

# A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment:

A policy statement of the  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

## Action of the 2019 Churchwide Assembly, Aug. 8, 2019

*To adopt the proposed policy statement “A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment: A policy statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.”*

In favor – 890 97.48%

Opposed – 23 2.52%

### Background

In 1991, the second Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) adopted **“A Declaration of Ecumenical Commitment: A policy statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America,”** which called for a “separate, official statement to describe [the ELCA’s] commitments and aspirations” in the area of inter-religious relations.

Twenty-five years later, in August 2016, Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton appointed the Inter-Religious Task Force to carry out this mandate: Patricia J. Lull (chair), Kathryn Mary Lohre (staff), Katie Bringman Baxter, Jacqueline Bussie, Elizabeth A. Eaton, Rahuldeep Singh Gill, William Horne, Darrell H. Jodock, Carol Schersten LaHurd, Peg Schultz-Akerson, Mark Swanson, and Lamont Anthony Wells.

A first draft was developed by fall 2017. Input received from preliminary review with ecumenical and inter-religious partners and other key leadership groups in 2017, as well as public review across the church in 2018, greatly informed the task force’s revisions.

The final draft was presented to the ELCA Conference of Bishops in October 2018, and to the ELCA Church Council in November 2018. Strongly encouraged by the Conference of Bishops, the ELCA Church Council unanimously recommended the proposed policy statement for adoption by the 2019 Churchwide Assembly. “A Declaration of Ecumenical Commitment,” “A Declaration of the ELCA to the Jewish Community” (1994) and “A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment” together form the policy basis for the ecumenical and inter-religious relations of the ELCA.

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# **A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment: A policy statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

## **FOREWORD: HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has been engaging in inter-religious relations since its formation in 1988, building upon the legacy of its predecessor bodies, the work of The Lutheran World Federation (LWF), and the witness of our ecumenical partners.

As part of the global Lutheran communion, we wrestle with and lament Martin Luther's troubling legacy regarding inter-religious relations, especially his anti-Judaic and anti-Islamic writings. Importantly, the first major inter-religious witness of this church was the adoption of a "Declaration of the ELCA to the Jewish Community" (1994), which repudiated Luther's vile anti-Judaic diatribes and reached out in love and respect to the Jewish community.

Over the years, our inter-religious relations have deepened and expanded. As a church, we have developed educational resources, engaged in dialogue and common action, defended our neighbors against religious bigotry, and cared for our various partnerships. While we have focused on Jewish and Muslim relations, we have also participated in organizations and efforts that reflect the broader diversity of religions and worldviews in the United States and globally.

Our 1991 policy statement, "A Declaration of Ecumenical Commitment," called for "a separate, official statement" that would reflect the "distinct responsibility for the church to enter into conversations and reach deeper understanding with people of other faiths." This inter-religious policy statement seeks to fulfill this recommendation, and complements our church's ecumenical policy statement.

Whenever possible, the ELCA cooperates with other Christians in building relations with those of other religions and worldviews. Councils of churches are an important avenue of dialogue and common action. While not all Christians are interested in or supportive of inter-religious relations, this commitment is receiving increased attention in many churches. Our Christian companions have greatly enhanced our journey. In fact, the inter-religious statements of our ecumenical partners have informed the development of this document.

At the same time, the ELCA has something distinctive to say about our inter-religious commitments. As a policy statement, this document provides a common framework for the diverse ministries of this church. The 12 commitments provide a succinct summary of the policy and may prove useful in certain contexts as a stand-alone aid. The afterword goes deeper into the biblical, confessional, and theological basis for the policy.

As used in this document, the word "religion" refers to various forms of beliefs and practices, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, Taoism, and traditional indigenous

spiritualities. Whenever “neighbor” is used, it refers to all those who profess a religion, as well as those who do not, including those who consider themselves atheists or agnostics or ascribe to other worldviews that are not explicitly religious. “We” refers to the individual members and participants, as well as to the congregations and ministries of the whole church. This document seeks to address a Lutheran approach to understanding and engaging with our neighbors in a multi-religious, pluralistic context.

As descriptions of the teachings of other religions and worldviews are readily available elsewhere, this policy statement does not seek to explain or categorize them. Neither does it seek to provide a theology of world religions. Instead, its focus is on our dual calling to witness to Christ and to love our neighbor. As such, this document serves as an invitation to individuals, congregations, ministries, institutions, and expressions of the ELCA to engage constructively with our neighbors of other religions and worldviews. In this declaration, our neighbors may also find greater clarity about who we are, what they can expect of us, and why and how our Christian faith and Lutheran self-understanding compel us into dialogue and common action.

