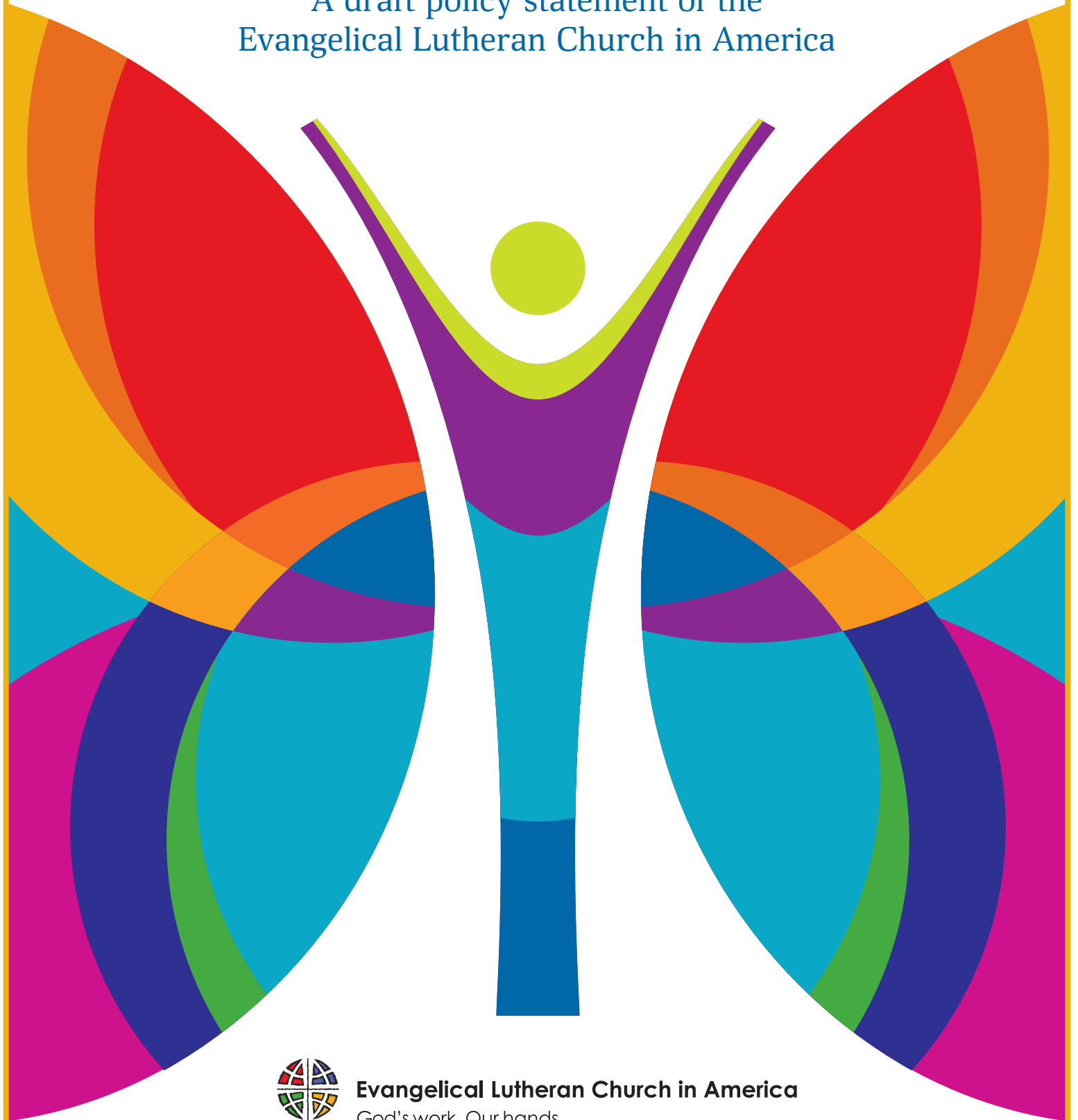


A Declaration of Our Inter-Religious Commitment:

A draft policy statement of the
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



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

Jan. 8, 2018

Dear Church,

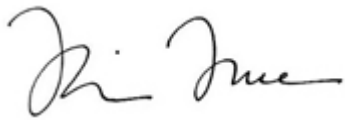
Two years ago Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton invited 11 of us to serve on a task force to draft a policy statement on inter-religious relations. It has been a privilege to work together to craft the document that now comes to you for your review and comment.

Each member of the task force brought both expertise in an aspect of inter-religious engagement and personal experience in working with and learning from those in other religious traditions. Our own meetings have been enriched by lively and thoughtful discussion of the themes and commitments incorporated in this document.

We hope that you will experience similar joy and fresh learning as you read these pages and discuss these ideas with others in your congregation, classroom or circle of friends. We are eager to receive your feedback and are grateful to be part of a church that invites wisdom from people of all ages and backgrounds.

On behalf of the task force, I thank you for taking time to read and reflect on what is presented here. May this discernment process also help you articulate your deepest convictions as a person of faith.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Patricia J. Lull". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "P" and "J".

The Rev. Patricia J. Lull
Bishop, Saint Paul Area Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Inter-Religious Task Force Participants

The Rev. Patricia J. Lull (chair)

Bishop, Saint Paul Area Synod

Katie Bringman Baxter

Vice President of Program Strategy, Interfaith Youth Core

Dr. Jacqueline Bussie

Professor of Religion, Concordia College

Director, Forum on Faith and Life

The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton

Presiding Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Rahuldeep Singh Gill, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Religion, California Lutheran University

Campus Interfaith Strategist

William Horne

Vice President, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Rev. Dr. Darrell H. Jodock

Chair, ELCA Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations

Carol Schersten LaHurd, Ph.D.

