



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.



**WE
ARE
CHURCH**

Recommendation: "A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment"

Background

The 1989 Churchwide Assembly adopted [CA89.3.15] "Ecumenism: The Vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America" as a working document. The 1991 Churchwide Assembly adopted [CA91.3.7] its second part, "A Declaration of Ecumenical Commitment: A Policy Statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America," as the policy of this church. The declaration stated:

Ecumenism ... should not be confused with the important but distinct responsibility for the church to enter into conversations and reach greater understanding with people of other faiths. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America does engage, in a variety of ways, in this inter-faith work and needs in the future a separate, official statement to describe its commitments and aspirations in this area. When that statement is prepared, special attention must be given to the distinctiveness of Judaism.

Presiding Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton appointed an ELCA Inter-Religious Task Force in 2016 for the purpose of developing an official statement to describe this church's commitments and aspirations in its interfaith work. The task force produced a draft policy statement and conducted a review and comment period during the first six months of 2018.

The task force incorporated recommendations it received about the draft into a proposed policy statement.

Recommended for assembly action:

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

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A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment:

A policy statement of the
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

PROPOSED



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

November 2018

Dear church,

I am delighted to share with you the proposed “A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment: A policy statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.” This document comes to you bearing the wisdom of many who have participated in the process of review and revision over the past year.

From January through June, individuals, congregations, networks and institutions of this church were invited to share feedback on the draft. I am grateful for the collective wisdom that served to improve the work. Over the summer months, the drafting team worked to revise the document accordingly. On the whole, you will find a draft that is resonant with the first but also notably different. A new structure, as well as clarified content, have emerged.

In October, the ELCA Conference of Bishops strongly encouraged the ELCA Church Council to recommend the proposed policy statement for adoption by the 2019 Churchwide Assembly, and in November, the council unanimously did so. Should the Churchwide Assembly adopt this text, it will stand alongside “A Declaration of Ecumenical Commitment: A policy statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America” (1991).

It is exciting to be on the cusp of considering a common basis for our inter-religious relations across the diverse ministries and contexts of this church. I hope that you will experience renewed joy and fresh insights as you read this document. I also hope that you will be able to experience its potential as a tool to aid practical application and theological reflection in the places where you worship and serve.

This proposed declaration reflects the realities of our long-standing inter-religious relations as a church, while giving us a framework for a common articulation of our context, our calling and our commitments to this vocation. We are truly freed in Christ to engage our neighbors in this multi-religious world.

Yours in Christ,



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

3
4 **FOREWORD: HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

5
6 The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has been engaging in
7 inter-religious relations since its formation in 1988, building upon the legacy of its
8 predecessor bodies, the work of The Lutheran World Federation (LWF), and the witness
9 of our ecumenical partners.

10
11 As part of the global Lutheran communion, we wrestle with and lament Martin Luther’s
12 troubling legacy regarding inter-religious relations, especially his anti-Judaic and
13 anti-Islamic writings. Importantly, the first major inter-religious witness of this church
14 was the adoption of a “Declaration of the ELCA to the Jewish Community” (1994), which
15 repudiated Luther’s vile anti-Judaic diatribes and reached out in love and respect to the
16 Jewish community.

17
18 Over the years, our inter-religious relations have deepened and expanded. As a
19 church, we have developed educational resources, engaged in dialogue and common
20 action, defended our neighbors against religious bigotry, and cared for our various
21 partnerships. While we have focused on Jewish and Muslim relations, we have also
22 participated in organizations and efforts that reflect the broader diversity of religions
23 and worldviews in the United States and globally.

24
25 Our 1991 policy statement, “A Declaration of Ecumenical Commitment,” called for “a
26 separate, official statement” that would reflect the “distinct responsibility for the church
27 to enter into conversations and reach deeper understanding with people of other
28 faiths.” This inter-religious policy statement seeks to fulfill this recommendation, and
29 complements our church’s ecumenical policy statement.