In all of this, may greater understanding and cooperation throughout the *Oikoumene* – the whole inhabited earth – enhance the justice, peace, and life abundant that God intends for us all.

## INTRODUCTION

As the ELCA, we enter into inter-religious relations on the basis of our Christian identity and Lutheran self-understanding. As we engage with our neighbors of other religions and worldviews, it is important that we clearly articulate who we are, what we believe, and why.

“This church confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Gospel as the power of God for the salvation of all who believe” (ELCA Constitution, Chapter 2). As a confessional church, we understand ourselves to be evangelical, catholic, and ecumenical. “To be *evangelical* means to be committed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. ... To be *catholic* means to be committed to the fullness of the apostolic faith and its creedal, doctrinal articulation for the entire world. ... To be *ecumenical* means to be committed to the oneness to which God calls the world in the saving gift of Jesus Christ” (“A Declaration of Ecumenical Commitment,” 1991).

“Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything was made and through whose life, death, and resurrection God fashions a new creation” (ELCA Constitution, Chapter 2). This is the gospel – the good news of what God has done, is doing, and will do for all in Christ. It is a gift from God, freely given, without any requirements that need to be fulfilled. “Sharing the good news,” or evangelism, is using words and deeds to pass this life-changing message along to others. We describe this as the work of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). As witnesses to the good news of Jesus Christ, we entrust to the Holy Spirit the work of turning that witness into faith.

With the work of being a witness comes an invitation to love God and to love and serve the neighbor, which is known as the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:34-40). This neighborly response is not fueled simply

by human kindness. We believe that God entrusts to us as “in clay jars” (2 Corinthians 4:7) the “message of reconciliation” for all (2 Corinthians 5:19). We believe that “Christ, our peace, has put an end to the hostility of race, ethnicity, gender, and economic class” (“Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture,” ELCA social statement, 1993, p. 1). In a deeply divided world, and as a faithful response to Christ’s message of reconciliation, we seek right, peaceful, and just relationships with all our neighbors, including those of other religions and worldviews. We do this as an expression of our Christian faith, and as a continuation of the covenant God made with us in holy baptism “to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)*, Affirmation of Baptism).

## **CONTEXT**

Our context, whether understood locally or globally, is multi-religious. Our Lutheran vocation both shapes *and* is shaped by our engagement with religious diversity.

### *Encountering religious diversity*

Religious diversity has continually shaped American society, starting with the indigenous peoples of this land. Though many colonizers came to this land in search of religious freedom, they systematically and violently denied it to the indigenous peoples already here. We publicly confess this sin in our 2016 ELCA “Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery,” which was an important step in a long path toward “repentance and reconciliation to native nations in this country for damage done in the name of Christianity.”

Every chapter of U.S. history has had a lasting impact on our identity as a religiously diverse nation. This includes our sinful history of slavery, as well as various waves of migration and immigration. In recent decades, this history, as well as new patterns of forced displacement and new kinds of religious affiliation, has resulted in rapid and radical changes to our multi-religious landscape. Christians in the United States are now more likely than in previous generations to encounter neighbors of other religions and worldviews in their communities, schools, workplaces, civic spaces, circles of friends, and families.

### *Responding to our context*

As a church, we must consider anew our calling and commitments in a multi-religious world. Many Lutherans and Lutheran ministries already participate in inter-religious activities such as theological dialogue, advocacy, and service, which build mutual understanding and advance the common good, defined as justice and peace for all of creation. As Lutherans, we are called to move from mere coexistence to a more robust engagement. It is through authentic, mutual relationships that we can truly love our neighbors as people made in the image of God. This commitment includes confronting whenever possible the often-compounding oppressions experienced by people of various religions and worldviews on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, and class.

### *Fear and division*

There are many ways individuals and communities can respond to religious difference. The most harmful responses are grounded in ignorance and fear, which can breed stereotypes. In the extreme, these responses can fuel incidents of religious bigotry, restrict religious freedoms, and arouse conflicts that are destructive of life, property, and the environment.

We live in a context of ongoing anti-Muslim bigotry and anti-Semitism, as well as incidents of harassment and violence directed against these and other minority religious and ethnic communities. In some cases, the words and deeds of a few are used to discredit entire religious communities. Unfortunately, in every religion, Christianity included, some people distort, misuse, or abuse religion to incite violence and cause harm. We ought not allow these voices to determine or influence our perception of our neighbors. The ELCA must play an active role in dispelling fear of our neighbors, opposing religious bigotry, and standing with those who are the targets of fear, discrimination, hatred, and violence.

