



ELCA GUIDELINES

**FOR MINISTRY
IN A
MULTI-RELIGIOUS
WORLD**



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

BACKGROUND

In 2019 the ELCA Churchwide Assembly adopted “A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment: A Policy Statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America” to guide the inter-religious work and witness of this church.

The 2019 declaration acknowledges that “there are many pastoral considerations beyond the scope of this declaration, for example, the common reality of multi-religious family life. Therefore, the church recognizes the need for the ongoing development of appropriate pastoral aids, including guidelines for inter-religious marriages, pastoral counseling, religious education, and joint prayer services” (p. 5).

In 2020 an ad hoc committee was appointed by the Office of the Presiding Bishop to develop such guidelines, co-chaired by Darrell Jodock and Mark Swanson. Other committee members were Jennifer Baker-Trinity, Joan Conroy, Khader El-Yateem, Kristen Glass Perez, Don Kreiss, Margaret Rose (The Episcopal Church), and Kara Skatrud Baylor (2020). The committee was staffed by John Hessian, Kathryn Lohre, Kristen Opalinski and Carmelo Santos.

The committee explored existing resources, surveyed the church and its ecumenical and inter-religious partners, and drew on the collective wisdom of all to develop the document before you. These guidelines are consistent with the inter-religious policy of this church as expressed in [“A Declaration of the ELCA to the Jewish Community”](#) (1994), [“A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment”](#) (2019) and [“A Declaration of the ELCA to the Muslim Community”](#) (2022).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

GENERAL GUIDLINES	4
PRAYER SERVICES	9
RESPONDING TO TRAGEDY AND CRISIS	12
SOCIAL MINISTRIES	13
PASTORAL CARE	15
WEDDINGS	17
FUNERALS	19
RELIGIOUS RITES AND CEREMONIES, INCLUDING ELCA ORDINATIONS AND INSTALLATIONS	20
INTER-RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS	21

GENERAL GUIDELINES

This set of “Guidelines for Ministry in a Multi-Religious World” grows out of a promise for “pastoral guidelines” found in the ELCA’s 2019 “A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment.”¹ Its purpose is to provide suggestions for local leaders who plan joint services or organize cooperative projects for the good of the larger community. Its recommendations are also offered in the hope of facilitating and inspiring more opportunities for fruitful encounters among neighbors and family members from different religious backgrounds.

Lutheran Theological Affirmations

Among the familiar Lutheran theological affirmations that undergird this document, five interlocking concepts should be identified as particularly important.

1. The gospel, or good news, is the heart of our faith. It inspires and shapes the way we engage with our neighbors. As “A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment” reminds us, “This is the gospel — the good news of what God has done, is doing, and will do for all in Christ. It is a gift from God, freely given, without any requirements that need to be fulfilled” (p. 2). The gospel reveals God as generous and merciful. This means we sometimes discover God working in surprising ways and in unexpected settings.
2. God is active in the world, working behind the scenes in and through humans and other creatures, institutions, religions and cultures to foster whole, healthy, life-giving relations. Using Luther’s images, every human is potentially a “mask” of God’s presence and activity or a “channel” of God’s good gifts (James 1:17). These gifts include everything from food and shelter to love and justice (Matthew 6:31-34). Luther affirmed, for example, that it was not necessary for a ruler to be Christian in order to govern well and hence serve as an instrument by which God bestows blessings on the community.² Therefore, as Lutherans, we are called to be on the lookout for God’s presence and activity in and through our neighbors and in God’s world.
3. All humans are created in the image of God, even if fallen and marred by sin (Genesis 1:27). This bestows on every single human being an inalienable dignity that is to be respected at all times, regardless of a person’s religious or ideological affiliation, race, gender, nationality, or anything else. Our calling is to be each other’s keepers (Genesis 4:9).
4. Vocation is central to our service in the world. God calls all humans to serve their neighbors and their communities, to pass along to others the myriad gifts we all receive from God.³ This call to aid others is addressed with particular urgency to the baptized. It extends to all neighbors, whatever their religious identity, and it invites the members of various religious communities and ideologies to come together to cooperate for the common good.
5. Humans are complex, tension-filled and paradoxical. Whether religious or not, whether working individually or corporately, they are capable both of grave mistakes and sinful acts that bring harm to others (Romans 3:10) and of wonderful acts of generosity that can bring joy, wholeness and hope to others (Luke 19:8). Wherever humans look, including in the mirror, they see flawed human beings who are loved by God, called to serve the neighbor and the community and capable of change for the better. Because of our flaws, we must engage in truth-telling, repentance, reorientation (i.e., *metanoia*) and reconciliation to foster strong, healthy relationships.

