

# 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.