30
31 Whenever possible, the ELCA cooperates with other Christians in building relations with
32 those of other religions and worldviews. Councils of churches are an important avenue
33 of dialogue and common action. While not all Christians are interested in or supportive
34 of inter-religious relations, this commitment is receiving increased attention in many
35 churches. Our Christian companions have greatly enhanced our journey. In fact, the
36 inter-religious statements of our ecumenical partners have informed the development of
37 this document.

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

43
44 As used in this document, the word “religion” refers to various forms of beliefs and
45 practices, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism,
46 Taoism, and traditional indigenous spiritualities. Whenever “neighbor” is used, it refers
47 to all those who profess a religion, as well as those who do not, including those who
48 consider themselves atheists or agnostics or ascribe to other worldviews that are not
49 explicitly religious. “We” refers to the individual members and participants, as well
50 as to the congregations and ministries of the whole church. This document seeks to
51 address a Lutheran approach to understanding and engaging with our neighbors in a
52 multi-religious, pluralistic context.

53
54 As descriptions of the teachings of other religions and worldviews are readily available
55 elsewhere, this policy statement does not seek to explain or categorize them. Neither
56 does it seek to provide a theology of world religions. Instead, its focus is on our dual
57 calling to witness to Christ and to love our neighbor. As such, this document serves
58 as an invitation to individuals, congregations, ministries, institutions, and expressions
59 of the ELCA to engage constructively with our neighbors of other religions and
60 worldviews. In this declaration, our neighbors may also find greater clarity about who
61 we are, what they can expect of us, and why and how our Christian faith and Lutheran
62 self-understanding compel us into dialogue and common action.

63
64 In all of this, may greater understanding and cooperation throughout the *Oikoumene*
65 – the whole inhabited earth – enhance the justice, peace, and life abundant that God
66 intends for us all.

67
68 **INTRODUCTION**

69
70 As the ELCA, we enter into inter-religious relations on the basis of our Christian identity
71 and Lutheran self-understanding. As we engage with our neighbors of other religions and
72 worldviews, it is important that we clearly articulate who we are, what we believe, and why.

73
74 “This church confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Gospel as the
75 power of God for the salvation of all who believe” (ELCA Constitution, Chapter 2).
76 As a confessional church, we understand ourselves to be evangelical, catholic, and

77 ecumenical. “To be *evangelical* means to be committed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
78 ... To be *catholic* means to be committed to the fullness of the apostolic faith and its
79 creedal, doctrinal articulation for the entire world. ... To be *ecumenical* means to be
80 committed to the oneness to which God calls the world in the saving gift of Jesus Christ”
81 (“A Declaration of Ecumenical Commitment,” 1991).

82
83 “Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything was made
84 and through whose life, death, and resurrection God fashions a new creation”
85 (ELCA Constitution, Chapter 2). This is the gospel – the good news of what God has
86 done, is doing, and will do for all in Christ. It is a gift from God, freely given, without any
87 requirements that need to be fulfilled. “Sharing the good news,” or evangelism, is using
88 words and deeds to pass this life-changing message along to others. We describe this as
89 the work of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). As witnesses to the good news of
90 Jesus Christ, we entrust to the Holy Spirit the work of turning that witness into faith.

91
92 With the work of being a witness comes an invitation to love God and to love and
93 serve the neighbor, which is known as the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:34-40).
94 This neighborly response is not fueled simply by human kindness. We believe that
95 God entrusts to us as “in clay jars” (2 Corinthians 4:7) the “message of reconciliation”
96 for all (2 Corinthians 5:19). We believe that “Christ, our peace, has put an end to the
97 hostility of race, ethnicity, gender, and economic class” (“Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity,
98 and Culture,” ELCA social statement, 1993, p. 1). In a deeply divided world, and as a
99 faithful response to Christ’s message of reconciliation, we seek right, peaceful, and just
100 relationships with all our neighbors, including those of other religions and worldviews.
101 We do this as an expression of our Christian faith, and as a continuation of the covenant
102 God made with us in holy baptism “to serve all people, following the example of Jesus,
103 and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)*,
104 Affirmation of Baptism).

