

Talking Together as Christians about TOUGH SOCIAL ISSUES



Division for Church in Society
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Talking Together as Christians about TOUGH SOCIAL ISSUES




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Preface

In its first social statement, “The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective” (1991), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—in all its expressions—committed itself to foster moral deliberation on social questions, seeking to:

- *be a community where open, passionate, and respectful deliberation on challenging and controversial issues of contemporary society is expected and encouraged;*
- *engage those of diverse perspectives, classes, genders, ages, races, and cultures in the deliberation process so that each of our limited horizons might be expanded and the witness of the Body of Christ in the world enhanced;*
- *address through deliberative processes the issues faced by the people of God, in order to equip them in their discipleship and citizenship in the world;*
- *arrive at positions to guide its corporate witness through participatory processes of moral deliberation; and*
- *contribute toward the up-building of the common good and the revitalizing of public life through open and inclusive processes of deliberation.*

The 1997 ELCA Churchwide Assembly adopted seven “Initiatives to Prepare for a New Century.” The third initiative, “Witness to God’s Action in the World,” is intended to encourage congregations to “model life in community as they address pressing social issues, ethical questions, and community renewal.” Part of this includes congregations developing and exercising their skills in faith-based deliberation about tough social issues. This guide has been written in response to that initiative. It is intended for leadership teams of pastors and lay people. Here “talking together” is used as a more accessible synonym for what has previously been referred to as “moral deliberation.”

The suggestions in this guide have been gleaned from groups and organizations with considerable experience in helping people with conversations such as these. In November of 1998, the Department for Studies of the Division for Church in Society convened a gathering of representatives of a number of these groups, some of whom are listed in Appendix A. We are grateful for their generous time, experience, and knowledge. You may want to contact them for further resources or assistance.

If your congregation is interested in participating in additional ELCA-sponsored training opportunities related to this, contact the Division for Church in Society (773-380-2716) for some special upcoming events.

This resource is available for free download in PDF format at www.elca.org/dcs/talkingtogether.html, as are all the ELCA social statements and messages.

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Introduction

Many of us yearn for help in figuring out how God and our faith relate to the issues we encounter in our lives and society. As a church we confess that God is deeply involved in our lives and world, but figuring out how and what that means in relation to the specific issues and questions we face is often difficult. People in many congregations seem reluctant to talk together about such questions, especially if this will open up real differences among them.

A man I left a synod workshop on gambling saying, “I sure wish we could talk about things I like this in my church!”

Congregational members on both sides of a hot community issue give clear indications that they don’t want to talk about it in their church.

A community is incensed over some suspected hate crimes that have occurred recently and expects that the churches will talk and do something about this.

A farmer and a small town mayor both discouraged over projected low commodity prices wish that their church would start talking about what it could do to address this and other rural issues.

Some members of an urban church want their congregation to do something about the lack of jobs for people in their neighborhood.

A pastor would really like members of the congregation to discuss a proposed social statement, but is unsure of how to do so because of the potential conflict that it might raise.

What is considered a “tough social issue” to talk about varies greatly, depending on who people are, their culture, their history, current situation, and the usual ways their congregation does things. What is easy to talk about in an urban setting may not be in a rural setting, or vice versa. What is taboo in some cultures, such as issues related to sex or money, may not be in others. In some

cases, people feel free to open themselves up to others—that’s part of what it means for them to be the church! In many other cases, people are reluctant to share their feelings and views—that feels too risky for them! They might express thoughts like those shared above. A given issue can affect some people in very different ways than it does others—due to what they’ve experienced, where they’ve come from, and individual personality differences. Talking about these things together brings these differences out in the open, which can be risky.

Some people fear that disagreement on an issue will divide a congregation and threaten relationships in the congregation as well as in the wider community. That can happen, *but it doesn’t necessarily have to happen*. Disagreements can become destructive when congregations don’t have the *attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, skills, and behavior to talk together constructively*. However, if those who shape the life of a congregation give clear, reassuring signals that “we talk about matters like that here,” *and* if the congregation has developed the *habit and learned practices* for doing so, this begins to feel like a natural part of what it means to

be a church. When issues arise, they *must* be talked about, and these congregations feel confident that they *can* talk about them.

Talking about social issues together from the perspective of our faith is something that Christians *can* learn to do, or do better and with more spiritual depth. This resource introduces congregations and other church groups (such as synod groups, committees, or social ministry organizations) to the *art of public conversation about social issues*. It can also help those who have experienced this already to improve their skills and practices. Rather than a complete training manual, it is a guide that points out some important things to remember in leading faith-based conversations about social issues. It may provide you the confidence to begin or enhance these conversations, or you may want additional training and resources (see Appendix A).

There is a wide range of social issues a congregation could talk about. For many people, the term “social issues” suggests things like abortion, homosexuality, racism, or sexual, physical, or emotional abuse. These are among the toughest issues to talk about publicly because they tap the deep feelings and values of many people, and are embarrassing for many to talk about. But there are other important issues, such as economic justice, health care, or the environment. They have a public dimension but may not be as emotionally sensitive or intensely personal as some others. Social issues can also be quite local to particular communities, such as the closing of a small town business, whether a congregation should start a health ministry to reach out to its surrounding community, or what to do about the prostitutes whose activities make life difficult for residents of a neighborhood.

Talking through tough social issues as Christians means respectful yet passionate dialogue from the perspective of the faith they share. Together they seek to understand and clarify the issue, its causes, dimensions, and consequences. They take into account their *personal and community experiences of the issue*, as well as *Scripture, church tradition and teachings, human knowledge and reason*. Such dialogue helps participants discern what they—both personally and as communities of faith—should do with regard to this issue. This is more than a casual conversation. It is a serious dialogue about what really matters in the life of the Christian community and in the life of the world.

These conversations are *public* in at least two ways. First, they are part of the public ministry of a congregation. Second, these conversations often deal with important matters of public concern outside the church. These matters are part of the congregation’s witness in the world. Members of the wider community may be encouraged to participate in these conversations. Through these conversations a congregation may also become more engaged with others in the community to address what is at stake.

“ I come to church to hear about spiritual matters and don’t want to hear about social issues.”

“ I have my own opinions and i don’t want to be upset by what others think.”

“ That’s too sensitive an issue to talk about here! ”

“ I have to live with these people—and that’s hard if we open up topics where we’re likely to disagree.”

“ We all think the same way in this church—there’s no need to talk about it! ”

“ I don’t want people to know what i think.”



Why do this as Church ?

Why should we do this as church? How is this part of our calling? How is this connected with how God is active in our world and in our congregation? How might this strengthen our congregation's mission and ministry?

