could even call rulers "gods" because "of the good works that God has appointed to this rank in life."[14]

The wisdom that emerges from these threads of Lutheran theology suggests that we should both value and distrust government, and not one without the other. If we distrust government without valuing it, we fall (like into

[13] "The Augsburg Confession—Latin Text—Article XVIII: Free Will," in op. cit. (note 11), 51.

[14] Luther, op. cit. (note 9), 54.

a pit) into cynicism; if we value government without distrusting it, we fall (like into a pit) into naïveté. The path from a disillusioned naïveté to cynicism is short. Because good government is God's gift, we have reason to value it; because of sin, we have reason to distrust government.

Because government is valuable, it must be strong enough to provide security and justice for its citizens (to prevent anarchy). Because government should be distrusted, it requires public institutions of accountability (to prevent tyranny). Whether one says "value but distrust" or "distrust but value," we are wise to adopt an attitude or posture that allows us to be free both to affirm and criticize government, both to say "yes" and "no" to it.

Out of this theological context, our own calling takes shape: to be vigilant, to discern God's intent and to hold government accountable.

**What theological teaching about the function and limits of government do you commonly hear in your context? How does that compare with what you read here?**

**Do you distrust or value government more? Why do you distrust or appreciate your particular government? On what bases?**

### *Citizens not subjects*

Who holds government accountable to what? During the last few centuries, political developments throughout much of the world have led to the response that it is the people—citizens—who are responsible to hold government accountable to law. A just government, it is claimed, depends on its citizens' consent and is to act on the basis of law. Citizens hold government accountable by insisting that the laws are established through agreed-upon public processes and further the human dignity of all and serve the common good.

This response differs from others found in history. Some have argued, for example, that government should be accountable to the few who are the wealthiest. Or, government should be accountable to the military, or to the strongest. Or, government should be accountable to selected religious leaders who know God's will. Or, government should be accountable to a divinely ordained individual or family who alone has the right to decide in the name of the whole society. Such responses claim that government should be accountable to one person or to a part of society instead of being accountable to all people.

While Scripture and the Confessions inform us about the function of government, they do not prescribe a particular form or structure of government. Israel's theocratic kingship, for example, is not one that Christians are bound to imitate today. The form of government is a matter of human responsibility. What form today best secures the God-given purposes of government? Because government belongs to this secular age, to the time before the coming of God's kingdom, Lutherans are open to learn from others. "Whoever wants to learn and become wise in secular government, let him read the heathen books and writings," wrote Luther.[15] He was referring to the "heathen wisdom" found among Greeks and Romans such as in Homer and Cicero. Today we should learn from the secular wisdom—which has grown out of the Christian tradition—that insists that government should be structured so that it is answerable to citizens and law.

Since the sixteenth-century Reformation in Europe, Lutherans throughout the world have advocated for and lived under many forms of government. They have been credited with the beginnings of a theory of resistance to the state but also with contributing to the absolute rule of divine kingship.[16]

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[15] Martin Luther, "Commentary on Psalm 110," in op. cit. (note 4), 199.

[16] See Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 2, *The Age of Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978). On Lutheran resistance theory, see especially, 189ff.

At times, Lutherans have tended to sanction authoritarian rule, but they also have been strong supporters of democracy. They have identified with colonial powers, and they have been active in liberation movements.

Whatever has been the case in their diverse and ambiguous past, Lutherans in the twenty-first century have good reason to work for a political culture and institutions whereby citizens hold government accountable to laws and ways of governing that are just. This is a positive alternative to condoning tyrannical governments, accommodating to situations where governments are unable to carry out their function, or to restricting government's accountability to a select group of people. What this might mean in the very different kinds of situations Lutherans face today will of course vary significantly.

"Citizen" designates a public person. To be a citizen is to belong, to be recognized as being a member of a community or society. This recognition brings with it certain rights and responsibilities. This understanding of citizenship has become widespread only in recent centuries. At the time of the Reformation, people were considered subjects of a political ruler, not citizens of a political community. When, for example, Luther considered the ruler a "father,"[17] he was conveying a relationship in which subjects, like children, were to be subservient and obedient to a superior authority. "Citizen" conveys a very different understanding: citizens are active participants in a political community of equals who share a common responsibility to assure that government operates justly. Government should guarantee citizens the rights necessary for individual freedom and for participating in the exercise of political power. In turn, citizens are to hold governments accountable for ordering liberty in just and peaceful ways.

[17] "The Large Catechism. The Ten Commandments," in op. cit. (note 11), 407. In speaking of civil authority, Luther wrote, "For here one is the father not of an individual family, but of as many people as he has inhabitants, citizens, or subjects."