105

106 **CONTEXT**

107

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

110

111 *Encountering religious diversity*

112

113 Religious diversity has continually shaped American society, starting with the indigenous
114 peoples of this land. Though many colonizers came to this land in search of religious
115 freedom, they systematically and violently denied it to the indigenous peoples already here.

116 We publicly confess this sin in our 2016 ELCA “Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery,”
117 which was an important step in a long path toward “repentance and reconciliation to native
118 nations in this country for damage done in the name of Christianity.”
119

120 Every chapter of U.S. history has had a lasting impact on our identity as a religiously
121 diverse nation. This includes our sinful history of slavery, as well as various waves of
122 migration and immigration. In recent decades, this history, as well as new patterns of
123 forced displacement and new kinds of religious affiliation, has resulted in rapid and
124 radical changes to our multi-religious landscape. Christians in the United States are now
125 more likely than in previous generations to encounter neighbors of other religions and
126 worldviews in their communities, schools, workplaces, civic spaces, circles of friends,
127 and families.
128

129 *Responding to our context*

130

131 As a church, we must consider anew our calling and commitments in a multi-religious
132 world. Many Lutherans and Lutheran ministries already participate in inter-religious
133 activities such as theological dialogue, advocacy, and service, which build mutual
134 understanding and advance the common good, defined as justice and peace for all of
135 creation. As Lutherans, we are called to move from mere coexistence to a more robust
136 engagement. It is through authentic, mutual relationships that we can truly love our
137 neighbors as people made in the image of God. This commitment includes confronting
138 whenever possible the often-compounding oppressions experienced by people of various
139 religions and worldviews on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, and class.
140

141 *Fear and division*

142

143 There are many ways individuals and communities can respond to religious
144 difference. The most harmful responses are grounded in ignorance and fear,
145 which can breed stereotypes. In the extreme, these responses can fuel incidents
146 of religious bigotry, restrict religious freedoms, and arouse conflicts that are
147 destructive of life, property, and the environment.
148

149 We live in a context of ongoing anti-Muslim bigotry and anti-Semitism, as well as
150 incidents of harassment and violence directed against these and other minority
151 religious and ethnic communities. In some cases, the words and deeds of a
152 few are used to discredit entire religious communities. Unfortunately, in every
153 religion, Christianity included, some people distort, misuse, or abuse religion to
154 incite violence and cause harm. We ought not allow these voices to determine or

155 influence our perception of our neighbors. The ELCA must play an active role
156 in dispelling fear of our neighbors, opposing religious bigotry, and standing with
157 those who are the targets of fear, discrimination, hatred, and violence.

158

159 *Inaction*

160

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

173

174 *Active engagement*

175

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

181

182 *Expanding our inter-religious commitments*

183

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

191

192 This “Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment” reaffirms the 1994 “Declaration of the
193 ELCA to the Jewish Community.” At the same time, it extends the scope of our calling

194 to additional neighbors too – including those of other religions, those who identify with
195 multiple religious and spiritual traditions, and those who are not religious.

196

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

204

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

211

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

219

220 *Relating to neighbors who are not religious*

221

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

230 *Pastoral considerations*

231

232 There are many pastoral considerations beyond the scope of this declaration, for
233 example, the common reality of multi-religious family life. Therefore, the church
234 recognizes the need for the ongoing development of appropriate pastoral aids, including
235 guidelines for inter-religious marriages, pastoral counseling, religious education, and
236 joint prayer services. In general, the ELCA is open to participating in inter-religious
237 prayer services that honor the integrity, distinctive commitments, and gifts of each
238 tradition, and reflect prayerful understanding and careful planning.