As the Church, we believe and proclaim that God is active in all realms of life—including the social, economic, and political. God preserves creation, orders society, and promotes justice in a broken world. Faith active in love seeking justice in the world is a single, unified vocation of the church. God continually pulls us out of our private lives and into the public—where we participate in a world in common with those who are different from us.

Luther's conviction was that the presence of the indwelling Christ through the Holy Spirit is the source of wisdom and power. The Spirit of the crucified and risen Christ, as known in and through the Word and sacraments of the gathered Church, is the effective power in what the Church is and does. The Spirit makes Christ present *in, with, and for* us as a dynamic, experienced reality. As a relational power grounded in the very nature of the triune God, the Spirit connects us in new ways with one another and the rest of creation

“Through preaching, teaching, the sacraments, Scripture, and ‘mutual conversation and consolation,’ the Church is gathered and shaped by the Holy Spirit to be a serving and liberating presence in the world” ELCA Social Statement, *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*, 1991.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we grow in understanding and service as we talk together about the tough social dilemmas and challenges we face today. It isn't always clear what we should do as Christians in these situations. When we as Christians

face difficult decisions or situations in our personal lives, we often pray about them, read the Scriptures, or talk with a few trusted friends or a pastor. Likewise, when we face difficult decisions or situations as the church, we need to pray together, read Scripture together, study the Christian tradition, and talk together as the church about our situation and our experiences in order to seek some guidance from the Holy Spirit.

Whether we do this individually, or with others, we are practicing what the Church has called “spiritual discernment.” We discern together, trusting the Holy Spirit to work through Scriptures, Christian tradition, human reason, and our experience to speak to our situation and guide our conversation. We trust that we might come to understand what God may be telling us and leading us to do, and that the Spirit will empower us to do it.

In this spiritual discernment, it is good to keep on praying together, reading Scripture, and talking together. The Spirit keeps us open to new things God may be doing, new insights God may want us to see, and new ways in which God may calling us to serve. We also realize that our previous understandings or actions may need to be corrected.

“But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and kept me in true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it united with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.”

Martin Luther, *The Small Chatechism*, Explanation to the Third Article of the Apostle's Creed

Although this way of talking about tough issues is similar to democratic discussion or civil conversation, talking *as the Church* makes it *different* from them in

important ways. It shares with civil conversation the same commitments to mutual respect and understanding and constructive dialogue among people with points of view that may differ strongly.

Democratic discussion or civil conversation, however, can be carried on without inviting or presuming the Holy Spirit to be working in the participants or in the conversation itself. The point of civil conversation is not necessarily to discern what God may be up to, how Scripture or Christian tradition inform the discussion, or what God may be calling people to understand, say, or do. But that *is* what talking through tough social issues together *as the Church* is about. It is more than an just a respectful civil conversation or an exercise in democratic decision-making where the majority rules. If the point of the conversation is seeking how God may be active in this issue, then something more than our personal opinion, feelings, or interests are at stake. Deciding and acting *as the Church* on tough social ethical issues, or discerning God's will, is more than a matter of "civility" or "majority vote."

Some Examples from the New Testament and Beyond

Talking through tough issues *as the Church* may be new to some Christians' experience today, but it is not really new in the history of the Church. It began with Jesus's earthly ministry as he proclaimed the Gospel and taught his disciples. Jesus's ministry was a *public* ministry in which he repeatedly addressed difficult issues among crowds, with religious authorities, at dinner parties, or in the Temple in Jerusalem, and did so from the tradition of Moses and the prophets, the Psalms, and the Hebrew sages. For example, he argued with the Pharisees when they complained about his disciples picking grain to eat on the Sabbath, and later continued this controversy about what was appropriate on the Sabbath when he healed a man's hand in their synagogue on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-3:6; Matthew 12:1-14; Luke 6:1-11). He had a controversy with the Scribes over his eating with sinners and tax collectors (Mark 2:13-17; Matthew 9:9-13; Luke 5:27-32). Jesus also argued with the Pharisees about divorce (Mark 10:1-12; Matthew 19:1-19), and with Pharisees and the supporters of King Herod about paying taxes (Mark 12:13-17; Matthew 22:15-22; Luke 20:20-26). In the Temple in Jerusalem, Jesus was publicly confronted by those who wanted to know by what authority he was "doing these things" (Mark 11:27-33; Matthew 21:23-27; Luke 20:1-8).

After Pentecost, the Church continued a pattern of talking about tough issues in public. For example, Greek-speaking Christians complained that the widows in their group were neglected in the daily distribution of food by Hebrew-speaking Christians. This led to a public meeting in which this situation was discussed and peacefully resolved (Acts 6:1-6). This not only addressed the needs of the women, but it was also a public witness about how widows ought to be treated. When Peter was called before the church in Jerusalem to explain why he was eating with Gentiles, he explained how God was leading them to faith in Jesus and giving them the Holy Spirit. This public conversation in the council led to the acceptance of these non-Jews in the Church (Acts 11:1-18). Paul's public ministry involved him in public controversy with people in his congregations. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, he engages the congregation about their internal divisions, about reports of sexual immorality among them, about their suing one another in court, about fornication, marriage and the remarriage of widows, and public offering of food to idols by members of the church (I Corinthians 3:1-9:13).

Both Jesus and Paul raised tough issues in public from the perspective of faith. In some cases, they stood in the tradition of Israel's prophets, who called Israel publicly to repent for its idolatry and injustice toward the poor. In other cases, they stood in the tradition of Israel's judges, who called for a community that was distinct from its neighbors. They also knew well the stories of the people of Israel and the account of God giving Israel the Law to regulate their community life. They were familiar as well with the writings of the Hebrew sages on what reason teaches faithful people about how to live together as a community of God's people.



For additional information on ELCA public policy advocacy, contact the Lutheran Office for Governmental Affairs (LOGA) at 202-783-7507 or by e-mail at loga@ecunet.org, or your Lutheran Public Policy Office—LOGA can tell you if there is one in your state.

Centuries later, Martin Luther regularly engaged public issues—such as those concerning schools, soldiers, and trade, as well as the relationships among powerful public leaders and poor peasants. Drawing on this tradition, 20th century Lutherans in the U.S. have addressed a range of tough and important public issues in national life by means of public statements as well as through advocacy in Congress, state legislatures, and in their local communities.