### *Inaction*

Another possible response to religious diversity is inaction. For some of us, an encounter with religious difference may seem a distant reality or one we are not quite ready to acknowledge. We may have limited information and experiences, which can mean we are less motivated to reach out to our neighbors. All of us have been exposed to stereotypes, which may seem harmless when not acted on or spoken aloud. Yet, in the face of bigotry, such stereotypes are not neutral. They, too, can be destructive. Luther interprets the Eighth Commandment, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor,” to mean not only that “we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations” but also that we should “come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light” (Small Catechism). Such action is, in fact, required of us.

### *Active engagement*

When the alternatives are so devastating, respectful conversation, dialogue, advocacy, accompaniment, friendship, and cooperation are imperative. We are called to move beyond encountering our religiously diverse neighbors to actively engaging with them. This calling leads to concrete commitments that we strive to live out as people of faith. We are freed in Christ to engage our neighbors in a multi-religious world.

### *Expanding our inter-religious commitments*

Our relationship to each of our neighbors of other religions and worldviews is vitally important. At the same time, Christians have had a particularly rich yet complex relationship with Jews and Muslims. In significantly different ways, all three traditions claim to worship the God of Abraham. Given this kinship, Lutherans have a responsibility to overcome stereotypes and misunderstandings of Muslims and Jews and to seek fuller understanding and cooperation. Doing so may well involve rethinking aspects of Christian self-understanding.

This “Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment” reaffirms the 1994 “Declaration of the ELCA to the Jewish Community.” At the same time, it extends the scope of our calling to additional neighbors too – including those of other religions, those who identify with multiple religious and spiritual traditions, and those who are not religious.

Beyond Judaism and Islam, the ELCA engages with other religious communities, including Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs, among others. The state, national, and world councils of churches have played a significant role in expanding the breadth of our inter-religious dialogue and in exploring how we understand and relate to other neighbors who self-identify as Christian, but are not trinitarian, such as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Jehovah’s Witnesses. On the whole, we affirm the value of pursuing inter-religious dialogue in partnership with others whenever possible.

The ELCA also participates in multi-religious coalitions, organizations, and initiatives that seek the common good. Though many religious traditions and worldviews are represented, these interactions provide opportunities for particular relationships to grow. As we are more frequently asked to articulate who we are and what we believe, multi-religious groups can also be spaces where we grow in our Lutheran self-understanding and vocation.

Occasions arise when reaching out directly as Lutherans is an important expression of our calling to love and serve our neighbor – for example, in response to an incident of religious bigotry or in pursuit of dialogue around a specific theological issue. Expanding and at the same time deepening our relations with our neighbors of other religions is a growing opportunity for the ELCA, and for the ecumenical movement as a whole. As our neighborhoods come to reflect greater religious diversity, our call to love and serve our neighbors also expands.

#### *Relating to neighbors who are not religious*

This declaration focuses on neighbors who practice other religions. However, many people in the United States are religiously unaffiliated. Some, such as atheists or secular humanists, have rejected religion and a belief in God; others have affirmed individual spirituality over institutional and/or church affiliation. As Lutherans, we affirm that we are called to build relationships with all our neighbors. Many who are unaffiliated are longing to see Christians practicing the generosity and love they profess and are eager to cooperate on projects that improve the larger community. Such cooperation is a way of practicing our calling, as well as a way of giving authentic witness to our faith.

#### *Pastoral considerations*

There are many pastoral considerations beyond the scope of this declaration, for example, the common reality of multi-religious family life. Therefore, the church recognizes the need for the ongoing development of appropriate pastoral aids, including guidelines for inter-religious marriages, pastoral counseling, religious education, and joint prayer services. In general, the ELCA is open to participating in inter-religious prayer



services that honor the integrity, distinctive commitments, and gifts of each tradition, and reflect prayerful understanding and careful planning.

## **VISION**

A biblical understanding of God's vision inspires our calling. The prophets received and shared this vision, and Jesus taught and embodied it.

### *A biblical vision*

God's vision is of a world in which humans and creation, in all their glorious diversity, live in unity, justice, and peace. In such a world, hope abounds, and fear no longer separates one person from another or one people from another. In this vision, "justice roll[s] down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24) and "the leaves of the tree [of life] are for the healing of the nations" (Revelation 22:2b). We envision a world in which God's grace and mercy are celebrated, and all of God's creatures and all of God's creation are regarded with value and treated with care.

The Scriptures reflect God's yearning for such a world, but they also recognize that we live between the inauguration of God's vision and its fulfillment. In the meantime, we struggle to "renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God" (*ELW*, Holy Baptism) as we experience the gift of Christ in us and the gift of the Holy Spirit calling us to celebrate every sign of reconciliation and wholeness.

