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Prepared by the Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Muslim Relations of the Office for Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. These Talking Points are not intended as position papers, but as discussion starters, with the hope of eliciting a broad range of responses and deepening relationships through understanding. Feedback is welcome at the address below or via e-mail to erinfo@elca.org. Bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version. English interpretations of the Qur'an are as found in *The Qur'an: A new translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

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TALKING POINTS

#1

TOPICS IN CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

THE BIBLE AND THE QUR'AN

Around the year 610 of the Common Era, a pious, 40-year-old merchant from the town of Mecca in the Arabian Peninsula experienced a call to be a Prophet and Apostle of the one Creator God, charged with delivering the divine revelations that he received to humankind; this was the core of Muhammad's vocation until his death in the year 632. These revelations were collected, memorized, and written down by Muhammad's companions in the nascent community of "Muslims" (those who "submitted" or committed themselves to God); the book known as the holy Qur'an (or "Recitation") was the result. Muslims believe that these verses, contained in 114 chapters or *surahs*, are direct communications of the divine Speech in clear Arabic.

A story is told about a small village in Lebanon in which half the town's population was Muslim, and the other half Orthodox Christian. A celebration was being planned that would involve the entire village. The town council proposed a grand procession through the city streets. The Muslims on the council eagerly announced that they would carry a copy of their sacred book, the holy Qur'an, and that their Orthodox brothers and sisters should do likewise and carry a copy of the Bible. "No," replied the Orthodox priest, "we will carry an icon of Jesus Christ."

This story represents a subtle difference in the way in which Christians and Muslims regard their sacred texts. For Muslims, the Qur'an occupies a status similar to that occupied by Jesus for Christians: the most decisive intersection between the Word of God and human history. Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the eternal Word of God made flesh; the Bible is then a *witness* to this word, pointing to Christ and revealing Christ. Muslims do not believe in an incarnation ("becoming flesh") of the Word, but do believe that the Qur'an is more than a witness to the Word; it *is*

that Word. An early theological controversy within the Muslim community resulted in the wide consensus that the Qur'an is the Speech of God, "uncreated."

Muslims regard Jews and Christians as close relatives in the faith, as "People of the Book" who have historically received revelations from God: the *Tawrat* or Torah, sent down to Moses; the *Zabur* or Psalms, delivered to David; and the *Injil* or Evangel/Gospel, sent down to Jesus. However, Muslims do not generally identify the Scriptures presently in the hands of Jews and Christians with the "original" Torah and Gospel; the extent to which these original revelations have been preserved and/or corrupted over time has been debated throughout Islamic history. The Qur'an, however, is believed to exist as the pure and undefiled transmission of the revelation that God intended. Muslim scholarship points to its collection and memorization already during the life of the Prophet, and its official "canonization" around the year 650, just eighteen years after Muhammad's death, under the rule of the third "rightly guided" caliph, Uthman. Since then, the text of the Qur'an has been very stable (in comparison to the Bible with its variant readings and text families), and modern publishers of the Qur'an go to great pains to ensure the integrity of the text.

The Qur'an is different from the Bible in a variety of ways. While the Bible has a narrative framework (from the Creation to the New Jerusalem), the Qur'an is a compilation of revelations vouchsafed to Muhammad at various times in his life; many surahs read like sermons, each addressed to specific circumstances confronting the Prophet or the Muslim *ummah* ("community"). Contents include narratives about God's prophets and apostles, the praise of God, warnings of God's judgment to come, legal material, and guidance for living.

The Qur'an is exalted Arabic speech, often marked by rhyme or assonance. Indeed, a "translation" of the text into a language besides Arabic is no longer the Qur'an, but rather an interpretation of the Qur'an's meaning. (It should be noted that Muslims have been very active in making and distributing these interpretations in many of the world's languages, in order to help non-native speakers of Arabic, Muslims and others alike, to understand the Qur'an's meaning.) While the majority of Muslims in the world are *not* native speakers of Arabic, throughout the world Muslims

rejoice to hear the Arabic Qur'an beautifully recited, learn to take the divine speech upon their tongues, and memorize long passages. Many Muslims memorize the whole of the Book, which is about two-thirds the length of the New Testament.

Muslims read the Qur'an for hope and guidance, but also experience in it—in a way that Christians may think of as "sacramental"—the intimate closeness of God's very Word, which the believer receives into himself/herself and takes to (and by) heart. The beauty of the Qur'an is lifted up for rapt audiences in the work of celebrated Qur'an reciters, and Qur'anic calligraphy is among the highest and purest forms of Islamic visual art.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Recall the story about the Lebanese village. Does the comparison of Christ to the Qur'an make sense to you? What difference does it make to claim that God's ultimate revelation to humankind is found in a person, rather than a book?
2. For Muslims, the Qur'an *is* Arabic. Christians, on the other hand, have many *translations* of the original Hebrew and Greek texts of their scriptures, and are happy to call each of them "the Bible." What implications might this difference have for the way that Scripture is taught and learned, and for the relationship between Scripture on the one hand, and art and culture on the other?
3. Where do *you* experience God's nearness most intensely?