Getting Organized

Congregations and other faith groups need a group of leaders to help them get organized and have good faith-based conversations. Between two and six lay people and a pastor will be enough for most congregations. These leaders need not, though they may, be the elected leaders of the congregation or group. **Each member of the leadership team should have a copy of this guide.**

While in some congregations this leadership group may want to organize conversations as special events, consider using existing occasions or groups. Bible study groups, confirmation classes, youth groups, service or fellowship groups, immigration or literacy groups, women's circles, men's organizations, adult instruction classes, and other ongoing groups in a congregation can all be occasions for holding conversations about issues that may be of vital interest to their members. Leadership teams decide what will work best in a given congregation. Even in congregations serving relatively transient groups, watch for some opportunities to engage people in conversation about issues of direct relevance to them.

Lay people should usually take the lead in a leadership group. Parish pastors or other professional leaders are most helpful and effective when they support, coach, and encourage lay people to take public leadership. They can also find other ways to serve the conversation. For example, pastors have valuable knowledge about church teaching, history, and Scripture, as well as what the church has said recently about various social issues. Occasionally they may serve effectively as public leaders of dialogue along with lay people, or when strong lay leadership is unavailable. Normally, however, the development of skilled lay leadership is necessary to help make this a regular part of church life and ministry. Then, when pastors move on, skilled lay leaders are able to continue leading such conversations. Pastors are key people in helping strong lay leadership to develop.

Leaders are responsible for:

- identifying a topic for discussion;
- making appropriate arrangements for a time and place to meet;
- inviting people to the conversation through publicity and personal contact (personal contacts will be occasions to listen to people's needs and concerns about the conversation);
- building relationships with people that will help the conversation;
- identifying any problems that need to be addressed to help good conversation happen;
- holding each other accountable for tasks to be done;
- organizing the format and structure for the meeting; and
- helping to conduct the conversations themselves.

Good leaders for faith-based conversation are those most people trust, who are known both as good listeners and are seen to be fair, and people who are interested in helping people talk about things from the perspective of their faith.

Leaders will be most effective when they see their roles as serving the conversation, whatever the particular roles they may play.

Choosing a Topic for Dialogue

The choice of a conversation topic will be influenced by several key considerations. Normally topics will reflect important issues that the congregation or its community are facing, or issues in which potential participants are interested. Sometimes these issues are so urgent that they cannot be avoided. For congregations just beginning to learn to talk through tough issues together, start with an issue that is not too difficult or complex (unless you cannot avoid it). With a less controversial and emotionally-charged issue, the congregation can more easily learn the skills and master the behavior for talking through tough issues together. This can also build some confidence in its abilities to tackle much tougher issues. When that time comes, the congregation will already have some skills and positive experience of talking about issues upon which to draw.

In planning for actual conversation, your group will need to decide whether the topic or the intended conversation partners need a one-time occasion or a series of meetings to talk through the issue. When and where conversations are held are determined by very practical considerations. Some congregations have had success holding conversations on Sunday mornings during their education period. This works well for a group where the participants know one another, have a basic level of trust, and are used to interacting.

“Even for groups of people that are familiar with one another, it often takes about 90 minutes for the conversation to start to ‘flow’ or ‘float.’”

However, on some topics, even for groups of people that are familiar with one another, it takes about 90 minutes for the conversation to start to “flow” or “float.” This means that after about this length of time they become less self-conscious, so that the conversation takes on a life of its own and starts to go somewhere. You may need this much time to begin to have a significant conversation that meets the hopes and expectations of the participants. You may need to hold your conversations at a time

other than Sunday morning if you want enough time for a deep conversation. On the other hand, when you are just beginning to help your congregation learn these skills, it may be easier to gather a group at a time they are used to being at church, such as Sunday morning. You need to hold conversations when people are *able* to gather together.

Giving an Effective Invitation to Talk Together

Christians need an *effective* invitation to talk, one that makes them feel comfortable and safe in sharing their views with others. This will vary from group to group and depend upon their context and past experiences. Church often *has not* been a safe place to talk; people in many congregations have some painful memories of experiences which make them anxious about having public conversation in a congregation or a group. They also have other memories which make them more hopeful about having such conversations in the future. When you organize a conversation, appeal to these more hopeful memories and let people know in every way possible that efforts will be made to make this a “safe place” to talk.

Congregations are safe places to talk through social issues when there is a true desire to listen to others, even when some people do not agree with them or when what they have to say is painful to hear. They are also safe places when there is genuine respect for all participants in the conversation and people are not put down, either for who they are or what they say. Their integrity is not put in question. Congregations are safe when people are free to speak their minds and hearts without negative consequences later.

The Purpose of the Conversation

An important purpose of our conversations is to enrich our understandings and try to discern how God is acting and calling us to act on this issue *without* the expectation that all in the group will necessarily come to the same position, and also to build relationships and trust among the participants. Through these conversations, we can find or broaden areas of agreement and clarify areas of disagreement. Even with what seem like disagreements, probe beneath the surface to see why they are there and if they are as wide as they appear. Making a decision or reaching a consensus is something that the group can do later if they want to.

Another purpose of some conversations—especially when some decision needs to be made—is to arrive at a position or plan of action that the group as a whole can support, or at least go along with. Here persuasion becomes more important and the main focus is on the *deciding* and *acting together*.

The Actual Inviting

- Be clear about the purposes of the conversation and about why they are invited.
- Target as much publicity to the intended participants as practical. It helps to raise awareness of the event.



- Show them a list of proposed ground rules for the conversation such as the one on the next page.
- Emphasize that everyone's views need to be heard.
- Invite them to listen to the views and feelings of others.
- Encourage people to express how they view or feel about the topic being considered.
- Stress that as we communicate with others we may realize how the power of the Holy Spirit enables us to hear and understand what we would not on our own. Our talking with one another can become another Pentecost miracle of communication that transforms the Church (us!) in the process.
- Extend hospitality by offering food, child care, and/or transportation.

Picture two or more people engaged in conversation on the street, in a coffee shop, tavern, or other gathering spot . . . or a circle of family or friends in a home . . . or people talking together at a retreat or other “place away” from their normal life. Why do they want to talk together? What makes them willing, even eager to share what’s on their minds?

- Give a realistic picture about what people can expect; here are some suggestions:
 - describe what it will be like in oral invitations and/or written announcements such as newsletters;
 - talk to potential participants personally about what you expect it will be like;
 - demonstrate or role play a conversation like the one you want them to take part in;
 - listen carefully and respond to the concerns they have about participating;
 - ask them what will make such experience feel “safe” for them to express themselves; and
 - stress that people may learn new skills.

How to invite people to a genuine conversation:

- Choose a topic in which potential participants already have an interest in.
- State the topic in a way that is not unduly biased in favor of one position.
- Designate or find neutral or trusted persons to do the inviting.
- Invite people personally; it helps if more than one person encourages someone to come.
- Seek out persons with different life experiences, perspectives, and vested interests in the topic; recruit enough from each perspective so that no one will feel outnumbered or “set up.”
- Make a persuasive case for *why* they would want to participate and *how* they will grow in their understanding, skills, and ability to respond to this issue in their life and in God’s world.