As a community of faith, we are inspired to put God's vision into practice here and now, even if we can see only vague outlines of its fulfillment. We realize that we will fall short of the glory of God. Nevertheless, we live in love and hope. We seek to foster healthy relations and healthy communities in which all can flourish. We break the cycle of escalating retaliation that divides and destroys. With God's help, we seek to mend and heal the world that God so dearly and deeply loves.

Guided by God's vision and sobered by this realization, we seek, as one part of our undertaking, to achieve mutual understanding among all people of different religions and worldviews and to inspire all to work together for the common good. In doing so we give an account of the hope that is within us (1 Peter 3:15b).

### *Mutual understanding*

When we engage our religiously diverse neighbors, we can expect both a new understanding of the other and a deeper understanding and appreciation of our own Christian faith. "Mutual understanding" involves moving from factual knowledge of commonalities and differences to grasping coherence and even glimpsing beauty. In discovering how others love and cherish their religious traditions, we more deeply love and cherish our own. We empathize with the challenges and struggles others face in their religious commitments, as well as appreciate their joys. Mutual understanding opens the possibility of friendship and accepting responsibility for each other's well-being.

As such, mutual understanding does not diminish but rather deepens our own faith. Luther was clear that our understanding of faith can and does grow and change: as we experience new things in life, study and learn, and meditate and pray. Hence, a person's understanding can change without one's faith being undermined. By engaging our neighbors, we learn to articulate our own faith more clearly and to see in it things we had not noticed or appreciated before. We learn to express what being a follower of Jesus really means to us. We learn that religious differences need not erect barriers. In all of this, relying on the Holy Spirit, we experience more of the mystery and glory of God.

### *Common good*

As we strive to show forth God's vision, we are called to work toward justice and peace for all people and creation, that is, the common good. Religious diversity, when accompanied by mutual understanding and cooperation, enriches the whole. Through inter-religious relationships, we receive the gifts of our neighbors and experience more fully the exquisite realization that all are made in the image of God. A deep appreciation of the similarities and differences among religions and worldviews enhances working together for the common good. At the same time, cooperation can enhance both mutual understanding and the self-understanding of each participant. Seeking mutual understanding and the common good are active steps we can take toward God's vision of life abundant for all.

## **CALLING**

Our calling is a dual calling: to be faithful witnesses to Christ *and* to love God by loving and serving our neighbors. The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) stands alongside the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:34-40).

Our Lutheran tradition distinguishes between "two kingdoms" of God. When Luther made this distinction, he was thinking not of two separate geographical territories but of two different ways, or "rules," in which God interacts with humans. These include: 1) showing mercy, overcoming our alienation, and giving us new life through Jesus Christ and 2) working through social, political, and economic institutions and authorities to safeguard human life and welfare.

Sharing the good news, or evangelism, contributes to the first rule. We do this in response to the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). Serving the community, which includes inter-religious relations, contributes to the second. We do this in gratitude for God's mercy and in response to the Great Commandment to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:39). In both rules, or kingdoms, God calls us to approach all relationships with love, grace, mercy, and a concern for distributive and restorative justice.

### *Evangelism*

We are committed to engaging our neighbors without compromising who we are or the fullness of the calling we have received. An integral part of this calling is to be witnesses to Christ (Acts 1:8)—to evangelize. As

understood by Lutherans, evangelism is sharing through our lives the joy of the good news of what God has done in and through Christ.

This sharing occurs in many ways, in word and in deed—always respecting the dignity of the other and always offered in love. It occurs best in the context of an already established relationship of trust. We acknowledge that at times we have betrayed this trust, substituting manipulation and coercion for evangelism. As we express the power of life in Christ, we do so in ways that honor our convictions that every human is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and that all of creation is good (Genesis 1:31).

We also rely on the Spirit, who alone creates faith. As we are taught in Luther's Small Catechism, "by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel [and] enlightened me with his gifts" (*ELW*, Explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed). We are saved by grace, unable to do anything to contribute to our own salvation, or to that of others.

Our faith compels us to respond to the gift we have received through the Spirit by freely and joyfully sharing the good news. We have claimed this evangelical commitment, and it is reflected even in our name. We know that "the Gospel is more than human recollection of, or our confession about, what God has done in the past. ... It is proclamation with the power of God's deed in Christ and in his resurrection (2 Corinthians 5:19b-21), an event that opens to us the future of God's eternal love" ("A Declaration of Ecumenical Commitment," 1991).

With such a sure and certain promise, we anticipate that not only may God work through others, God may also work through us when we witness to a God of generosity and forgiveness, a God who loves humans, values their freedom, and works for their wholeness. As we engage our neighbors in the fullness of who we are and in whom we believe, we expect that so, too, will our partners share with us their deepest selves and convictions.