ELCA Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Muslim Relations

Distinguished Affiliate Professor, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

The Rev. Peg Schultz-Akerson

ELCA Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations

Lutheran Church of The Master, Los Angeles, Calif.

The Rev. Dr. Mark Swanson

Chair, ELCA Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Muslim Relations

Professor of Christian-Muslim Studies and Interfaith Relations, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

The Rev. Lamont Anthony Wells

President, African Descent Lutheran Association

Assistant to the Bishop for Evangelism, Director for Evangelical Mission, Metropolitan New York Synod

Kathryn Mary Lohre (staff)

Assistant to the Presiding Bishop

Executive, Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations & Theological Discernment

Reader's introduction and tips for individual and group study

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) Inter-Religious Task Force, appointed by Presiding Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton in 2016, is preparing an inter-religious policy statement to be considered by the 2019 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. This draft of "A Declaration of Our Inter-Religious Commitment" is an invitation to everyone in the ELCA to join in conversation and discernment about our inter-religious calling and commitments.

There are several ways to participate in the process:

1. Study, discuss, comment: You are invited to study, discuss and use the online response form to share your thoughts in response to the draft. This can be done by individuals or as part of a study group. The response form is available online. [Click here](#) to take the survey.
2. Participate in a hearing: Some synods and ELCA institutions will be holding hearings, and you might attend one in your area. If you are interested, please speak to your synod office, [LEIRN representative](#) or send an email to eirinfo@elca.org.

The comment period will close on June 30, 2018.

This draft represents the best thinking of the task force to date. This draft comes with the unanimous support of the task force for sharing with our church for discussion. It follows and grows out of the long-time inter-religious relations of the ELCA and its predecessor bodies, as well as the contemporary case studies of inter-religious relations lifted up in the 2016 publication *Engaging Others, Knowing Ourselves: A Lutheran Calling in a Multi-Religious World* (Lutheran University Press).

Your response to this draft, along with that of many others across this church, is vital to the process of developing a proposed policy statement that will be considered by the 2019 Churchwide Assembly. Talking together is important in our life together as part of Christ's body. Your feedback will inform the task force's thinking as it revises this draft to create a proposed policy statement to be considered first by the ELCA Church Council and then by the 2019 Churchwide Assembly.

In preparing to lead discussion sessions, questions like these may help guide the discussion:

- What in each section speaks to your experience? In what ways?
- What do you think are the strengths of each section? Weaknesses?
- What else needs to be said? How should it be said differently?
- What advice do you have for the task force, keeping in mind that it is charged with writing a policy statement for the whole ELCA?

Tips for leading the sessions:

- Keep in mind that discussing matters related to inter-religious relations require a degree of sensitivity.
- Invite people of all genders, ages and perspectives to join the discussion. Sometimes people just need to be invited to feel welcome.
- Leaders do not need to be pastors. Discussion facilitators from within the congregation or group can be recruited and briefed.
- Read and become familiar with the content of the entire draft before beginning a study session.
- Be prepared to take some notes or assign a recorder to capture ideas and thoughts during the discussion. This may be especially helpful when you get to the online response form.

Thank you for your prayerful participation.

1 **A Declaration of Our Inter-Religious Commitment:**
2 **A draft policy statement of the**
3 **Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**
4

5
6 **PART 1**

7 **INTRODUCTION**

8
9 “This church confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Gospel as the power
10 of God for the salvation of all who believe.” “Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate,
11 through whom everything was made and through whose life, death, and resurrection
12 God fashions a new creation” (ELCA Constitution, Chapter 2).

13
14 The grace of God is an undeserved gift that re-orientes our relationship with God. With
15 this gift comes an invitation to love and serve the neighbor. God entrusts to us as
16 “in clay jars” (2 Corinthians 4:7) the “message of reconciliation” for all (2 Corinthians
17 5:19). “Christ, our peace, has put an end to the hostility of race, ethnicity, gender, and
18 economic class” (“Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture,” ELCA social statement,
19 1993, p. 1). As ambassadors for Christ in a deeply divided world, we seek right, peaceful
20 and just relationships with our neighbors of all religions and those who practice no
21 religion. We do this as an expression of our faith.

22
23 Since 1988, we have deepened and expanded our inter-religious relations as church,
24 building upon the work of our predecessor bodies, The Lutheran World Federation and
25 our ecumenical partners. Our 1991 policy statement, “Ecumenism: The Vision of the
26 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America,” called for “a separate, official statement” that
27 would reflect the “distinct responsibility for the church to enter into conversations and
28 reach greater understanding with people of other faiths.” This declaration seeks to fulfill
29 that recommendation.

30
31 **OUR CONTEXT**

32
33 *Encounter with religious diversity*

34
35 Each layer of history, starting with the native peoples of this land, has shaped the
36 religious diversity of American society. In recent decades, patterns of global migration,

37 immigration and forced displacement, coupled with new patterns of religious affiliation,
38 have resulted in rapid and radical changes to the religious diversity in our midst. Today,
39 many Lutheran Christians in the United States encounter neighbors of other religions
40 and worldviews in their communities, schools, work places, civic spaces, circles of
41 friends and families.

42
43 As used in this document, the word “religion” refers to all beliefs, such as Buddhism,
44 Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism. Whenever “neighbor” is used, it includes all
45 of those who profess a religion, plus those who do not, including those who consider
46 themselves atheists or agnostics or ascribe to other worldviews that are not explicitly
47 religious. This document seeks to address a Lutheran approach to understanding and
48 engaging with our neighbors in a multi-religious, pluralistic context.