239

240 **VISION**

241

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

244

245 *A biblical vision*

246

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

254

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

260

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

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

271

272 *Mutual understanding*

273

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

282

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

291

292 *Common good*

293

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

304 **CALLING**

305

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

309

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

316

317 Sharing the good news, or evangelism, contributes to the first rule. We do this in
318 response to the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-10). Serving the community, which
319 includes inter-religious relations, contributes to the second. We do this in gratitude
320 for God’s mercy and in response to the Great Commandment to love God and to love
321 our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:39). In both rules, or kingdoms, God calls us to
322 approach all relationships with love, grace, mercy, and a concern for distributive and
323 restorative justice.

324

325 *Evangelism*

326

327 We are committed to engaging our neighbors without compromising who we are or the
328 fullness of the calling we have received. An integral part of this calling is to be witnesses
329 to Christ (Acts 1:8)—to evangelize. As understood by Lutherans, evangelism is sharing
330 through our lives the joy of the good news of what God has done in and through Christ.

331

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

338

339 We also rely on the Spirit, who alone creates faith. As we are taught in Luther’s Small
340 Catechism, “by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my
341 Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel [and]
342 enlightened me with his gifts” (*ELW*, Explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles’

343 Creed). We are saved by grace, unable to do anything to contribute to our own salvation,
344 or to that of others.

345

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

353

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

360

361 *Inter-religious relations*

362

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

371

372 *Love our neighbor*

373

374 Central to the Lutheran tradition is every person’s calling, or vocation, to love
375 and serve God and our neighbor. As Luther reminded us, God asks that we
376 direct our gratitude for God’s generosity outward to others rather than upward
377 in activities intended to please God. Luther called this our vocation. Alongside
378 “grace alone,” this was arguably his second most important teaching. Vocation
379 affects every area of life. Our vocation, our calling to be a neighbor, excludes
380 no one, even those whose religion is different from our own. Commenting on
381 the parable of the Good Samaritan, Martin Luther defined the neighbor this

382 way: “Now our neighbor is any human being, especially one who needs our
383 help” (Martin Luther, “Letters to Galatians, 1535,” *Luther’s Works*). We are to
384 extend God’s mercy to all, and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Luke 10:25-37,
385 Matthew 19:19).

386

387 *Serve (alongside) our neighbor*

388

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

397

398 *Live in solidarity with our neighbor*

399

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

411

412 In the United States, many Christians live in neighborhoods that are predominantly
413 Christian, where social expectations, such as holidays, school vacations, work rules,
414 and the clothes we wear, have accommodated their beliefs and practices. The same is
415 often not true for our neighbors who practice other religions or those who practice
416 no religion at all. They can be at a disadvantage and made to feel like outsiders. As
417 a result, we are called to be sensitive toward our neighbors of other religions and
418 worldviews, engaging them in the spirit of accompaniment. This includes listening
419 and learning, giving and receiving. It also means recognizing that other religions
420 are organized differently, sometimes with very few or no structures corresponding

421 to our own. Assumptions about cultural norms, affecting both ourselves and our
422 neighbors, need to be constantly identified and avoided. Determining together the
423 right pace for building and deepening partnerships is a way in which we can begin to
424 practice mutual hospitality and live in solidarity with our neighbor.

425

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

434

435 **COMMITMENTS**

436

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

442

- 443 • **Seek mutual understanding** with our neighbors of other religions and
444 worldviews.
- 445 • **Cooperate** with our neighbors of other religions and worldviews as instruments
446 of God’s justice and peace.