### *Inter-religious relations*

Having received both the Great Commission and the Great Commandment, we recognize that inter-religious relations are part of our calling to love the neighbor. We are called by God and freed in Christ to witness to the life-changing news of Jesus Christ and to love and serve our neighbors in a multi-religious world. This vocation includes loving and serving both those who share our faith in Jesus Christ and those who do not. It is our duty and joy to extend God's love, grace, mercy, and justice to all those who are made in the image of God and to the whole of creation. In other words, we are called to inter-religious engagement because we are Lutheran. We live out this calling in three ways.

#### *Love our neighbor*

Central to the Lutheran tradition is every person's calling, or vocation, to love and serve God and our neighbor. As Luther reminded us, God asks that we direct our gratitude for God's generosity outward

to others rather than upward in activities intended to please God. Luther called this our vocation. Alongside “grace alone,” this was arguably his second most important teaching. Vocation affects every area of life. Our vocation, our calling to be a neighbor, excludes no one, even those whose religion is different from our own. Commenting on the parable of the Good Samaritan, Martin Luther defined the neighbor this way: “Now our neighbor is any human being, especially one who needs our help” (Martin Luther, “Letters to Galatians, 1535,” *Luther’s Works*). We are to extend God’s mercy to all, and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Luke 10:25-37, Matthew 19:19).

### *Serve (alongside) our neighbor*

Our vocation includes service to the individual neighbor and to the community as a whole. To know how to best serve the community, we need to understand what benefits all parts of that community. This means reaching out to neighbors across the boundaries of religion, race, ethnicity, gender, and class. Our vocation also includes serving *alongside* our neighbor, as we respond together to meet the needs of others. While we may not necessarily share the same religious inspiration for doing so, our shared vision for peace and justice leads us to engage in service for the sake of the world.

### *Live in solidarity with our neighbor*

Being a neighbor can be risky. When power is abused, and fear grips a community or a nation, standing up for those who are being targeted or excluded takes courage. We are called to exhibit this courage and take this risk. In the face of social pressures that make us feel paralyzed, our calling includes developing a sense of agency—that is, a sense that each of us can make a difference. Our attention needs to be focused on our God-given gifts and responsibilities rather than on the many impediments to acting on behalf of those who are being maligned or harassed or harmed, recognizing that some of our neighbors are experiencing multiple forms of oppression at once. For all of this, a support community of fellow believers and inter-religious partners can make an empowering difference.

In the United States, many Christians live in neighborhoods that are predominantly Christian, where social expectations, such as holidays, school vacations, work rules, and the clothes we wear, have accommodated their beliefs and practices. The same is often not true for our neighbors who practice other religions or those who practice no religion at all. They can be at a disadvantage and made to feel like outsiders. As a result, we are called to be sensitive toward our neighbors of other religions and worldviews, engaging them in the spirit of accompaniment. This includes listening and learning, giving and receiving. It also means recognizing that other religions are organized differently, sometimes with very few or no structures corresponding to our own. Assumptions about cultural norms, affecting both ourselves and our neighbors, need to be constantly identified and avoided. Determining together the right pace for building and deepening partnerships is a way in which we can begin to practice mutual hospitality and live in solidarity with our neighbor.

Our calling is to be both faithful witnesses and good neighbors. We enter into this calling in a spirit of humility and self-criticism, repentant of our past mistakes, anticipating that we will continue to fall short of God's vision, and committed to the justice, peace, and well-being of our neighbors. We accept that we will have unanswered questions about how God is working in and through our neighbors of other religions and even in and through us. Yet, we anticipate that in loving, serving, and standing in solidarity with our neighbors, we will experience the presence of God, participate in building a more just and peaceful world, and find our faith enriched.

## COMMITMENTS

We participate in God's mission in an increasingly multi-religious world. Locally and globally, there are examples of religious communities coexisting peacefully but also examples of conflict, violence, discrimination, bigotry, intolerance, and persecution. In the midst of this, God has entrusted to us a vision of unity, justice, and peace. Therefore, in faithful response to God's love in Christ Jesus, we are called and committed to:

- **Seek mutual understanding** with our neighbors of other religions and worldviews.
- **Cooperate** with our neighbors of other religions and worldviews as instruments of God's justice and peace.

Across the ELCA, the form of our inter-religious relations will vary depending on context. As a church, we hold these commitments in common as a policy to guide our work and as a measure of accountability to our inter-religious partners.