Ground Rules for Conversation

To fulfill the hopes people have for conversation in their congregation, and to lessen their anxieties and fears about it, certain ground rules for conversation are helpful. These will help to build trust among participants and create a safe space in which good conversation is possible.

The purpose of this honest sharing is to open up discussion of things that need attention, rather than to close off discussion.

Follow the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”—even when you disagree with them.

Listen respectfully and carefully to others. This is your best way to begin to understand them. This also helps keep the “public space” of this conversation safe for candid conversation. By listening carefully to others, you help to build relationships of trust. You also move beyond our private feelings and thoughts to public space where it feels safe to share your differences, and where you can probe for values and positions that you hold in common.

Speak honestly about your thoughts and feelings. Honesty about your thoughts and feelings expresses respect for others. Personal thoughts, feelings, values, and experiences are as legitimate a part of the conversation as factual information. Conversation can be quite passionate and still be respectful, civil, and constructive.

Speak for yourself, rather than as a member of a group. You do not necessarily know what everyone else in the group is thinking or feeling—even if you’ve known someone for a long time and think you know them well. Use “I-statements” rather than “You-statements.” Likewise, it is not fair to expect other conversation partners to represent a whole group. Remember that they are only speaking for themselves.

Realize that the Holy Spirit is present and active in the conversation and has given each participant a part of the truth you are seeking to discern. But you won’t hear that if you judge too quickly what is being said!

A true conversation needs give and take. Give others plenty of opportunity to speak and respond. Help keep the discussion focused by sticking to the subject at hand.

Maintain confidentiality about matters people share with the group when it is asked or obviously appropriate. This helps to build and maintain trust.

Keep an open mind and heart. Try to understand others as much as possible from their point of view as they express it. Even those who disagree with you are not necessarily your enemies. Christ has broken down dividing walls of differences and hostilities (Ephesians 2).

Exercise care for group members who become upset over what is said during the conversation.

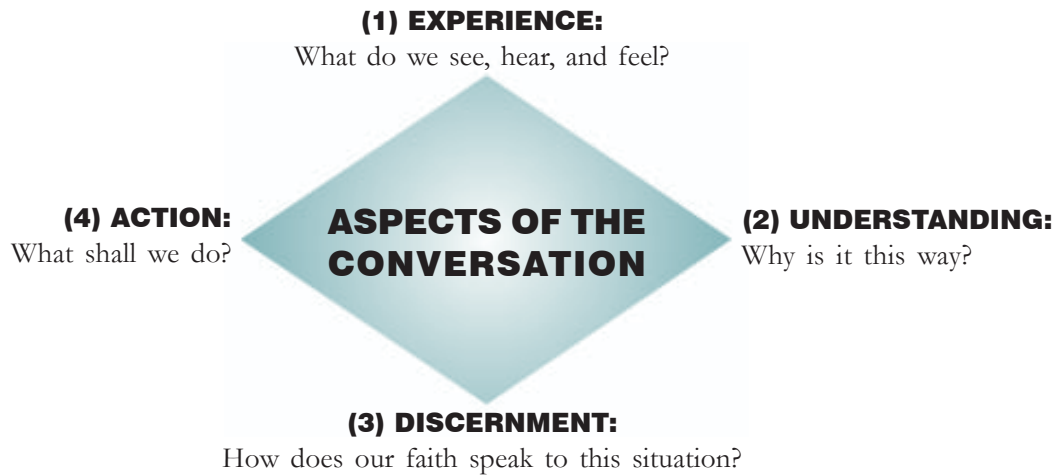
The outcome, quality and safety of the conversation is everyone’s responsibility.

In a conversation of this kind, listening is as important or more important as talking.

Genuine listening is not a passive activity, but an active, demanding one. Listen not only for the content of what is said, but for the way it is said—such as the language used, the tone of voice, the kind and level of feeling expressed, the body language and facial expression of the person speaking, whether they make eye contact, and so on. Also be attentive for what is not said. Being more conscious about this kind of deep listening will help us to hear and understand better what other people are saying.

Talking Together

The Conversation Happens: Exploring the Diamond



Let's assume we have gathered together to talk about a social issue in our lives or world today, and do so in light of our faith. Scripture is the source and norm for our faith and life, but that doesn't necessarily mean that our conversation *begins* with Scripture.

We first need to get a clearer sense of **(1)** how different people *experience* the issue and **(2)** a better *understanding* of the issue, how it came about, and what's at stake in it. This will take some time—if we do some deep listening and talking with one another, and are open to learning from the shared wisdom the participants bring to the discussion. After we have spent some time on this, we are ready to try **(3)** to *discern* together how our *faith*—as shaped by Scripture, theology, traditions, and practices of the Church—speaks to us regarding this issue, and how we experience and understand it today. Depending on the purpose of the conversation, this may lead us to consider **(4)** what *to do* in relation to the issue.

Certain ritual activities can help your group learn and use these four aspects of the conversation successfully. *Go through these four aspects in sequence to help learn the different aspects of this process.* After becoming skilled at using these four points of the diamond in conversation, you will begin to discover how they interact back and forth with one another. As your conversations take on a life of their own, the sequence is likely to vary.

Most participants have experiences or a point of view they want to share. They want to have their say. They also want to be heard. Because it is just as important for participants to hear others accurately as it is to be heard, it may be helpful for listeners to repeat back what another speaker had just said. Knowing beforehand that they will need to do this helps them listen more carefully. It also lets the speaker know that he or she is being heard. This helps to build trust and relationships, and lowers anxiety. This technique is especially helpful on issues that are particularly divisive and emotionally-charged, such as abortion, gun control, and racism.

A third kind of ritual that may be helpful if people are interrupting each other and having a hard time listening to each other is to have a ground rule (which you are prepared to enforce) that in order to speak, you have to be holding a particular object, such as a ball. To further encourage listening you could use the procedure of asking one listener to repeat what they heard. No one can add anything or respond until the object is passed on to someone else.