49
50 *Possible responses to our context*

51
52 As a church, we must consider anew our calling and commitments in a multi-
53 religious world. Many Lutherans and many Lutheran ministries already participate
54 in inter-religious activities such as theological dialogue, advocacy and service,
55 which build mutual understanding and advance the common good. Lutheran
56 Christians are called to move from co-existence to a more robust engagement.
57 Namely, we’re called to move beyond fear, stereotypes, apathy and mere tolerance
58 to friendship, mutual understanding and cooperation, confronting whenever
59 possible the often-compounding oppressions experienced by people of all religions
60 and worldviews on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender and class.

61
62 *Fear and division*

63
64 There are many ways individuals and communities can respond to religious
65 difference. The most harmful responses are grounded in ignorance and fear, which
66 can breed stereotypes that in the extreme are used to fuel incidents of religious
67 bigotry, restrict religious freedoms, and arouse conflicts that are destructive of
68 life, property and the environment. We live in a context of ongoing anti-Semitism
69 and anti-Muslim bigotry, as well as incidents, harassment and violence directed
70 against other minority religious and ethnic communities, houses of worship and
71 indigenous peoples. The ELCA must play an active role in dispelling fear of our
72 neighbors, in opposing religious bigotry and in standing with those who are the
73 targets of fear, discrimination, hatred and violence.

74 *Inaction*

75

76 Another possible response to religious diversity is inaction. For some of us,
77 an encounter with religious difference may seem a distant reality or one we
78 are not quite ready to acknowledge. Some of us have limited information and
79 experiences, which can sometimes mean that we are less motivated to reach out
80 to our neighbors. All of us have been exposed to stereotypes, which may seem
81 harmless when not acted upon or spoken aloud. Yet, in the face of bigotry, apathy
82 and passivity are not neutral. They too can be destructive. In the Small Catechism,
83 Martin Luther explains that there are responsibilities associated with “not bear[ing]
84 false witness against your neighbor.” He explains that “we are to fear and love God,
85 so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy
86 their reputations. Instead, we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and
87 interpret everything they do in the best possible light” (Small Catechism, Eighth
88 Commandment). Action is, in fact, required of us.

89

90 *Encounter and engagement*

91

92 When the alternative is so devastating, respectful conversation, mutual
93 understanding, advocacy, accompaniment, friendship, mutual hospitality and
94 multiple forms of cooperation are imperative. Lutherans are called to move beyond
95 tolerance of our religiously diverse neighbors to engagement with them. This
96 calling leads to concrete commitments that we strive to live out as people of faith.
97 We are freed in Christ to engage our neighbors in a multi-religious world.

98

99 **OUR VISION**

100

101 As the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), our vision is what inspires our
102 calling. It is a vision of a world in which individuals of diverse cultures and races, with
103 varied understandings of the divine, live in harmony. Ours is a vision of a world where
104 hope abounds and fear no longer separates one person from another or one people
105 from another, where “justice roll[s] down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-
106 flowing stream” (Amos 5:24) and “the leaves of the tree [of life] are for the healing of the
107 nations” (Revelation 22:2b). We envision a world of God’s shalom, in which the generosity
108 and mercy of God are celebrated, and all of God’s creatures and all of God’s creation are
109 treated with care.

110

111 The Scriptures yearn for such a world of shalom, but they also recognize that we live
112 “between the times”—between the inauguration of God’s kingdom and its fulfillment. In

113 the meantime, we struggle with all the forces that work against the kingdom. But we,
114 the baptized, experience the gift of Christ in us and the gift of the Holy Spirit calling
115 us to turn away from those forces and to celebrate every sign of God’s kingdom. As a
116 community of faith, we are inspired to put our vision into practice here and now, even
117 if we can see only the vague outlines of its fulfillment. We realize that we will fall short
118 of the glory of God. Nevertheless, we live in love and hope. We foster healthy relations
119 and healthy communities in which all can flourish. We break the cycle of escalating
120 retaliation that divides and destroys. With God’s help, we seek to mend and heal the
121 world that God so dearly and so deeply loves.

122

123 Guided by this vision and sobered by this realization, we seek, as one part of our
124 undertaking, to achieve mutual understanding among all people of different religions
125 and worldviews and to inspire all to work together for the common good. We do so to
126 give an accounting for the hope that is within us (I Peter 3:15b).

127

128 *Mutual understanding*

129

130 Lutheran Christians who engage their religiously diverse neighbors can expect
131 both a new understanding of the other and a deeper understanding and
132 appreciation of their own Christian faith. “Understanding” as used here is a
133 process of moving from factual understanding of commonalities and differences
134 to grasping coherence and even glimpsing beauty, sensing how it is that others
135 love and cherish their religious traditions, while empathizing with others in
136 the challenges and struggles they may face in their religious commitments.
137 Mutual understanding opens us up to the possibility of friendship—of accepting
138 responsibility for each other’s well-being.

139

140 Luther was clear in his insistence that our understanding of faith can and does grow
141 and change: as we experience new things in life, as we study and learn, and as we
142 meditate and pray. Hence, it is possible for one’s understanding to change without
143 one’s faith being undermined. Participating in inter-religious relations does not
144 diminish but deepens our faith. By engaging our neighbors, we learn to articulate
145 our faith more clearly. We learn to express what being a follower of Jesus really
146 means to us in today’s world. In encounter, we can also expect to learn something
147 about the glory of the Lord, relying on the Spirit who, like at Pentecost, amazes and
148 delights us by giving us the capacity to comprehend each other in our “speaking
149 about God’s deeds of power” (Acts 2).