447

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

451

- 452 1. The ELCA will pray for the well-being of our wonderfully diverse human family,
453 including our neighbors of other religions and worldviews (*ELW*, Prayer for the
454 Human Family, p. 79).
- 455 2. The ELCA will articulate why we both cherish the gospel, Scripture, the creeds, and
456 confessions at the core of our Christian identity and Lutheran self-understanding
457 and seek to understand our neighbor’s core identity and self-understanding
458 in a spirit of mutual respect (“Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World:
459 Recommendations for Conduct,” the World Council of Churches, Pontifical Council

- 460 for Interreligious Dialogue & World Evangelical Alliance, 2011).
- 461 3. The ELCA will witness to the power of life in Christ in and through our daily
462 lives. We will seek to be ethical, transparent, and concerned for the integrity
463 of our neighbor's rights and religious sensibilities as we share our faith with
464 others (Report from Inter-Religious Consultation on Conversion, World Council of
465 Churches, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 2006).
- 466 4. The ELCA, in dialogue with our partners, will seek to understand the religions
467 of the world so as to enhance mutual understanding as well as to be able to
468 identify the misuse of any religion to justify oppression, such as violence,
469 genocide, or terrorism.
- 470 5. The ELCA will seek to know our neighbors in order to overcome stereotypes
471 about them, "to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret
472 everything they do in the best possible light" (Small Catechism, Eighth
473 Commandment).
- 474 6. The ELCA will explore and encourage inter-religious friendship, accompaniment,
475 and partnership with all who seek justice, peace, human wholeness, and the
476 well-being of creation (ELCA Constitution, Chapter 4.03.f).
- 477 7. The ELCA will, whenever possible, work with other Christians and through
478 ecumenical and inter-religious coalitions in its quest for inter-religious
479 understanding and cooperation ("Lund Principle," 1952).
- 480 8. The ELCA will seek counsel from other religious groups in its discernment of and
481 advocacy for the common good.
- 482 9. The ELCA will defend the full participation of all in our religiously diverse society,
483 "strengthening public space as a just place for all" regardless of religion or
484 worldview ("The Church in the Public Space: A Statement of The Lutheran World
485 Federation," 2016).
- 486 10. The ELCA will defend human rights and oppose all forms of religious bigotry,
487 violence, discrimination, and persecution and stand in solidarity with those who
488 experience them, whether they are Christian or of another religion or worldview
489 ("Human Rights" ELCA Social Message, 2017; "For Peace in God's World" ELCA
490 Social Statement, 1995; "Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture" ELCA
491 Social Statement, 1993; "Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective" ELCA Social
492 Statement, 1991).
- 493 11. The ELCA will confess when our words or deeds (or lack thereof) cause offense,
494 harm, or violence to our neighbors of other religions and worldviews and will
495 repent and seek forgiveness from God and reconciliation with our neighbors
496 ("Luther, Lutheranism, and Jews," The Lutheran World Federation, 1984; ELCA
497 "Declaration to the Jewish Community," 1994; ELCA "Repudiation of the Doctrine
498 of Discovery," 2016).

499 12. The ELCA will produce study and dialogue materials and pastoral guidelines for
500 understanding and engaging with our neighbors of other religions and worldviews
501 and seek counsel from inter-religious partners in the development of such
502 resources.

503

504 **AFTERWORD: BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS**

505

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

514

515 Many ELCA members and participants have experience with inter-religious relations. Their
516 good work opens opportunities for us to replicate or to join rather than needing to invent
517 or to initiate. It is not possible to provide a comprehensive list of these activities. Food
518 banks, social service projects, and racial and economic justice work, when undertaken
519 cooperatively with our neighbors of other religions and worldviews, are examples. So are
520 advocacy endeavors, such as working for the care of creation or the reduction of HIV
521 and AIDS. Some congregations share their buildings with other religious communities
522 and find the relationship mutually enriching. ELCA colleges and seminaries have faculty,
523 students, and courses that reflect religious diversity. They also have programs and groups
524 that seek to foster sensitivity to religious difference and competencies for vocational living
525 in a multi-religious world. When welcoming and receiving refugees as new neighbors,
526 Lutherans have carefully and compassionately tended to the important dimensions of
527 religion and culture. For more examples, see *Engaging Others, Knowing Ourselves: A
528 Lutheran Calling in a Multi-Religious World* (Lutheran University Press, 2016).