Leaders Serve the Conversation

The leadership team organizes and helps faith-based conversation to happen by serving the conversation. Doing so also serves the Holy Spirit. In order to be servants of the conversation, members of the leadership group need to:

- take as neutral a role as possible about the course and outcome of the conversation and treat all views respectfully and impartially;
- stay out of the way of the participants talking; do not control nor distract them;
- probe participants to go deeper either into their own views or, when appropriate, into the issues at stake;
- give or elicit from others appropriate feedback that lets people know how they are being heard;
- help clarify issues and areas of agreement or disagreement when needed, especially when the group reaches an impasse;
- enforce the ground rules of the conversation fairly and consistently, giving each participant opportunity to speak;
- try to draw out those who have been silent or reluctant to talk; and
- attend to all the tasks both of leading the conversation and serving the human needs of those in the group so the conversation can continue as smoothly as possible.

If it serves the conversation, leaders may find it helpful to note important points made by the participants on a chalkboard or easel pad. This should be done as naturally as possible without distracting the conversation participants.

It is the participants' conversation and their responsibility to make it happen. It is usually freeing for leaders to realize that this is not their responsibility, nor is it something that they can make happen by sheer force of will or a "bag of tricks."

Preparations and Introductions

You've prepared, invited participants, gone over the ground rules, and decided who will tend to what needs to be done for the sake of the conversation. Now you're ready to have the conversation.

Small Groups

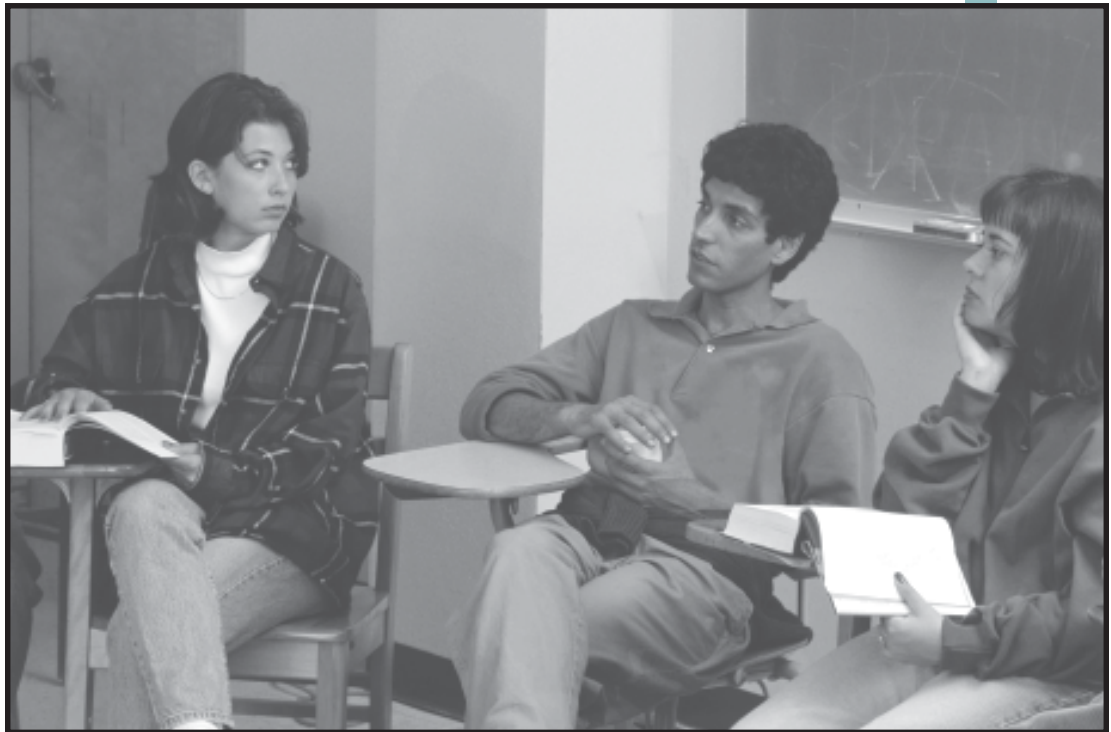
Most faith-based conversation works best in small groups, especially for a congregation just beginning to do this. Groups of six to ten people are ideal. Arrange seating so all the people can sit facing each other during their conversation. Ideally, you will have one leadership team member for each group. If not, team members present will need to circulate between groups to see how things are going and to help when necessary.

Welcome

A short devotion with prayer for the presence and guiding of the Holy Spirit, and for those affected by your topic, will be appropriate. Review what the conversation is about and from where the topic comes. Introduce those who will be assisting the conversation.

Introductions

There are certain rituals we use when we meet someone, such as shaking hands and exchanging greetings. These rituals help to establish relationships and build trust. Faith-based conversation about social or ethical issues can also benefit from certain ritual acts that help to establish relationships and to build trust for venturing into deeper waters of sensitive topics. Make sure everyone in the group is introduced, if they don't know each other already. If the leaders think it is appropriate, the group could participate in a brief, non-threatening "ice breaker" to help participants feel comfortable with one another. They might also be invited to tell why they each came to this conversation, why the topic is important to them, how it connects with their lives, and what they hope will happen through it.



“There are certain rituals we use when we meet someone, such as shaking hands and exchanging greetings. These rituals help to establish relationships and build trust.”



Getting Started

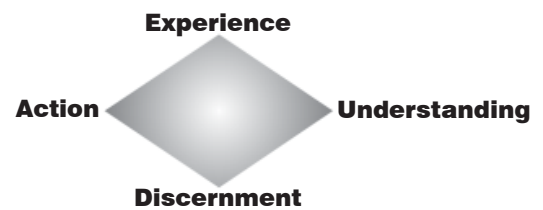
Review the ground rules for conversation with the participants by sharing copies of page 10 with them. Ask if there are any suggestions for additional ground rules, including those participants feel might enhance their feeling of safety during the conversation. Get explicit agreement to abide by the ground rules or renegotiate them if someone objects to some of them. Discussion leaders will need to exercise some judgment, however, about changes to the ground rules, and whether these changes will actually help open, respectful, and civil dialogue.

Experiences are best related in personal stories. Tell stories about your experiences on this issue to one another. How do your experiences or personal stories affect how you view or respond to the issue? What can you conclude from this?

Watching a short video or hearing a brief personal story from someone outside the participant group may help get conversation started. These are ways for people to get some personal distance from the issue at first, which can help them become engaged in the dialogue. Or, if you have asked them all to read something in common beforehand, you could

begin reflecting together on a particular passage which a team member reads aloud. Then you can guide the conversation through the four aspects of the conversation as follows.

Working the Diamond



EXPERIENCE: **What do you hear, see, feel?**

Our conversation needs to be grounded in how people experience the issue—the actual human points of contact. Our immediate emotional reactions or associations with an issue are important. They are usually connected with our own personal histories, our cultural heritage, or the communities with which we identify. Ask yourselves:

- *What* in our experience has especially affected how we view this issue?
- *Why* do we have these reactions or associations?
- *What* are the common threads in the various stories we have heard about this issue?
- *How* does this issue “hit home” for us? How are actual persons or communities affected?
- *How* does this issue raise *tensions* or *possible conflicts*? (within and among persons or groups).