1. The ELCA will pray for the well-being of our wonderfully diverse human family, including our neighbors of other religions and worldviews (*ELW*, Prayer for the Human Family, p. 79).
2. The ELCA will articulate why we both cherish the gospel, Scripture, the creeds, and confessions at the core of our Christian identity and Lutheran self-understanding and seek to understand our neighbor's core identity and self-understanding in a spirit of mutual respect ("Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct," the World Council of Churches, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue & World Evangelical Alliance, 2011).
3. The ELCA will witness to the power of life in Christ in and through our daily lives. We will seek to be ethical, transparent, and concerned for the integrity of our neighbor's rights and religious sensibilities as we share our faith with others (Report from Inter-Religious Consultation on Conversion, World Council of Churches, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 2006).
4. The ELCA, in dialogue with our partners, will seek to understand the religions of the world so as to enhance mutual understanding as well as to be able to identify the misuse of any religion to justify oppression, such as violence, genocide, or terrorism.
5. The ELCA will seek to know our neighbors in order to overcome stereotypes about them, "to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light" (Small Catechism, Eighth Commandment).
6. The ELCA will explore and encourage inter-religious friendship, accompaniment, and partnership with all who seek justice, peace, human wholeness, and the well-being of creation (ELCA Constitution, Chapter 4.03.f).

7. The ELCA will, whenever possible, work with other Christians and through ecumenical and inter-religious coalitions in its quest for inter-religious understanding and cooperation (“Lund Principle,” 1952).
8. The ELCA will seek counsel from other religious groups in its discernment of and advocacy for the common good.
9. The ELCA will defend the full participation of all in our religiously diverse society, “strengthening public space as a just place for all” regardless of religion or worldview (“The Church in the Public Space: A Statement of The Lutheran World Federation,” 2016).
10. The ELCA will defend human rights and oppose all forms of religious bigotry, violence, discrimination, and persecution and stand in solidarity with those who experience them, whether they are Christian or of another religion or worldview (“Human Rights” ELCA Social Message, 2017; “For Peace in God’s World” ELCA Social Statement, 1995; “Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture” ELCA Social Statement, 1993; “Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective” ELCA Social Statement, 1991).
11. The ELCA will confess when our words or deeds (or lack thereof) cause offense, harm, or violence to our neighbors of other religions and worldviews and will repent and seek forgiveness from God and reconciliation with our neighbors (“Luther, Lutheranism, and Jews,” The Lutheran World Federation, 1984; ELCA “Declaration to the Jewish Community,” 1994; ELCA “Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery,” 2016).
12. The ELCA will produce study and dialogue materials and pastoral guidelines for understanding and engaging with our neighbors of other religions and worldviews and seek counsel from inter-religious partners in the development of such resources.

## **AFTERWORD: BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS**

As a policy statement, this document seeks to provide a common framework for inter-religious relations across the ELCA. This work takes a variety of forms and moves in differing directions. That is, dialogue can foster study, and study can lead to dialogue. Conversation can lead to cooperation, and cooperation can foster dialogue. Group experiences can produce one-to-one relationships, and one-to-one relationships can lead to group encounters. Whatever form inter-religious relations takes, the goal should be to achieve ever-deeper mutual understanding and to maximize cooperation for the sake of the world, and all of creation.

Many ELCA members and participants have experience with inter-religious relations. Their good work opens opportunities for us to replicate or to join rather than needing to invent or to initiate. It is not possible to provide a comprehensive list of these activities. Food banks, social service projects, and racial and economic justice work, when undertaken cooperatively with our neighbors of other religions and worldviews, are examples. So are advocacy endeavors, such as working for the care of creation or the reduction of HIV and AIDS. Some congregations share their buildings with other religious communities and find the relationship mutually enriching. ELCA colleges and seminaries have faculty, students, and courses that reflect religious diversity. They also have programs and groups that seek to foster sensitivity to religious difference and competencies for vocational living in a multi-religious world. When welcoming and receiving refugees as new neighbors, Lutherans

have carefully and compassionately tended to the important dimensions of religion and culture. For more examples, see *Engaging Others, Knowing Ourselves: A Lutheran Calling in a Multi-Religious World* (Lutheran University Press, 2016).

While the framework offered by this policy statement is flexible, it is also firmly rooted in the scriptural, confessional, and theological witness of the Lutheran tradition. While we may undertake our calling to inter-religious relations in various contexts and ways, we do so undergirded by what we hold in common. Therefore, this declaration will close with an exploration of two key questions: “What do the Scriptures say about people of other religions?” and “What are some of the Lutheran convictions that influence our calling?”