529

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

537

538 *God's vision*

539

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

548

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

556

557 *Other religions in the Bible*

558

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

563

- 564 • Moses receives valuable advice from Jethro, a priest of Midian, not an Israelite,
565 who also happens to be his father-in-law (Exodus 18).
- 566 • Cyrus of Persia, who did not worship the God of Israel, is "anointed" by God to
567 deliver the Israelites from exile (Isaiah 45:1).
- 568 • Jesus encounters a Canaanite woman and is moved by her faith to heal her
569 daughter (Matthew 15:27).
- 570 • Jesus responds to the needs of a Roman centurion, a commander within the
571 occupying forces—not likely a person who practiced Judaism (Matthew 8:5-13 and
572 Luke 7:1-10).
- 573 • In the story of Abimelech, Abraham, and Sarah, it is the outsider Abimelech who
574 listens to God and does what is right (Genesis 20).

- 575 • The Canaanite named Rahab hides the two spies Joshua sent to find out about
576 Jericho prior to its conquest (Joshua 2).
577 • And the magi from the east, who likely did not practice Judaism, visit and honor
578 the infant Jesus (Matthew 2:1-12).

579

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

585

586 WHAT LUTHERAN CONVICTIONS INFLUENCE OUR CALLING?

587

588 *Theology is relational*

589

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

600

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

604

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

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

616

617 *Grace without prerequisites*

618

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

629

630 *Limits on our knowing*

631

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

633

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

648

649 The full story of the relationship between our neighbor and God is beyond our
650 knowledge, and even our calling. In the context of inter-religious relations, we do not
651 need answers to these questions in order to treat one another with love and respect, find
652 ways to cooperate for the sake of the larger community, practice hospitality, or witness

653 to the good news of God's love, forgiveness, and new life in Christ. All we know, and all
654 we need to know, is that our neighbors are made in God's image and that we are called
655 to love and serve them.

656

657 *Ever-depending on forgiveness*

658

659 Our calling to inter-religious relations depends on God's forgiveness. We need to
660 acknowledge not only our own personal errors and omissions but also the collective
661 errors of our tradition. These include misdeeds, such as our readiness to benefit from
662 the conquest of American Indian people and land, chattel slavery, the treatment of
663 the Jews during and after the Reformation, and our readiness to take up arms against
664 those of another religion. And they include failures to reach out to people of all races,
665 ethnicities, and cultures within our church and in society. Not only do we rely on
666 forgiveness for the past, we also rely on forgiveness for the present and the future.
667 Because our responsibility for others has no limits, inevitably our best efforts will fall
668 short, and we are likely to make new mistakes that harm others. When we engage our
669 neighbors, we therefore rely on forgiveness as we reach out into unfamiliar territory,
670 navigating religious and cultural differences. The promise of forgiveness sets us free to
671 risk the unfamiliar.

672

673 *Acknowledging suffering*

674

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

679

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

686

687 Acknowledging the reality of suffering unites us not only with God but also with one
688 another. The commonality and universality of human suffering binds us inextricably
689 to each other. This reality influences our understanding of our vocation. When we
690 acknowledge the suffering of those whose beliefs are different from our own and
691 when we recognize the commonality of suffering, we find a fuller, more compassionate

692 understanding of those who differ and a common calling to alleviate suffering wherever
693 it exists. At the same time, when we recognize the suffering of other Christians who
694 experience discrimination or attacks because of their religious beliefs, we can appreciate
695 how inter-religious relations can support not only cooperation but, indeed, survival.
696 Amid suffering of all forms, we stand together, not apart.

697

698 *God in the world*

699

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

707

708 **CONCLUSION AND BENEDICTION**

709

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

716

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

725

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

Notes



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.