Pay attention to important commonalities and differences in how members of the group experience the issue. What are some reasons for the differences? How can these differences complement or give us a fuller picture, rather than leading to disagreement or conflict?

UNDERSTANDING: Why is it this way?

Here we move beyond our own personal experience and reactions in order to see the issue or examine it more objectively. We seek to understand the wider picture. We use the minds God has given us. We might ask:

- *How has it come about?* What are its causes? What's involved? What is especially key?
- *How is this related to other issues?*
- *How is this related to and affected by the wider culture?*
- *What's really going on?*
- *Why is it this way?*
- *What's really at stake?* Who gains and who loses by the way things are? What are the personal, economic, or social costs involved?
- *How are all these things related to the stories and experiences you discussed above?*

Sometimes members of the group can help us understand, depending on the issue and their knowledge of it. But often we need to turn to data or analyses that come from others, especially through secular sources (yes, God is at work here too!), or through studies, messages, or social statements of the ELCA (see Appendix B). Read yourself and suggest pre- or post-conversation reading that may enhance participants' understanding.

A “Good Enough” Understanding from Different Points of View: Many issues today—especially those that pose difficult ethical questions or dilemmas—are complex and hard to understand. Don't let that bog you down! The intent here is to gain *good enough* understanding from reliable sources and from enough *different* perspectives so that the appropriate faith questions can be engaged. Without an adequate understanding of what's going on, we may look for biblical or theological “answers” that really don't speak to the deeper matters at stake in this issue.

DISCERNMENT: How is our faith—and God—related to this?

Sources of our Faith: Here we turn to Scripture, to the traditions and teachings the Church has confessed and lived out through the ages, as well as to other forms of witness to the faith, such as traditions within denominations or those of particular congregations.

The temptation is to turn to one particular passage in Scripture that seems to relate to the issue at hand, and to use that as a “proof text” for a position arrived at on other grounds. In some cases, there *are* clear scriptural stances, for example, in opposition to killing, adultery, or unjust treatment of the poor (even though there may be differences in how particular situations are dealt with). But often Scripture is less than clear about how people of faith should respond to issues today. That's why we need to talk together with one another. What we hear and how we interpret what we hear from Scripture is incomplete, partial, and affected by our own experience and understandings. Our own vested interests can get in the way.

Our world is significantly different from that of biblical times. A challenge of the church in every time and place is to discern how God is speaking to us through God's Word and what that implies for how we view and act on issues we face in our world today.

Discernment can be the most challenging part of the conversation, and where we may especially sense the power of the Holy Spirit to be active in and through our discernment.

Seeing Scripture in a Wider Context: Rather than looking just for specific passages that speak to your understanding of this, also think of:

- What connections do we see between what we're discussing and our faith?
- What passages and themes, stories and characters, commandments, or images and metaphors relate to the issue? What do these images or metaphors tell us about God, about the people in the Bible, or about the world we live in? What does God seem to be up to? What laws or commandments seem to apply to this issue, and how? Do all these things point in the same direction? If not, how can we make sense of this diversity?
- How do the creeds and beliefs of the church help us understand both what Scripture is saying and what this situation means?
- What themes from the Lutheran Confessions speak to this situation (e.g., law and gospel, sin and grace)?
- How does this issue cause us to re-think or deepen some understandings about God and humanity, or our usual ethical stances?
- How does a biblical vision of what God is about enable us to see what we would not otherwise see, or to imagine new possibilities?

Guidelines for Discerning How God is Speaking to Us through Scripture

- Turn to the Bible **after** you have discussed your experience and understanding of the issue—
how is God speaking to what's at stake on this matter today?
- Be open to how the **full variety** of Biblical themes, stories and characters, commandments, and images and metaphors may cast light on the issue—
give free exercise to your Christian imaginations.
- Don't overlook the **context** of the biblical passages—
what was being addressed and why?
- Don't use the Bible as a **weapon**, or to "trump" others—
"It says so here in the Bible!" can end any conversation.
- Be wary of **self-righteousness** regarding **the** biblical answer—
"for in passing judgement on another you condemn yourself" (Romans 2:1).
- **Don't** put your **heart and head** on hold—
God may use your emotions, common sense, and reason to get through to you.
- Be aware that your interpretation of Scripture is **partial**—
you need what others bring to complement and to correct your point of view.
- Be open to how Scripture may **criticize** or **challenge** any perspectives or positions people may bring to it—
be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2).
- Be wary of **explaining away** clear, widespread commands in Scripture—
note how frequently, for example, God calls us to respond to the needs of the poor.
- Faithful discernment occurs **in community** with others—
be cautious about biblical answers you come up with all on your own.
- Be **surprised** at how God may be speaking, prodding, and challenging you as you discuss social issues with other Christians in light of the witness of Scripture.

ACTION:

How shall we respond? What should we do?

Many conversations are likely to end with the above faith discernment. That by itself can be helpful to participants as they seek to deal with social issues they face in their own lives. However, many groups either have a real need to come to a position or resolution on a matter, or will feel frustrated if there are no actions that result from this discussion. It may be important or healthy for a group to agree to do at least one thing together as a result of their discussion.

In considering what to do, ask:

- What especially informs how we will respond? (e.g., Christian love or the Ten Commandments)
- What is the community context of this issue?
- What alternative approaches or actions are there?
- Who will be affected by what is done?
- Which would be consistent with who people are (their character)?
- Which would lead to the best over-all consequences?
- Which would best respect the rights or dignity of persons?
- Which would best promote the common good or justice?
- What principles would you be willing to apply to other situations?

After considering these questions, the group can plan how to deal with the issue which builds on its earlier insights and conversation. Work through the following steps to create a plan of action:

Creating a Plan of Action¹

- Imagine what you would like to see with regard to the issues. How do you hope things could be? Write down the main points of your vision.
- Identify the major obstacles you would face in implementing your vision.
- Outline a strategy for realizing your vision. What are the main things you would need to do in order to overcome these obstacles and get closer to realizing your vision? What witness to the Gospel will this response make?
- Create a plan of action based on your basic strategy:
 - What specific actions will you take?
 - What measurable outcomes do you expect?
 - Who will take what assignments for these actions?
 - To whom will people be accountable?
 - What resources will be needed, and how will you get them?
 - What is your timetable for action?
- Carry out your plan of action.
- At some appropriate later point in time, evaluate how things went. If your group thinks either that it missed the mark or that you could come even closer to it, you may want to revisit these steps.

