



A DECLARATION OF THE Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Muslim Community

As the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), we assure our Muslim neighbors of our love and respect and reaffirm our commitment to working together in our shared communities for the common good. As people who know that we live by the grace and in the sight of the one, almighty, and merciful God, we have confidence that our engagement will result in mutual learning, growth, and enrichment.

We make this declaration, realizing full well that interlocking forms of hatred – anti-Muslim bigotry, anti-Semitism, racism, xenophobia – are all around us.¹ Our Muslim neighbors experience subtle and not-so-subtle acts of aggression and violence, including vandalism against their community centers and masjids (mosques). In the United States, such bigotry is often amplified by political rhetoric and social media. We in the ELCA emphatically reject such attitudes and actions, and the malice and fear that fuel them. Anti-Muslim hatred is antithetical to our Christian faith and counter to Lutheran teachings, which focus on God's *good* news for the world² and instill in us a *love* for our neighbor, the kind of love that casts out fear (1 John 4:18).

The ELCA is part of a global Lutheran movement, a living legacy of the theological tradition associated with Martin Luther (1483-1546). In 2017, the ELCA marked the 500th anniversary of the Reformation by lifting up our ecumenical and inter-religious partnerships. After more than 50 years of dialogue and cooperation, our reflections about our identity as Lutherans have become inseparable from those about our ecumenical and inter-religious relations. We have looked back at the divisions of the past in order to look forward to our common life together in the future. We also rejoice at the extraordinary progress that has been made in the reconciliation of relationships.

In 2019 such reflections led the ELCA Churchwide Assembly to adopt "A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment: A Policy Statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America."³

1 Though this declaration is specifically addressed to the Muslim community, it should be read and interpreted alongside the church's other declarations, especially "[A Declaration of the ELCA to the Jewish Community](#)," "[A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment](#)," "[A Declaration of the ELCA to People of African Descent](#)," and "[A Declaration of the ELCA to American Indian and Alaska Native People](#)."

2 The word "evangelical," which we have intentionally kept in the name of our denomination, comes from the Greek *euangelion*, "good news."

3 "A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment: A Policy Statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America" (adopted 2019), available at: [Inter-Religious Policy Statement - Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#) (ELCA.org).

This declaration commits the ELCA to pray for our neighbors of other religions and worldviews; to seek understanding; to stand in solidarity with them; to practice hospitality; to seek counsel and mutuality in planning and decision-making; to “confess when our words or deeds (or lack thereof) cause offense, harm, or violence to our neighbors” and to “repent and seek forgiveness from God and reconciliation with our neighbors.”⁴

During these past years we have had the opportunity to re-read, reflect upon, and interpret for our time the voluminous writings of Martin Luther. In them we find words that edify and give life. But we also encounter Luther’s crude polemics, which at times portray Islam in negative ways and reduce Muslims to tropes (the fearsome “Turk”) in the face of military threats. We are reminded that, for Luther, the safeguarding of precious teaching entailed the sharpest possible rejection of difference.

We in the ELCA have learned, with and from our partners, a different way – that of *dialogue*, in which difference is acknowledged and honored. We have experienced dialogue as an occasion for genuine learning, honest conversation, retrieval of neglected aspects of one’s own tradition, fresh insight, and the cultivation of respect and friendship.⁵ We have discovered that the precious teaching we have inherited is not at risk, but enriched, through dialogue. With our partners, we have for many years been exploring this way – of friendship, mutual understanding and accountability, joint service, and witness. We are committed to pursuing this path of dialogue *together*.

We also are determined to learn from our history. Luther’s characterizations of Muslims were borne not out of dialogue but at a dehumanizing distance – fueled by fear and end-of-world expectations. Through loving our neighbors, we have come to reject Luther’s polemics. We do not dismiss our history but take it to heart. By embracing dialogue instead of rejecting difference, we have come to realize that we can truly love our neighbors only when we know them.

Indeed, we recommit ourselves to the heart of our theological inheritance. Though we are a fractured and fractious people, our calling is to love God and our neighbor. As Luther himself put it in his best-known writing, the “Small Catechism,” the commandment “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” means not only that “we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations” but also that we should “come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.”⁶ On the basis of this teaching, we in the ELCA seek friendship and solidarity with our Muslim neighbors, not in spite of our Lutheran Christian commitments but because of them.

Diverse communities of Muslims and Lutherans have long been part of North America. These communities have engaged in a dialogue of life in towns and cities across the continent. The

4 Ibid, 11.

5 See: Carol Schersten LaHurd, et al, *Engaging Others, Knowing Ourselves: A Lutheran Calling in a Multi-Religious World* (Lutheran University Press, 2016).

6 Quoted in “A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment,” 4.

years since 9/11 have been especially important for deepening these relationships, in North America and throughout the world, including through the Lutheran World Federation.⁷ We acknowledge with gratitude a series of efforts by Muslims to build peaceful communities and societies, including “A Common Word Between Us and You” (2007)⁸ and the “Marrakesh Declaration” (2016).⁹

Given the disunity around us and the fear of the unknown, we sense the renewed urgency to nurture relationships and build communities in which we look upon one another with respect and esteem, in which people feel safe and loved, and in which we seek the common good together. As the ELCA, we recommit¹⁰ ourselves to learning from and with Muslims, providing educational resources on Christian-Muslim relations for use across the church;¹¹ to dialogue and friendship, seeking opportunities for relationship-building at every level of the ELCA; and to solidarity, standing shoulder to shoulder¹² with our Muslim neighbors in the face of bigotry and injustice, pursuing peace for all people and creation.

“While Luther himself could have never anticipated this, we have come to expect great joy in our companionship for the journey” with our Muslim neighbors.¹³ May we be “called to one another as to a holy site, where God’s living revelation in the world is received in reverence among the faithful and not in fear of our neighbors.”¹⁴ And may almighty God grant us the will and strength to pursue this path, success in our shared work for the common good, and joy in our encounters.

7 See [“LWF and Islamic Relief Sign Memorandum of Understanding”](#) and [“Three Major Faith-based Organizations Commit to Welcome the Stranger”](#)

8 See [“A Common Word Between Us and You”](#)

9 Download at marrakeshdeclaration.org

10 See Assembly Action CA 16.02.03p, [“My Muslim Neighbor,”](#) from the 2016 ELCA Churchwide Assembly.

11 See [“Muslim Relations,”](#) Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA.org).

12 In 2010, the ELCA became a founding member of the [Shoulder to Shoulder Campaign: Standing with American Muslims, Advancing American Ideals](#), and provides leadership in this interfaith coalition to end anti-Muslim bigotry and violence.

13 Eaton, Elizabeth A., “Foreword,” in *More Than a Cup of Coffee or Tea*, ed. David Grafton (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2021) ix.

14 In response to “A Common Word Between Us and You,” Lutheran World Federation President (and ELCA Presiding Bishop) Mark S. Hanson expressed his belief “that Jews, Muslims, and Christians are called to one another as to a holy site, where God’s living revelation in the world is received in reverence among the faithful and not in fear of our neighbors.” Available on the “A Common Word” website: www.acommonword.com/response-from-bishop-rev-mark-s-hanson/