**In your context, to whom and to what is government accountable? To what values or principles?**

**What hampers the possibilities for exercising citizenship in your context? How could the rights and responsibilities of citizens be furthered?**

### *Church and government*

How should churches, or any religion, relate to government? The question reminds us that "churches holding governments accountable" is part of a broad and often controversial historical and theological context. Remembering this context of "church and state" may help us to deepen our understanding of how churches should hold government accountable in ways that maintain the integrity of both church and government.

Three ways of relating lead down the wrong path:

- Church and government are two separate entities that should not influence each other. This type of response draws an absolute separation between the two: the church has to do with "spiritual" matters and government with "material" things. It may be informed by a piety that sees the world as evil and to be avoided as much as possible. Or it may be nurtured by the idea that faith is exclusively a private relationship "between God and me" and has nothing to do with government. This type is commonly characterized by the phrase, "Religion and politics don't mix."

- Government controls the church. Through coercion, traditional practice or willing cooperation, the church becomes subservient to government or perhaps even a subordinate part of government. Throne and altar are seen as one; president and bishop walk hand-

in-hand, and are present to honor each other's special events. In this type of response, the church gives its unconditional support to government; what the government does, the church echoes and blesses. The church may gain in power and privilege but loses any critical distance from government. It becomes a mouthpiece or lapdog of the government and its policies.

- The church, mosque or temple controls government. A religion uses its power to subordinate government to itself and its interests. In this type of response, a religion's superior "spiritual authority" gives it the right to guide and command the lesser "temporal authority." Today this type may be less common among churches than among some other religious groups where efforts are made to subordinate all of society to certain religious laws as interpreted by religious leaders.

**Which of the above tends to prevail in your context? Discuss how this is the case.**

What arises from Lutheran theology is an alternative to these three types: God is at work in both church and government; they have distinctive divine mandates that prevent one from being subordinate to the other, for both serve God's purposes. The church (but not the government) proclaims God's Word of law and gospel. Government, as we have seen, has the special responsibility to order human freedom justly and peacefully. Because government belongs to God's care of the world, Christians are called to participate critically in its arena of responsibility. Both church and government have their own God-given integrity and freedom to act, and are limited by the other's integrity and freedom. Therefore, the two institutions should not be confused, nor should one control the other. Yet, the two share overlapping areas of engagement where they properly

interact for the sake of the neighbor, including the church's calling to hold government accountable.

God uses many agencies to hold government accountable; it is not a responsibility that belongs exclusively to the church. While it is not the whole of the church's mission, it is a valid and often important part of its mission. It is part of the church's prophetic witness, which arises from critical solidarity with the poor and critical participation in transforming injustice. The church's prophetic witness is shaped by critical reflection, truth telling through word and deed, participating and serving in society for the sake of peace and justice, and building reconciled and healing communities.[18]

The Bible gives us a wonderful example, indeed, a paradigm of the prophetic witness of holding government accountable, in the story of Nathan and David (2 Sam 11–12). After David plotted to have Uriah killed so that he could take Uriah's wife as his wife, Nathan, the prophet, went to the king and told him a story about a rich man taking advantage of a poor man. David angrily asked who the man was and Nathan said, "You are the man!" With these simple, powerful words, Nathan held David to account to God's law for abusing his power, arranging murder, and committing adultery. The result was David's confession of sin and God's punishment.

Nathan the prophet boldly spoke truth to power. The two protagonists represented distinct institutions: that of the prophet and of the king. Each respected the integrity and the function of the other institution, and they interacted in an area of mutual engagement. Nathan was not trying to take power from David but calling him to live up to his obligations as king. However much the story grips and instructs us, we are also aware of the historical distance between then and now. Nathan and David

[18] For more on the church, see Paul John Issak's, "The Church's Prophetic Witness: Social, Political and Economic Engagement," in Bloomquist (ed.), op. cit. (note 3), 152.

shared a common faith and worldview, which is not necessarily the case in a pluralistic world. They were involved in a face-to-face encounter in which the king acknowledged his wrongdoing before God. Such an event would be hard to repeat in most places in our world today.

One difference between church and government is that God has not given the "sword" to the church; instead, the church's "weapon" is the Word, and that Word, Luther insisted, is not to go silent before temporal authority. For preachers to rebuke rulers "through God's Word, spoken publicly, boldly, and honestly" is not seditious, wrote Luther, but "on the contrary a praiseworthy, noble, and rare virtue, and a particularly great service to God."[19] In writing this, Luther had in mind situations where princes, nobles, mayors and officials were sitting in a congregation and being directly addressed by the preacher. Where this occurs today, Luther's counsel still needs to be followed. Yet, in many places today, the personal encounters that Luther envisioned or that Nathan enacted are not common possibilities for holding government accountable.