1 Commitment 12, “[A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment: A Policy Statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#),” (ELCA Churchwide Assembly, 2019), 13. These guidelines use two terms frequently: “multi-religious” and “inter-religious.” To clarify the distinction, “multi-religious” refers to the reality of religious diversity, whereas “inter-religious” implies intentional engagement among various religious traditions and worldviews.

2 Luther, Martin, “On Secular Authority,” 1523.

3 See Luther’s explanation of the Fourth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Give us our daily bread,” in his Large Catechism.

Building on these foundations, this preface identifies some attitudes that serve well in any inter-religious setting. They are the foundation for anything that follows. The document then makes suggestions regarding specific kinds of interaction: prayer services, services in response to a tragedy, family events, cooperative projects and the like.

The recommendations in this document are based on the experiences, expertise and collective wisdom of the more than 2,600 people who responded to a survey conducted by the ELCA churchwide organization in 2020 and the members of the ad hoc committee who worked on this project, as well as on input from various ELCA leaders and our ecumenical and inter-religious partners.

As will become clear, by far the most crucial step is to expend the time and effort to build relationships of trust.

Meeting One Another With Expectancy

The world benefits from a rich diversity of cultures, races, religions and so much more. Engaging in ministry amid such diversity presents both serious challenges and wonderful opportunities. It requires a delicate balance between humble curiosity and respectful witness. If with humble curiosity we approach each other in our differences as “holy sites”⁴ where we expect to encounter something sacred, we can begin to appreciate the beauty, wisdom and goodness present in each other’s traditions. We may even come to experience a “holy envy,”⁵ which does not diminish the differences among religions as it makes space to appreciate them.

From the depths of the richness of each of our own traditions, we can share with each other, “as neighbors bearing gifts,”⁶ what we have received from our ancestors in the faith: sacred stories, prayers, rituals, teachings, values, etc., but always keeping in mind that, even in revelation, God remains hidden (Luther). The mystery remains. God is greater than even the best perceptions found in any single tradition.

Acknowledging Wounds and Seeking Healing

Sadly, our religious traditions are not innocent, and the encounters between them have often been marred by misunderstanding, prejudice, abuse and violence. Therefore, as we approach each other in good faith, we must be sensitive to the ways we may have hurt each other (in the past and in the present) and especially to the ways our own tradition may have caused others pain. Even simply acknowledging such a history is an important step in the direction of healing and reconciliation.

In the particular case of Western Christianity, of which the ELCA is a part, we must reckon with the terrible ways the church’s teachings have been used to justify genocide, war, slavery, colonization, climate injustice, the violent suppression of minoritized⁷ groups (based on religion, race, gender, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation) and the exploitation of God’s good creation. In some cases, wounds are still being inflicted, including to future generations. In others, the wounds from such abuses are still open, and the pain is still real.⁸

4 Hanson, Mark, “[Response to ‘A Common Word Between Us and You,’](#)” 2007.

5 Stendahl, Krister, “Three Rules of Religious Understanding,” press conference in response to opposition to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ intentions to build a temple in Stockholm, 1985.

6 Phan, Peter, *The Joy of Religious Pluralism: A Personal Journey* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017), 154.

7 The word “minoritized” is meant to problematize the reality of historical and social constructs by which a dominant group in society attempts to subordinate other groups and view them as “less than” the dominant group. Sometimes that results in overt prejudice and discrimination; at other times it results in benevolent patronizing. Both result in the perpetuation of the subordinate status of the minoritized groups.