150 *Common good*

151

152 In this vision, religious diversity, when accompanied by understanding and
153 cooperation, enriches the whole. Through inter-religious relationship, we receive
154 the gifts of our neighbors and experience more fully the exquisiteness that all
155 are made in the image of God. Mutual understanding and a commitment to the
156 common good are reciprocal. Mutual understanding and a deep appreciation of
157 the similarities and differences among religions and worldviews enhance working
158 together for the common good. At the same time, working together for the
159 common good can enhance mutual understanding and the self-understanding of
160 each participant. Seeking mutual understanding and the common good are active
161 ways in which we take steps toward our vision of God’s shalom.

162

163 **OUR CALLING**

164

165 As the ELCA, we claim inter-religious engagement as part of our vocation. We—the
166 individual members and participants, congregations and the whole church—are called by
167 God and freed in Christ to love and serve our neighbors in a multi-religious world. This
168 calling begins with our neighbors next door and extends “to the ends of the earth” (Acts
169 1:8). This includes loving and serving those who share our faith in Jesus Christ, as well
170 as those who do not. It is our duty and joy to extend God’s shalom—God’s love, mercy
171 and grace to all those who are made in the image of God and the whole of creation. In
172 other words, we are called to inter-religious engagement *because* we are Lutheran.¹ We
173 live out this calling in four ways.

174

175 *Love our neighbor*

176

177 Every person’s calling to love and serve God and our neighbor is central to the
178 Lutheran tradition. As Luther reminded us, God asks that we direct our gratitude
179 for God’s generosity outward to others rather than upward in activities intended
180 to please God. No one is excluded from “our neighbor.” Jesus makes this point in
181 the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), in which he chooses a person
182 of another religion to illustrate what it means to *be* a neighbor. Our vocation, our
183 calling to be a neighbor, does not exclude from “neighbor” those whose religion is
184 different from our own. God’s mercy is to be extended to all.

1 Biblical and theological basis for these commitments is discussed in detail in Part 2 of this document.

185 *Serve our neighbor*

186

187 Our vocation includes service to the individual neighbor and to the community
188 as a whole. The two are connected because how well the community functions
189 affects every individual in it and vice versa. To know how to serve the community,
190 we need to understand what benefits all parts of that community, and this means
191 reaching out to neighbors across religion, race, ethnicity, gender and class. Our
192 vocation also includes serving *alongside* our neighbor, as we respond together to
193 meet the needs of others. While we may not necessarily share the same religious
194 inspiration for doing so, our common vision for peace and justice leads us to
195 engage in service for the sake of the world.

196

197 *Live in solidarity with our neighbor*

198

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

208

209 In the United States, many Christians live in neighborhoods that are predominantly
210 Christian, where social expectations (holidays, school vacations, work rules,
211 etc.) have accommodated their beliefs and practices, affording them significant
212 privilege. The same is often not true for our neighbors who practice other
213 religions or those who practice no religion at all. They can be made to feel like
214 outsiders. As a result, we are called to be sensitive toward our neighbors of other
215 religions and worldviews, relinquishing our privilege and engaging them in the
216 spirit of accompaniment. This includes listening, learning and letting go of the
217 need to always issue the invitation or be in control of the process. It also means
218 recognizing that other religions are organized differently, sometimes with very little
219 or no corresponding structures to our own. Assumptions about cultural norms,
220 both within the ELCA and about our neighbors, need to be constantly analyzed
221 and avoided. Setting the course for building and deepening partnerships and
222 determining the right pace together are ways in which we can begin to practice
223 mutual hospitality—the deepest form of living in solidarity with our neighbor.

226 We are committed to engaging our neighbors without compromising who we are or
227 the fullness of the calling we have received. An integral part of this calling is to be
228 witnesses to Christ: to bear with our lives the good news of the gospel and to share
229 the joy of the good news with our neighbor in ways that honor our conviction that
230 every human is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and that all of creation
231 is good (Genesis 1:31). This means that we will faithfully share with our neighbors
232 our belief that Jesus Christ is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6); we
233 will serve as ambassadors of the ministry of reconciliation we have received from
234 God through Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18); and we will uphold Scripture, the Creeds
235 and the Confessions as core to our Lutheran identity and vocation. As we engage
236 our neighbors in the fullness of who we are and what we believe, we expect that
237 so, too, will our partners engage us with their deepest convictions.

239 We enter into this calling in a spirit of humility and self-criticism, repentant of our past
240 mistakes, anticipating future mistakes and committed to the justice, peace, and well-
241 being of our neighbors. In doing so, we seek to build upon our church’s longstanding
242 work in inter-religious relations, with ecumenical partners and through The Lutheran
243 World Federation. We accept that we will have unanswered questions about how God is
244 working in and through our neighbors of other religions and even in and through us.
245 Yet, we anticipate that in loving, serving, standing in solidarity with, and witnessing to
246 our neighbors, we will encounter God, participate in building a more just and peaceful
247 world and find our faith enriched.

249 **OUR COMMITMENTS**

251 Today, we participate in God’s mission in an increasingly multi-religious world. In our
252 neighborhoods and globally, there are examples of peaceful religious co-existence but
253 also active religious intolerance, inter-religious conflict, violence, discrimination, and
254 religious bigotry and persecution. In the midst of this, God has given us the ministry of
255 reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18). Therefore, in faithful response to God’s love in Christ
256 Jesus, we are called and committed to actively:

- 257 • **seek mutual understanding** with our neighbors of other religions and
258 worldviews; and
- 259 • **cooperate** with our neighbors of other religions and worldviews as instruments of
260 God’s justice and peace.