1. Source: Based on material in Patrick R. Keifert, Pat Taylor Ellison and Ronald W. Duty, *Growing Healthier Congregations, or How to Talk Together When Nobody's Listening*, (St. Paul: Church Innovations Institute, c. 1998). Used by permission.



Concluding the Conversation

As your conversation draws to a close, ask: “What have we learned? What insights have we gained? What are we taking from this conversation?” Some of these will be the insights of individuals, but people may also have some insights in common. These insights may also be useful in evaluating the conversation and planning future ones, or in helping the group decide what it wants to do next.

If your group has decided to take further action, this would be a good time to review its decisions, the commitments people have made, and how their actions will be monitored and evaluated, and the results shared.

If there are to be further conversations, remind the participants when and where they will be held.

Thank the participants for coming and for their contributions to the dialogue.

It is always appropriate to conclude a conversation with prayer concerning the issue, those it affects, and the participants in your discussion, and conclude by praying the Lord's Prayer.

A New Sense of What It Means to Be the Church

As talking together as Christians about tough social issues becomes a learned, ongoing practice, we begin to sense that this activity is an important aspect of what it means to be the Church and to carry on its public ministry and witness.

“We see that moral struggle, discernment and formation are not optional ‘extras’ alongside the understandings of church which come from our various traditions. They also challenge those traditional understandings, helping us learn from God’s world how better to be church. . . . The most promising way is arranging a common table, open to participation by the whole people of God, to see what emerges as living church when faith is freely shared on the burning issues we face” *Ecclesiology and Ethics*, ed. Thomas F. Best and Martin Robra (World Council of Churches, 1997), 47, 107.

At the birth of the Church at Pentecost (see Acts 2), the Holy Spirit enabled diverse people to communicate in ways that moved beyond the usual barriers. The Spirit continues to do so in ways that strengthen and deepen who we are in relation to God and one another. Those who are “other” from us challenge us when we mistake our reason and experience as being the case for all people. With new eyes we begin to see how God is active in the world—in the people, the social issues, ethical challenges, the suffering, and the delights that we discover there. We find that our relationship with God grows stronger, our relationship with people in our congregation grows deeper, and our lives and the

life of our congregation are transformed. As these things continue to happen, God works to transform the world around us.

What we confess as the Church becomes embodied in how we are in relation with one another and how we witness to God’s action in the world. Through the Spirit we participate in Christ’s death and resurrection. The power of the cross emphasizes weakness and vulnerability, rather than dominating, controlling, or “being right.” It is relational, incarnational, and generative of new forms of human connection and community. The conversation of the Christian community involves all the members of the community

attempting to discern in every way possible what God is doing in our world, and what God is calling us to do, in congregations and other expressions of the church, as well as in our daily lives. That is why talking together as Christians about tough social issues is so pivotal in what it means to be the Church.

In the Introduction, it was noted that certain attitudes, values, knowledge and skills are needed for congregations to talk together constructively. They are key elements in this new sense of what it means to be the church in our time.² Congregations that are able to talk about tough social issues have certain **attitudes and values**. They are ready to talk about them, are hopeful about what will happen through these conversations, and long to discern what God may be calling them to do about these issues. They believe that their vocation as a community of faith is to serve God in the world, where God is creating and sustaining life. This is why they consider their congregation to be a public place for talking together as Christians about tough social issues that arise in the world and their lives.

Congregations who regularly talk through tough issues have also learned **appropriate knowledge and skills**, such as those outlined in this resource.

- Their members have learned the art of listening carefully to others, and are willing to alter old habits that get in the way of constructive conversation.
- They imaginatively connect Scripture and Christian teaching with events and situations in daily life in order to understand how God may be speaking to them today.
- They test what they discern by engaging with people different from themselves. They regularly practice hospitality toward their own members and toward people outside their congregation.
- They no longer fear or avoid conflictual issues because they realize that conflict can be an organic part of living congregations in which God is active.
- Although they may not feel that learned regarding the Bible and Christian teachings, they have a “good enough” knowledge to proceed, trusting that the Holy Spirit will guide them in their conversation.
- Both participants and leaders serve the conversation in order that all involved may be freed for greater communion with God and one another, for the sake of service in the world.

With these attitudes, values, a body of knowledge, and skills, congregations can make talking through tough social issues together a regular part of how they put their Christian faith into practice as a natural outgrowth of their Word and sacrament ministry. Congregations grow into such attitudes, values, knowledge and skills by constant practice of talking about issues. Your congregation can, too. We hope you try it!

“Congregations that are able to talk about tough social issues have certain attitudes and values and regularly talk through tough issues using learned knowledge and skills.”

2. Based on: Pat Taylor Ellison, “Doing Faith-based Conversation: Metaphors for Congregations and Their Leaders,” and Patrick R. Keifert, “Return of the Congregation to Theological Education” in Keifert, ed., *Testing the Spirits* (tentative title, forthcoming). Used by permission.

Resources

(Appendix A)

This resource is intended as an introductory guide for congregations and other faith groups that want to try having conversation on their own. Other congregations and groups may want additional help and can contact experienced groups for information or training, such as those listed here:

The Center for New Community

The Center provides training and support in a faith-based process for conversation and community organizing around various issues of importance to congregations and their local communities. Ask about “Revitalizing Church and Community.” 6429 W. North Avenue, Suite 101, Oak Park, Illinois, 60302, phone 708-848-0319.

Church Innovations Institute

The Institute provides training and support in a faith-based process for conversation, decision-making and action for congregations and faith-based groups. Ask about “Growing Healthier Congregations, or How to Talk Together When Nobody’s Listening.” 1456 Brantson Street, Saint Paul, Minnesota, 55108, phone 651-646-7633.

Common Ground Network for Life and Choice

Common Ground Network for Life and Choice provides resource material for organizing and exploration all sides of the abortion issue in a respectful way which includes participants faith-perspectives and values in the conversation. It uses conflict mediation techniques also applicable to other values-based conflicts. Search for Common Ground, 1601 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C., phone 202-265-4300, www.searchforcommonground.org. Training and facilitation is available by contacting Mary Jacksteit, 7128 Willow Avenue, Takoma Park, Maryland, 20912, phone 301-270-5561.

ELCA Youth Ministries

ELCA Youth Ministries has resources to help talking and acting on tough issues in youth groups. See: Pat Taylor Ellison, “Risking Difficult Discussions,” and Patricia Beattie Jung, “Ground Rules for Risky Conversations,” in *Dancing at the Cross Roads: 1999-2000 School Year Resources for Youth Ministries, 2000 Playbook* (AFP order code 69-7437). Order from the Augsburg Fortress Distribution Service at 800-328-4648. For additional information, contact Julie Sevig, ELCA Division for Congregational Ministries, 8765 West Higgins Road, Chicago, IL 60631, phone 773-380-2596.