## WHAT DO THE SCRIPTURES SAY ABOUT PEOPLE OF OTHER RELIGIONS?

### *God’s vision*

God’s revelation has entrusted to us a vision of whole, healthy relationships among humans, between humans and the whole of creation, and between humans and God. Several passages in the Bible help us to see God’s vision more clearly. We think of the wolf lying down with the lamb; swords beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks; workers able to enjoy the fruits of the trees they have planted; people turning the other cheek and going the second mile; and a city with its gates wide open for all, with plenty of food, water, and medicine, and with God so close that no special building is needed (Isaiah 2:4, 65:21-22; Matthew 5:39-41; Revelation 21:22, 25 and 22:1-2).

In light of God’s vision, our calling is to help each other, and our neighbors, to make it manifest. With our lives, we become signs of this vision; through our whole, healthy relationships we come to see it more clearly. Our calling to live out this vision includes our relationships with our neighbors of other religions and worldviews. Every time we initiate, restore, heal, and embody such relationships, we take a step, however feebly, toward the wholeness that God intends. Our hope for the realization of God’s vision guides and supports our calling and commitments.

### *Other religions in the Bible*

The Bible contains no uniform perspective regarding people of other religions. In some cases, the leaders of Israel try to draw a sharp line between the Israelites and their neighbors. In other cases, God is portrayed as working through neighbors who practice other religions. There are numerous examples:

- Moses receives valuable advice from Jethro, a priest of Midian, not an Israelite, who also happens to be his father-in-law (Exodus 18).
- Cyrus of Persia, who did not worship the God of Israel, is “anointed” by God to deliver the Israelites from exile (Isaiah 45:1).
- Jesus encounters a Canaanite woman and is moved by her faith to heal her daughter (Matthew 15:27).
- Jesus responds to the needs of a Roman centurion, a commander within the occupying forces—not likely a person who practiced Judaism (Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10).

- In the story of Abimelech, Abraham, and Sarah, it is the outsider Abimelech who listens to God and does what is right (Genesis 20).
- The Canaanite named Rahab hides the two spies Joshua sent to find out about Jericho prior to its conquest (Joshua 2).
- And the magi from the east, who likely did not practice Judaism, visit and honor the infant Jesus (Matthew 2:1-12).

These are but a few examples of how God loves and works with, in, and through people of various religions. These passages reveal the surprising truth that God at times invites Christians to learn from and even emulate people of other religions. These scriptural stories invite us to listen, ponder, and discover, from a position of humility, how God might use inter-religious relations to instruct us and challenge our faith to grow today.

#### WHAT LUTHERAN CONVICTIONS INFLUENCE OUR CALLING?

##### *Theology is relational*

Lutheran theology is relational. Our religious communication needs to be assessed on whether it restores whole relationships and opens the door to new life or whether it harms another person or disregards the value of God's creation. When said in the wrong way or in the wrong setting, even "the right words" can be harmful. The same is true for actions. They, too, need to be evaluated in terms of their benefits or their damage to others and to the larger community. So, a relational theology examines both our words and actions in terms of whether they strengthen or undermine healthy relationships. This applies to words and actions that give expression to God's love and forgiveness (in response to the Great Commission) and to words and actions that seek to aid a struggling neighbor (in response to the Great Commandment).

Another indication of a theology that is relational is the Lutheran understanding of faith as trust. Faith is relational and not simply, or even primarily, about affirming beliefs. Faith is a response to the love of God, not a prerequisite for that love.

The observation that theology is relational helps us understand why Lutheran theology so often employs paradoxes—that is, it affirms as true two seemingly contradictory statements, such as "a Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none" and "a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all" (Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian"). Other examples are that God is both hidden and revealed and that a Christian is both justified and a sinner. This capacity for paradox can also be extended to the tension we hold between our dual commitments to evangelism and inter-religious relations. These formulations seek to point beyond themselves to a deeper truth that is relational rather than propositional.

The stance of this declaration is influenced at every point by the relational character of Lutheran theology.



### *Grace without prerequisites*

This declaration affirms and celebrates the gift of new life that comes from God but does not seek to explain God's relationship with other religions. There are several reasons for this. Our Lutheran tradition has emphasized that God's grace is given as a gift without any prerequisites. When God restores relations with us, it is entirely a result of God's action, not something we have earned. As a result, we cannot know the limits of God's grace and love. Any attempt to define a limit introduces a prerequisite. Because we do not know its limits, God's remarkable generosity toward us frees us to engage in inter-religious outreach, and in this way to embody for our neighbors God's generosity. Our calling is to come to know our neighbors, to assist them, to work with them, and in doing so to see in them the image of God.

### *Limits on our knowing*

The Lutheran tradition offers other reasons for caution about our claims to know.