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

- 264 1. The ELCA will pray for the well-being of our neighbors of other religions and those
265 who practice no religion, and we will pray for God’s continued guidance as we live
266 out our Lutheran calling in a multi-religious world.
- 267 2. The ELCA will hold fast to the gospel, and to Scripture, the Creeds, and
268 Confessions at the core of our Lutheran identity and faith and will work to
269 foster relationships of mutual respect with regard to our inter-religious partners’
270 identity and commitments (“Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World:
271 Recommendations for Conduct,” the World Council of Churches, Pontifical Council
272 for Interreligious Dialogue & World Evangelical Alliance, 2011).
- 273 3. The ELCA will witness to the power of life in Christ in and through our daily lives,
274 in our inter-religious relations, and in preaching that gives testimony to the power
275 of God at work in the world. We will engage our neighbors of other religions and
276 worldviews with respect for their traditions and will not approach inter-religious
277 relations as a means for manipulative or deceptive attempts at conversion.
- 278 4. The ELCA will seek to know its neighbors, to overcome stereotypes, and “to come
279 to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best
280 possible light” (Small Catechism, Eighth Commandment).
- 281 5. The ELCA will explore and encourage inter-religious friendship, accompaniment
282 and cooperation with all who seek justice, peace, human wholeness and the well-
283 being of creation, recognizing that dialogue and cooperation are the activities of
284 people not religions.
- 285 6. The ELCA will defend the full participation of all in our religiously diverse society,
286 “strengthening public space as a just place for all” (“The Church in the Public
287 Space: A Statement of The Lutheran World Federation,” 2016).
- 288 7. The ELCA will defend human rights and oppose all forms of religious bigotry, fear-
289 mongering, violence, discrimination and persecution and stand in solidarity with
290 those who experience them, whether they are Christian or of another religious
291 tradition or worldview, upholding commitments made in existing ELCA social
292 teaching.
- 293 8. The ELCA will seek to be aware of when we have made mistakes or missteps,
294 acknowledge them, and seek repentance, reconciliation and right relationship with
295 our inter-religious neighbors.
- 296 9. The ELCA, in consultation with our partners, will seek to understand the religions
297 of the world so as to identify and oppose those distortions that misuse religion to
justify oppression, violence, genocide or terrorism.

- 298 10.The ELCA will, whenever possible, work with other Christians and through
299 ecumenical and inter-religious coalitions in its quest for inter-religious
300 understanding and cooperation.
- 301 11.The ELCA will seek counsel from other religious groups in its discernment of and
302 advocacy for the common good.
- 303 12.The ELCA will identify and produce study and dialogue materials and pastoral
304 guidelines for understanding and engaging with other religions, exploring the
305 implications of this understanding for our interpretation of Lutheran Christianity,
306 and reaching out in right relationship to our neighbors of other religions and
307 worldviews.

308

309 **PART 2**

310

311 Part 1 offers a concise statement regarding our context, our vision, our calling and
312 our commitments with regard to our neighbors. Beyond this concise statement, other
313 questions need to be considered: How do we relate to these neighbors? What do
314 the Scriptures say about those of another religion? What are some of the Lutheran
315 convictions that influence our calling? And what about our commitment to evangelism?
316 Part 2 will seek to begin to address these questions.

317

318 **HOW DO WE RELATE TO NEIGHBORS OF ANOTHER RELIGION?**

319

320 *Various approaches and examples*

321

322 No single path exists for inter-religious understanding and cooperation. It takes a variety
323 of forms and moves in differing directions. That is, dialogue can foster study, and study
324 can lead to dialogue. Conversation can lead to cooperation, and cooperation can foster
325 dialogue. Group experiences can produce one-to-one relationships, and one-to-one
326 relationships can lead to group encounters. Whatever form inter-religious relations
327 take, the goal should be to achieve ever-deeper mutual understanding and to maximize
328 cooperation for the sake of the world.

329

330 While engaging those in other religious communities certainly can and should be done
331 individually as we meet individuals at work or in our neighborhood or in school, it also
332 can be done together. Many ELCA members and participants are experienced at inter-
333 religious cooperation. Their good work opens opportunities for us to replicate or to join
334 rather than needing to invent or to initiate. It is not possible to provide a comprehensive
335 list of these activities, but food banks and other social service projects, when undertaken
336 cooperatively with our neighbors of other religions and worldviews, are examples, as are

337 advocacy endeavors, such as working for the care of creation or the reduction of HIV
338 and AIDS. Some congregations share their buildings with other religious communities
339 and find the relationship mutually enriching. ELCA colleges have faculty and students
340 and courses that reflect religious diversity and initiatives and student groups that seek
341 to foster sensitivity to religious difference and competency for vocational life in a multi-
342 religious world. Lutherans have carefully and compassionately tended to the important
343 dimensions of religion and culture when welcoming and receiving refugees as new
344 neighbors. For more examples, see *Engaging Others, Knowing Ourselves: A Lutheran*
345 *Calling in a Multi-Religious World* (Lutheran University Press, 2016).

346

347 *Unique considerations*

348

349 None of what has been said in this declaration suggests that all religions are the same
350 or that they should become so. Each is different. Even if we understand one, we will be
351 surprised by another, and sometimes even our own! As a result, we need to be careful
352 not to identify individual similarities without taking into account the distinctive role
353 each element may play in its own religion. (For example, fasting is a spiritual practice
354 of both Islam and Christianity, but fasting takes a different shape and significance in
355 the two religions.) This is not to deny, however, that shared values, concerns and hopes
356 do exist across traditions. Discovering them is one of the many joys of inter-religious
357 conversation and cooperation.