Florida-Bahamas Synod, ELCA

A Synod-sponsored group offers resources and assistance to congregations in the Florida-Bahamas Synod wanting to talk about issues from the perspective of their faith. Contact either Judith Bunker at Lutheran Services Florida, 16201 SW 95th Avenue, Suite 101, Miami, FL 33176, phone 800-651-1853, or Ana Cobiella-Olson, 88181 Old Hwy A-41, Islamorada, FL, 33036, phone 305-852-2246.

InterReligious Council of Central New York

The InterReligious Council facilitates dialogues on race and social diversity for congregations and community groups in and around Syracuse, New York, using a dialog circles approach. Ask about “Community Wide Dialogue.” 3049 East Genesee, Syracuse, New York, 13224, phone 315-449-3552, ext. 119.

Lutheran Office for Governmental Affairs

Assistant Director Faye Coddling offers assistance to ELCA congregations and groups wanting to discuss public policy issues from the perspective of their faith. 122 “C” Street, NW, Suite 125, Washington, DC, 20001, phone 202-626-7935.

The Park Ridge Center for the Study of Health, Faith, and Ethics

The Park Ridge Center has produced a booklet of principles and guidelines for those who want to bring religion into discussions in the public and civil sphere of life. Ask Bernice Chantos about “Religion and Public Discourse: Principles and Guidelines for Religious Participants” 211 East Ontario, Suite 800, Chicago, Illinois, 60611-3215, phone 312-266-2222.

The Study Circles Resource Center

The Study Circles Resource Center offers training to congregations wanting to explore community issues with other congregations in which faith perspectives are part of the process. Ask about “Study Circles in Paired Congregations.” P.O. Box 203, 697 Pomfret Street, Pomfret, Connecticut, 06258, phone 860-928-2616.

United Church of Christ

The United Church Board for World Ministries sponsors training to congregations and groups in a process for faith-based conversation and action. Ask about “See—Judge—Act.” Contact the Rev. Charles McCollough, Office for Church in Society, 110 Maryland Avenue, N.E., Washington, DC, 20002, phone 202-543-1517.

Some Recent ELCA Resources on Social Issues

(Appendix B)

Title of Document	Code	Cost
Abortion (statement, 1991)	69-0062	15¢
El Aborto (pronunciamento, 1991)	69-0064	15¢
Using the Social Statement on Abortion (study, 1993)	67-3329	s/h only
AIDS and the Church's Ministry of Caring (message, 1989)	67-1181	s/h only
El SIDA y el Ministerio Compasivo de la Iglesia (mensaje, 1989)	67-1182	s/h only
Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice (statement, 1993)	69-1380	10¢
El Cuidado de la Creación: Visión, Esperanza, y Justicia (pronunciamento, 1993)	69-2382	10¢
Christian Faith and U.S. Political Life Today (discussion resource, 1995)	69-1890	10/\$1.00
Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective (statement, 1991)	69-2102	10¢
La Iglesia en la Sociedad: Una Perspectiva Luterana (pronunciamento, 1991)	69-6063	10¢
Community Violence (message, 1994)	69-6598	10/50¢
La Violencia en la Comunidad (mensaje, 1995)	69-6599	10/\$2.50
Death Penalty, The (statement, 1991)	69-2571	10¢
La Pena de Muerte (pronunciamento, 1991)	69-6077	10¢
Educational Choice: A Discussion Guide (study, 1996)	69-3131	\$1.00
Two Essays on Educational Choice: Lutheran Perspectives (study, 1996)	69-9172	\$2.00
End-of-Life Decisions (message, 1992)	69-3290	10/50¢
Decisiones al Final de la vida (mensaje, 1992)	69-2595	40¢
For Peace in God's World (statement, 1995)	69-3920	25¢
Por la Paz en el Mundo de Dios (pronunciamento, 1996)	69-7474	25¢
Using the Social Statement For Peace in God's World (study, 1996)	69-9331	\$2.00
Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture (statement, 1993)	69-3952	10¢
Liberados en Cristo: Raza, Feticnicidad y Cultura (pronunciamento, 1993)	69-6231	10¢
Using the Social Statement on Freed in Christ: Race Ethnicity, and Culture (study, 1994)	69-9330	\$2.00
Gambling: A Study for Congregations (study, 1998)	69-4110	\$1.00
<i>Genetic Testing & Screening: Critical Engagement at the Intersection of Faith and Science</i> (book, 1998)	34-11-2108	\$10.00
Give Us this Day Our Daily Bread: Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All (study, 1996)	69-4219	\$3.00
Homelessness (message, 1990)	67-1205	s/h only
La Situación de la Gente Sin Vivienda (mensaje, 1990)	67-1210	s/h only
Immigration (message, 1998)	69-6605	10/\$1.00
Inmigración (mensaje, 1998)	69-8520	10/\$1.00
Our Church and Social Issues (discussion resource, 1989)	69-7290	25¢
<i>The Promise of Lutheran Ethics</i> (book, 1998)	1-3121	\$18.00
Living the Faith: A Lutheran Perspective on Ethics (study, 1999)	69-6330	\$1.25
Sexuality: Some Common Convictions (message, 1996)	69-8269	10/\$1.00
La Sexualidad: Algunas Convicciones Comunes (mensaje, 1996)	69-6601	10/\$1.00
Stories of Gay People and Family Members (Video, 1999)	67-1257	s/h only
Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All (statement, 1999)	69-8615	35¢
Talking Together as Christians about Homosexuality: A Guide for Congregations (Packet containing Leader's Guide, Participant's book & video: "Two Ethical Perspectives," 1999)	67-1258	s/h only
Talking Together as Christians about Homosexuality—Leader's Guide (1999)	67-1255	s/h only
Talking Together as Christians about Homosexuality—Participant's Book (1999)	67-1256	s/h only

To order single, complimentary copies of statements or messages, regardless of cost, please call the Department for Studies at 800-638-3522 ext. 2718. (Note: books, videos, multiple copies, or cost items should be ordered from the ELCA Distribution Service at 800-328-4648; a shipping charge applies for each order regardless of the number or cost of the items ordered.) Many of these resources are available online at www.elca.org/dcs/studies.html.



This resource is available for free download at www.elca.org/dcs/talkingtogether.html.
All of the statements and messages of the ELCA, as well as many other resources noted in Appendix B,
are also available online at www.elca.org/dcs/studies.html.



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