**How might this Lutheran framework of church and government relations be helpful in your context?**

**How can your church hold government accountable? What kind of prophetic witness is needed in your context?**

### *The challenges facing churches*

The way in which churches carry out their responsibility depends on the situation in which they find themselves. Reflect on which of these challenges especially require attention in your context:

[19] Luther, op. cit. (note 9), 50.

***Public space***: The church needs public space for it to address government. In many situations today, churches do not have this space. Many Christians live under governments that intimidate, repress, persecute or discriminate against them. Yet, many remain faithful to Christ, even to the point of giving their lives. The blood of today's martyrs calls us, among other things, to ensure that government is accountable to norms that protect life and treat citizens equally and fairly.

***Religious freedom***: The legal institution of religious freedom is of utmost importance in providing some public space for churches and other religious communities. This is an internationally recognized human right that should be honored by culture and government.[20] Protecting freedoms of religion, speech, assembly and press, along with a vibrant civil society, are necessary if Christians and other citizens are to hold their government accountable to justice. These freedoms also include the right to criticize and even risk offending some religious sensitivities. Churches and other religions must also be held accountable to just laws that do not violate their divine mandate.

***Appropriate use of power***: When these freedoms are guaranteed, accountability becomes part of the structure of government itself. This is the most effective way to ensure accountability. Churches should work for and support institutions that build accountability into government, such as dividing power among its executive, legislative and judicial functions, holding periodical elections for the legislative and executive branches, maintaining an independent judiciary, respecting the duties of different jurisdictions (local, regional, national) and protecting basic freedoms in practice. They should advocate openness and transparency in government. These institutions are a crucial means for combating corruption and other abuses of power, and for increasing the likelihood that government will fulfill its responsibilities.

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[20] For a discussion of the introduction of this concept into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the Lutheran theologian O. Frederick Nolde, see John S. Nurser, *For All Peoples and all Nations* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005). See especially, 143ff.

***Networking and communicating:*** In a pluralistic world with an astonishing variety of interests and perspectives, and in a technological world with ever new and faster means of communication, Lutheran churches of course are not alone in efforts to hold government accountable. In our day, it is important that this be done through ecumenical, interfaith and civil society alliances. If in Luther's day the office of the preacher was the principal way to hold government accountable, today the pulpit has exploded into thousands of public voices amplified by Web sites, blogs, emails, texting, YouTube and social networking, not to mention radio, television, newspapers, magazines and books. The Internet can permeate even situations where repressive governments try to control it. Today the public square is crowded and messy, a reality that also has the potential to make government more responsive to citizens' just demands.

***Making public statements:*** Churches, often ecumenically and sometime in interfaith coalitions, seek to hold governments accountable by means of public declarations or statements. This practice, which became widespread in the twentieth century, can be an important instrument in calling attention to glaring injustices and urging action on vital issues. Some of these declarations are examples of the best of prophetic witness. Certainly, as we seek to hold others accountable, we should hold ourselves accountable to our highest standards in how we develop and what we say in these declarations. We continually need to evaluate our declarations as to how faithful, competent, participatory, effective and fair they are.

***Forming citizens:*** Another way to hold government accountable is to revitalize our preaching and teaching on vocation and educating the faithful that being a citizen is a sacred calling. God's Word in the water of baptism calls us to praise and serve God in all of life by loving our neighbor in our places of responsibility, that is, in the institutions of daily life. One of these places is in our citizenship. By being active, informed, constructive, critical citizens who seek justice and the common good, Christians are serving God and loving the neighbor.

The church is holding government accountable to vital moral standards that serve the common good, for example, when Christian citizens become

- Police officers who fairly enforce the law and reject all brutality
- Judges who apply the law justly and refuse bribes and outside influences
- Elected officials who work for legislation that serves the common good and reject the corruption that would enhance their own power
- Business people, who carry on business with government, complete their contracts competently and honestly and repudiate any fraud.

***Upbuilding institutions***: Lutherans who recognize that holding government accountable is a long-term and substantial task will link this with the necessity of building and maintaining strong, trustworthy institutions and forming the people who inhabit them. Humans are agents in social networks and institutions; they act according to rules, patterns and expectations that constrain and enable behavior to accomplish certain human purposes. Christians with a sense of God's calling to be citizens will act to create and maintain public institutions, whose purpose it is to carry out an aspect of the common good. Instead of contributing toward people's distrust of institutions, Christians will seek to make the necessary changes so that people can value them. Instead of looking at public institutions in terms of what they themselves can get out of them, they will seek to avoid doing anything that would dishonor these institutions. Being a good citizen includes thinking and acting in terms of institutions.[21]

When Christians do such things, showing by example and word what the institution is intended to accomplish, they are building the social trust needed for institutions to function for the common good.