358

359 *Expanding our inter-religious commitments*

360

361 The ELCA has already made a commitment to the Jewish people (see “Declaration
362 of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community,” 1994).
363 That commitment reads: “We express our urgent desire to live out our faith in Jesus
364 Christ with love and respect for the Jewish people. We recognize in anti-Semitism a
365 contradiction and an affront to the Gospel, a violation of our hope and calling, and
366 we pledge this church to oppose the deadly working of such bigotry, both within our
367 churches and in the society around us. ... We pray for the continued blessing of the
368 Blessed One upon the increasing cooperation and understanding between Lutheran
369 Christians and the Jewish community.” This declaration of our inter-religious
370 commitment reaffirms that 1994 statement, while at the same time extending the
371 scope of our calling to reflect engagement with our broader multi-religious context,
372 including with our Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh neighbors, and those
373 who are not religious.

374 *Relating to neighbors who are not religious*

375

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

385

386 *Pastoral considerations*

387

388 There are a number of pastoral considerations beyond the scope of this declaration,
389 for example, the common reality of multi-religious family life. Therefore, the church
390 recognizes the need for the ongoing development of appropriate pastoral aids, including
391 guidelines for inter-religious marriages, guidelines for pastoral counseling, guidelines for
392 religious education, and guidelines for joint prayer services. In general, the ELCA is open
393 to participating in inter-religious prayer services that honor the distinctive commitments
394 and gifts of each tradition. A good deal of understanding and careful planning is needed
395 to design meaningful services that respect the integrity and rich traditions of more than
396 one religion.

397

398 **WHAT DO THE SCRIPTURES SAY ABOUT THOSE OF ANOTHER RELIGION?**

399

400 *God's goal of shalom*

401

402 According to many passages in the Bible, the goal of God's activity in the world is
403 shalom. Shalom can best be described as whole, healthy relationships (a) among
404 humans, (b) between humans and the rest of creation, and (c) between humans and
405 God. The Bible uses multiple images to describe shalom, such as the wolf lying down
406 with the lamb, swords beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, people
407 able to enjoy the fruits of the trees they have planted, turning the other cheek, going
408 the second mile, and a city with its gates wide open for all, with plenty of food, water
409 and medicine, and with God so close that no special building is needed (Isaiah 2:4, 65:21-
410 22; Matthew 5:39-41; Revelation 21:22, 25 and 22:1-2). If God's goal is shalom, then our
411 calling is to foster shalom. Every time we initiate, restore, heal and embody mutually
412 respectful relationships—especially with those who practice different religions—we take a

413 step toward God’s desired goal of shalom. The hope for shalom guides and supports our
414 vision and our calling.

415

416 *Other religions in the Bible*

417

418 There is no uniformity in the Bible regarding people of other religions. In some cases,
419 the leaders of Israel try to draw a sharp line between the Israelites and their neighbors.
420 In other cases, God is portrayed as working through their neighbors who practice
421 another religion. In addition to the good Samaritan example already mentioned, there
422 are numerous examples:

- 423 • Moses receives valuable advice from Jethro, a priest of Midian, not an Israelite, who
424 also happens to be his father-in-law (Exodus 18).
- 425 • Cyrus of Persia, who did not worship the God of Israel, is “anointed” by God to
426 deliver the Israelites from exile (Isaiah 45:1).
- 427 • Jesus encounters a Canaanite woman and is moved by her faith to heal her
428 daughter (Matthew 15:27).
- 429 • Jesus responds to the needs of a Roman centurion, a commander within the
430 occupying forces—not likely a person who practiced Judaism (See Matthew 8:5-13
431 and Luke 7:1-10).
- 432 • In the story of Abimelech, Abraham and Sarah, it is the outsider Abimelech who
433 listens to God and does what is right (Genesis 20).
- 434 • The Canaanite named Rahab hides the two spies Joshua sent to find out about
435 Jericho prior to its conquest (Joshua 2).
- 436 • And the magi from the east, who likely did not practice Judaism, visit the infant
437 Jesus (Matthew 2:1-12).

438

439 These are but a few examples of how God loves, and works with, in and through people
440 of various religions. These passages reveal the perhaps surprising truth that God at
441 times invites Christians to learn from and even emulate people of other religions. In
442 the case of the good Samaritan, for example, Jesus explicitly instructs us to “Go and
443 do likewise.” These scriptural stories invite us to listen and ponder, from a position of
444 humility, for how God might use inter-religious relations to instruct us and challenge our
445 faith to grow.

446

447 *Jewish and Muslim relations*

448

449 Though our relationship to our neighbors of other religions and worldviews are each
450 important, Christians have had a particularly complex relationship with their closest
451 neighbors in the faith, Jews and Muslims. In significantly different ways, all three

452 traditions claim to worship the God of Abraham. Given this kinship, Lutherans have a
453 particular responsibility to overcome inaccurate stereotypes and misunderstandings of
454 Jews and Muslims and to seek fuller understanding and cooperation.

455

456 In Romans 9-11, Paul wrestles with the role of those Jews who have not accepted Jesus
457 as the Messiah. He has more questions than answers, but he is clear about one thing: “I
458 ask then, has God rejected his people? By no means!” (Romans 11:1) “For the gifts and
459 the calling of God are irrevocable” (Romans 11:29). Here is evidence that at least one
460 group of people who had rejected Jesus were considered people of God. Another passage
461 where this occurs is Genesis 17:20: “As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and
462 make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes,
463 and I will make him a great nation.” The Scripture unequivocally asserts not only that
464 God has made the descendants of Ishmael a great nation, distinct from the nation
465 of Israel but also that God blesses them. Our Muslim neighbors regularly associate
466 themselves with Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael and re-enact central events in their story
467 during the annual pilgrimage to Mecca.