- Luther said that no human could know another person's relationship with God. What that person says or does gives us clues, but, ultimately, we cannot see into someone else's heart (Luther, *Bondage of the Will*).
- Similarly, Luther insisted that we cannot know the inner workings of God. God has revealed God's attitude toward us, overall purpose, and character, but the inner workings of God remain hidden. Hence, we must be careful about claiming to know God's judgments regarding another religion or the individual human beings who practice it.
- There is another reason for caution. As mentioned above, the Lutheran tradition has understood the word "faith" to mean trust rather than affirming beliefs. Hence, we also must be careful not to judge our neighbors only on the basis of their religious beliefs, as they may or may not tell us much about how our neighbors relate to God. There is no substitute for exploring together what matters most to others and to us.

The full story of the relationship between our neighbor and God is beyond our knowledge, and even our calling. In the context of inter-religious relations, we do not need answers to these questions in order to treat one another with love and respect, find ways to cooperate for the sake of the larger community, practice hospitality, or witness to the good news of God's love, forgiveness, and new life in Christ. All we know, and all we need to know, is that our neighbors are made in God's image and that we are called to love and serve them.

### *Ever-dependence on forgiveness*

Our calling to inter-religious relations depends on God's forgiveness. We need to acknowledge not only our own personal errors and omissions but also the collective errors of our tradition. These include misdeeds, such as our readiness to benefit from the conquest of American Indian people and land, chattel slavery, the treatment of the Jews during and after the Reformation, and our readiness to take up arms against those of another religion. And they include failures to reach out to people of all races, ethnicities, and cultures within our church and in society. Not only do we rely on forgiveness for the past, we also rely on forgiveness for the present and the future. Because our responsibility for others has no limits, inevitably our best efforts will fall

short, and we are likely to make new mistakes that harm others. When we engage our neighbors, we therefore rely on forgiveness as we reach out into unfamiliar territory, navigating religious and cultural differences. The promise of forgiveness sets us free to risk the unfamiliar.

### *Acknowledging suffering*

At the heart of Luther's "theology of the cross" is a unique view of God present in the person of the crucified Jesus. Jesus' suffering on the cross was a redemptive suffering for the sake of all. The Jesus who endured the cross is also present with us, all humans, and the whole creation in times of suffering (Romans 8:18-25).

This understanding of a "theology of the cross" causes us to take the reality of suffering seriously. As Christian disciples we are called to take up the cross, acting on behalf of others to seek ways to end the suffering of others, even though doing so may lead us to suffer with them. This is part of our vocation as Christians. And, when ending suffering is not possible, we are still called to accompany – to be with – those who suffer, just as in Christ God came to be with us.

Acknowledging the reality of suffering unites us not only with God but also with one another. The commonality and universality of human suffering binds us inextricably to each other. This reality influences our understanding of our vocation. When we acknowledge the suffering of those whose beliefs are different from our own and when we recognize the commonality of suffering, we find a fuller, more compassionate understanding of those who differ and a common calling to alleviate suffering wherever it exists. At the same time, when we recognize the suffering of other Christians who experience discrimination or attacks because of their religious beliefs, we can appreciate how inter-religious relations can support not only cooperation but, indeed, survival. Amid suffering of all forms, we stand together, not apart.

### *God in the world*

As we respond to our calling, we are confident that God is at work caring for all of creation, respecting human freedom and dignity, and fostering wholeness. We are sent out into the world by a God who is already at work. When we reach out to a neighbor, we are reaching out to someone who, whether the person acknowledges it or not, has already received gifts from God. In addition, just as the love of God reaches us through the words and actions of others, so our own words and actions can serve as "channels" (Luther's word) of God's gifts to others.

## **CONCLUSION AND BENEDICTION**

We are called to learn to know and understand our neighbors and to work together for their well-being. We are called to work with them to overcome the obstacles and suffering they face, and to build justice and peace for all people and for God's creation. We are called to overcome the isolation that separates neighbors from one another. Having heard the good news of Jesus Christ, we are called to live in hope and engagement, not fear and inaction.

Our calling is a responsibility, yes, and it is also a joy. Engagement with our neighbors enriches our lives and our faith. In relationship with our neighbors, we come to understand more fully the depth and breadth of the riches of God and to appreciate more deeply the wonder of God's generous love, which we experience through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We discern more accurately how to reflect God's generosity in our thinking and in our behavior. As individuals and as neighbors, we benefit from the increased health of our communities and from a world that is more just and peaceful. Authentic and mutual relationships are transformative.

May God bless the efforts of this church as we set our sights on God's vision, as we seek to respond to God's calling in our context, and as we strive to uphold these commitments.



**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

God's work. Our hands.