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[21] See Hugh Heclo, *On Thinking Institutionally* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2008). Heclo is also one source for the phrase "Distrust but Value."

***Praying:*** As we face the challenges to hold government accountable, let us also pray for good and just governments throughout the world. When the kingdom of God comes in all its fullness, all will have totally good and trustworthy governance. Until then, we are responsible for holding government accountable to its God-given functions in order to lower the reasons for distrusting government and increasing the reasons for valuing it, for the sake of the good of neighbors both near and afar.

**In your setting, what are the possibilities and challenges for you as a citizen to make government more accountable to serving the common good?**

## *Developing capacities for churches to hold government accountable*

The October 2009 consultation noted that the following kinds of capacity building are especially urgent:

Too often, we have failed to bear public witness to God's purposes for the common good in our societies. Holding governments accountable is one of the crucial means through which we bear witness to our faith—to assure that this arena genuinely serves the good of ***all*** people.

Most basically, this bearing witness begins by telling what is happening on the ground, in the actual lives of people, especially when they are suffering injustices because of what government is doing or failing to do. Such bearing witness is an expression of love for the neighbor.

**What is happening to people in your community that government needs to hear about? How can you or your church bring this witness to government? What changes are needed?**

Church leaders often are uninformed, unable to articulate or analyze the issues at stake, not seeing this as a central aspect of what the church's witness entails. Many are unable to speak in ways that will be effective in the public arena, and/or lack theological understandings that readily engage these realities, including in their sermons.

**How could pastors and other leaders in your church be better prepared to analyze and speak to the critical social issues at stake in your context? How and where might this take place?**

Churches often feel that they lack the information they need to hold government accountable. Accurate, up-to-date information is necessary if they are to engage governments with integrity, such as, what agreements their governments have signed and what human rights they are obliged to respect. Strategic information can be accessed and effectively used in different contexts to hold governments accountable.

**Check especially:**

**• Your country's constitution and any national bill of rights**

**• Any legislation adopted related to human rights (including labor, consumer and environmental protection)**

**• Any relevant regional human rights instruments your country has ratified (available online from regional human rights institutions, such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Council of Europe etc.)**

**• Any international human rights treaties your country has ratified (available online at http://treaties.un.org/Pages/Treaties.aspx?id=4&subid=A&lang=en)**

**• National and international non-governmental organizations dealing with human rights.**

Churches may be reluctant to identify or work with potential allies, especially those who may not share their faith convictions. They may feel they lack the capacity or are too small to hold government accountable, yet even rather small churches are making an important impact through their participation in ecumenical, interfaith and civil society coalitions.

**What ecumenical or interfaith coalitions are active in addressing some key issue involving the government in your context and how might you get involved?**

By necessity, the approaches for holding governments accountable will vary. We need to learn from one another in order to discern the most appropriate approaches in particular circumstances. Some churches are able to dialogue with government about changes needed, based on long and mostly positive relationships with government, including making policy recommendations. Other strategies may range from occasional public confrontations over blatant injustices to subtle attempts to influence policies and practices, as well as continuing discussion and relationship building with those in government. Some churches have also participated in forming transitional governments and in peace-building efforts.

**Discuss what ways of engaging with government are possible and especially strategic in your context.**

**Why is it important for popular movements to be able to critique policies or governments that are oppressive? How can churches be advocates for and with them?**

In order to be effective, churches need to understand how governments actually work, the kinds of assumptions, worldviews, self-interests they have, and the different kinds of "capital" (political, social and moral) that churches can bring to their exchanges with government. As churches, we should ask not only what we want government to do for us, but also assess how we can work in critical partnership with governments at all levels to uphold the common good.

**Discuss with some elected or appointed government officials their perspectives on this. What surprises you? How could you more effectively (albeit critically) work in partnership with government?**

As a global communion, mindful of the pervasive effects of neoliberal globalization, we affirm that urgent challenges increasingly need to be addressed across political boundaries. For example, the migration of people between Asian countries means that, in addition to receiving them as brothers and sisters, churches there need to press for fair and humane policies for migrant workers, as well as calling governments from which they have migrated to redress their unjust policies toward them. Coordinated regional approaches are needed.

**How could you hold your government more accountable for how those from elsewhere are treated in your country?**

Theologians and others with related areas of expertise need to give more in-depth attention to how Lutheran theological understandings regarding the relationship between churches and governments (such as those developed under "A theological perspective") may need to be reconsidered, revised and elaborated in light of the new realities of and challenges facing churches and government in different parts of the world today.

**How can a political ethic be forged that resonates more with realities in the Global South or East? In situations where other faiths prevail, or where fundamentalist approaches dominate, or where government is basically dysfunctional? Call upon theologians in your context (and from other contexts) to address the particular challenges you face in holding government accountable.**

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