468

469 **WHAT LUTHERAN CONVICTIONS INFLUENCE OUR CALLING?**

470

471 *Grace without prerequisites*

472

473 Our Lutheran tradition has emphasized that God’s grace comes to humans without
474 any prerequisites. When God repairs God’s relationship with us, it is entirely a result of
475 God’s generosity, not something we have earned. As a result, we cannot know the limits
476 of God’s grace and love. Any attempt to define a limit introduces a prerequisite. God’s
477 remarkable generosity frees us to engage in inter-religious outreach and in this way to
478 embody God’s generosity. Our calling is to come to know our neighbors and in doing so
479 to see in them the image of God.

480

481 *Limits on our knowing*

482

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

484

- 485 • Luther said that no human could know another person’s relationship with God. To
486 be sure, what that person says or does gives us clues, but, ultimately, we cannot
487 see into another’s heart.
- 488 • Similarly, Luther insisted that we cannot know the inner workings of God. To be
489 sure, God has generously revealed God’s attitude toward us, God’s overall purpose
490 and God’s character, but the inner workings of God remain hidden. Hence, we must

491 be careful about claiming to know God’s judgments regarding another religion or
492 the individual human beings who practice it.

- 493 • There is another reason for caution. The Lutheran tradition has understood the
494 word “faith” to mean trust. Faith is relational and not simply, or even primarily,
495 about affirming beliefs. Hence, we also must be careful not to judge our neighbors
496 on the basis of their religious beliefs.

497

498 The full story of the relationship between our neighbor and God is beyond our
499 knowledge. In the context of inter-religious relations, what is important is that we do not
500 need to have this question answered in order to be hospitable, treat one another with
501 respect, and find ways to cooperate for the sake of the larger community.

502

503 *God in the world*

504

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

512

513 *Ministries of reconciliation*

514

515 Our calling in Christ is to participate in ministries of reconciliation. “In Christ God was
516 reconciling the world to himself” and “entrusting the message of reconciliation to us”
517 (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). This message, whether spoken or embodied, aims to restore
518 relations. It includes both humans and other parts of creation (“in him God was pleased
519 to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven” (Colossians 1:20).
520 Further, our calling to ministries of reconciliation is complementary, not contradictory, to
521 our calling to share the gospel. When we seek to restore right relations—among humans,
522 all of creation, and with God—we are serving as “ambassadors for Christ, since God is
523 making his appeal through us” (2 Corinthians 5:20). The disciple who is invited to follow
524 Christ is invited to be a reconciler—a reconciler who works for unity, justice and peace.

525

526 *Ever depending on forgiveness*

527

528 Our calling of reconciliation depends on God’s forgiveness. We need to acknowledge
529 not only our own personal errors and omissions but also the collective errors of our

530 tradition.² These include misdeeds, such as our readiness to benefit from the conquest
531 of American Indian lands, chattel slavery and the treatment of the Jews during and after
532 the Reformation,³ in addition to failures to reach out with respect to people of all races,
533 ethnicities and cultures. Not only do we rely on forgiveness for the past, we also rely on
534 forgiveness for the present and the future. Because our responsibility for others has no
535 limits, inevitably our best efforts will fall short. We, therefore, rely on forgiveness for support
536 as we reach out into unfamiliar territory, navigating religious and cultural differences.
537 The promise of forgiveness sets us free to risk the unfamiliar. Fortunately, based on the
538 experience of those who have taken such steps, we can expect and hope that our neighbors
539 will be gracious and hospitable to us and be quite willing to overlook or forgive our well-
540 intentioned mistakes. In all likelihood, they too find themselves in unfamiliar territory.

541

542 *Acknowledging suffering*

543

544 At the heart of Luther's "theology of the cross" is our calling to take the reality of
545 suffering seriously. Whenever possible, this means seeking ways to end suffering. At
546 other times, we have no option available to accomplish this. God, who is most fully
547 revealed through the cross and the resurrection, always comes to "be with" humans
548 and calls them to "be with" others. From this perspective, God is seen more clearly
549 through suffering—including the suffering of Jesus, the suffering of others and our own
550 suffering—than through success.

551

552 Acknowledging the reality of suffering unites us not only to God but also to one
553 another. The commonality and universality of human suffering binds us inextricably to
554 each other. This influences our understanding of our vocation. When we acknowledge
555 the suffering of those whose beliefs are different from our own and recognize the
556 commonality of suffering, we find a fuller more compassionate understanding of those
557 who differ and a common calling to alleviate it wherever it exists. At the same time,
558 when we acknowledge the suffering of other Christians who experience discrimination
559 or attacks because of their religious beliefs, we can begin to understand how inter-
560 religious relations can be necessary not only for cooperation but, indeed, for survival. In
561 suffering of all forms, as neighbors who come to see each other as made in the image of
562 God, we stand together, not apart.

² We do so not because we bear personal guilt for the past but because we are responsible for the future. Repentance is a re-orientation that puts us on a different path in the present and the future.

³ See the "Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery" Social Policy Resolution CA16.02.04 adopted by the 2016 Churchwide Assembly and "Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community," requested by the 1993 Churchwide Assembly and adopted by the Church Council in April 1994 (both available at ELCA.org).

563 **WHAT ABOUT OUR COMMITMENT TO EVANGELISM?**

564
565 Throughout the centuries, and for all time, our primary calling as Christians is to share
566 the good news of Jesus Christ, who frees us to love and serve our neighbors. This calling
567 to evangelism, of witnessing to the power of life in Christ, must be carried out in all
568 aspects of our lives and work as church, including in our inter-religious relations. Only
569 then are we authentically engaging our neighbors as Christians.

570
571 Evangelism takes many forms, in word and in deed, always offered in love. Whether
572 through preaching, teaching, or acts of justice and mercy, “The commandment we have
573 from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also” (1 John
574 4:21). Because the good news frees us to love and serve our neighbors, and likewise to
575 share with them why the love of Jesus calls and inspires us to do so, evangelism and
576 inter-religious engagement are both parts of our calling. The Great Commission, found
577 both in Matthew 28:19-20 and Mark 16:15-16, stands alongside the call for Christians to
578 be salt, leaven and light in the places where they live (Matthew 5:13-16; Matthew 13:33).

579
580 Historically, Lutherans have emphasized the remarkable generosity evidenced by God
581 and our own inability to do anything to contribute to our salvation. We are saved
582 by grace. Faith is a response to the love of God, not a prerequisite for that love. As
583 Lutherans, we share this good news as a compelling counter-narrative to a theology of
584 “you must believe, then God will save you,” which in Luther’s day took the form of “you
585 need to do your best, and then God will save you.”

586
587 Sharing this gift that we have been given freely is a faithful response to God’s love
588 in Jesus Christ. This is different than proselytizing or targeting certain groups for
589 conversion. God’s gift, freely given, cannot be forced upon others. Our love and care,
590 as an extension of God’s love and care, are also freely given without any contingencies.
591 We do not require others to accept a credal statement in order to receive our love and
592 care. Luther was confident that, whenever the good news is shared, the Spirit is at work.
593 This Spirit blows when and where it wills. We are called to share the good news, but
594 bringing others to Christ is ultimately God’s work through the Holy Spirit. As we are
595 taught in Luther’s Small Catechism, “I believe that by my own understanding or strength
596 I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has
597 called me through the gospel” (Explanation to the Third Article of The Apostles Creed,
598 translation in Evangelical Lutheran Worship). As individuals called to be reconcilers
599 in God’s world, we have two tasks: to share the good news and to love and serve our
600 neighbors, no matter who they are. In other words, our calling is to embody that all—
601 without exception—are created in the image of God. Admittedly, we always fall short, and

602 sometimes we even forsake this calling. In the past and even today, there are examples
603 of those who have been victimized by Christians, sometimes explicitly in the name of
604 Christ. Reconciling and re-building trust with our neighbors is an important way in
605 which we re-present Christ, serving as his ambassadors, and becoming reconciled also
606 to God.

607

608 *The way*

609

610 But what then about a passage such as John 14:6, “I am the way and the truth and
611 the life. No one comes to the father except through me”? This passage needs to be
612 understood not in isolation, but in relation to other parts of the Bible. Its immediate
613 context is important. It occurs during Jesus’ discussion with his disciples about
614 the cross and the death that he faces. So “the way” is the way of the cross, of
615 acknowledging suffering.

616

617 “The way” of the cross does not include manipulation, judgmentalism or a claim
618 to have all the answers. As we engage with people who practice another religion,
619 we are called to ponder what it means to embody the way of the cross. From St.
620 Paul we learn the power and persuasiveness of humbleness rather than arrogance
621 in our relationship with others. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ
622 Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as
623 something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being
624 born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and
625 became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:5-8).

626

627 *The truth*

628

629 Lutherans wholeheartedly agree with John 14:6 that Jesus is “the truth.” Jesus is
630 God incarnate, born among us as a human being. As Luther taught and the ELCA
631 constitution affirms, Jesus is the preeminent form of God’s Word.⁴ To know Jesus
632 is to know God. In this sense, the person of Jesus is the truth. The life, death and
633 resurrection of Jesus is at the center of our witness. This is not to say that truth is
634 absent from other religions. Human beings cannot know everything about God, nor
635 can we set limits on God.

4 The preached word is the second form, and the written Scripture is the third.

636 *The life*

637

638 Lutherans also confess and draw daily strength from Jesus as “the life,” the third
639 description in John 14:6. As St. Paul writes, “Do you not know that all of us who have
640 been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been
641 buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead
642 by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3-4). It is
643 from this perspective of life in Christ that we engage our neighbors of other religions.
644 We do so with full awareness of our own dependence on God’s grace, mercy and
645 forgiveness and with trust that God in Christ has willed reconciliation for all.

646

647 As Christians, we believe that the good news of God’s grace is worth offering to others.
648 Not only may God work through others, God may also work through us to the degree
649 that we witness to a God of generosity and forgiveness, a God who loves humans, values
650 their freedom and works for their wholeness.

651

652 **CONCLUSION**

653

654 Our vision is a society where the dignity of every person is respected, where God’s
655 shalom reigns and all people work together for the common good. As we live or
656 work with individuals of other cultures and religions, we are called to overcome the
657 isolation that separates neighbors from one another and to serve as ambassadors of
658 Christ’s ministries of reconciliation. We are called to learn to know and understand our
659 neighbors and to work together for their well-being. We are called to work with them
660 to overcome the obstacles and suffering they face, and to build justice and peace for all
661 people and God’s creation. We are called to live in hope, not fear.

662

663 Our calling is a responsibility, yes, but it is also a joy. Engagement with our neighbors
664 enriches our lives and our faith. In relationship with our neighbors, we come to
665 understand more fully the depth and breadth of the riches of God and to appreciate
666 more deeply the wonder of God’s generous love, which we experience through the life,
667 death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We discern more accurately how to reflect God’s
668 generosity in our thinking and in our behavior. And, as individuals and as neighbors,
669 we benefit from the increased health of our communities and from a world that is
670 increasingly just and peaceful, as God intends.

671

672 May God bless the efforts of this church and its members and participants as we set our
673 sights on this vision, as we seek to respond to God’s calling and as we strive to uphold
674 these commitments.

Notes

Notes



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.