8 See “[Declaration of the ELCA to People of African Descent,](#)” “[A Declaration of the ELCA to American Indian and Alaska Native People,](#)” “[A Declaration of the ELCA to the Jewish Community](#)” and “[A Declaration of the ELCA to the Muslim Community.](#)”

Learning from our ongoing work to heal wounds within the church, we are better able to reach out to our neighbors of other traditions and worldviews with humility and the genuine desire to do the hard work of building and mending relationships.

Whether we are aware of it or not, all of this shapes encounters and relationships within the church and across religious traditions, cultures, races, ethnic groups, etc. The ELCA includes people of varying cultures, ethnicities, races and backgrounds that transcend the borders of the United States to include churches in the Bahamas and the Caribbean, and within American Indian and Alaskan Native nations and tribes. In one way or another we are all shaped by persistent historical assumptions about white superiority and by colonial practices and systems that oppress people.

Reckoning with the woundedness and pain *within* the church and the complicity of the church in inflicting such painful histories, both within and beyond itself, will enable us to be more authentic in our witness to others of God's amazing grace. At the same time, our intentionality in embracing the fullness of our diversity within the church, and the cultural, traditional and Indigenous practices that many within the ELCA embody and embrace, will richly bless our endeavors with our neighbors in a complex, multi-religious world.

"I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isaiah 43:19). Could it be that God's Spirit is at work amid the rich diversity of the world and our communities — at work bringing about something new? Could it be that through our getting to know each other and each other's faith traditions with patience, humility, respect, honesty and love, the Spirit of God is birthing a new way for our communities and the world to flourish? Are we not awed by the work of the Spirit, which is beyond our wildest expectations? We are called to be open to these possibilities and to live in hope.

Hospitality . . . and Learning to Be a Guest

As beneficiaries of the grace of God, our calling is to recognize and honor that grace in others — passing along the welcome and generosity with which God first welcomes us. While marveling at the glory and mystery of God, our calling is to pay attention to the ways in which God may be working in the world, through other people and communities as well as our own.

Our vocation includes seeking the well-being of our neighbor and the larger community. This calling applies to all neighbors, without exception. We are called to move beyond indifference and tolerance to active engagement and collaboration. Engagement entails practicing hospitality, getting to know our neighbors, respecting our neighbors, listening, cooperating and not controlling or dominating the relationship. It means seeking out and telling the truth about the brokenness in our past and present, as well as its impact on future generations. It means speaking well of others⁹ and, in the face of discrimination or injustice, standing in solidarity with them. Engagement of this sort requires a special combination of humility, compassion and courage.

Whoever initiates a relationship of trust, that relationship flourishes when it is reciprocal—when we are as ready to receive as to give. The relationship itself is central. Everything else flows from it.

Active engagement includes readiness to be a guest, to receive with humility and gratitude the hospitality of our neighbors who reach out to us.

⁹ See Luther's explanation to the Eighth Commandment in his Small Catechism.

Can We Engage Religious Difference Faithfully?

We can engage religious difference without compromising our faith. As Lutheran Christians we hold firm to the conviction that, justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, we are freed to engage fully with others without fear or apprehension. We can do so without compromising our trust in God or our commitment to the gospel. At appropriate times and in appropriate settings, we can share our faith in God's love and mercy, trusting in the work of the Holy Spirit, not our own powers of persuasion.

However, because we live in the tension of being simultaneously saints and sinners, we need to acknowledge that our anxiety in the face of difference is real. Building genuine relationships across those differences can be a challenge because it requires us to be vulnerable. But the experience of those who have reached across the boundaries has shown that the benefits far outweigh the risks.

One typical outcome of inter-religious engagement is a rethinking of how we understand our own beliefs. This rethinking is an enrichment. It is not a reduction in our commitment to basic Christian beliefs but a new exploration of the faith and how to articulate it. Some parts of the Christian tradition may come to be appreciated more deeply, and other parts previously given little attention may take on new meaning. Through inter-religious engagement we may "hear" the Bible, or our confessional documents, in new ways.

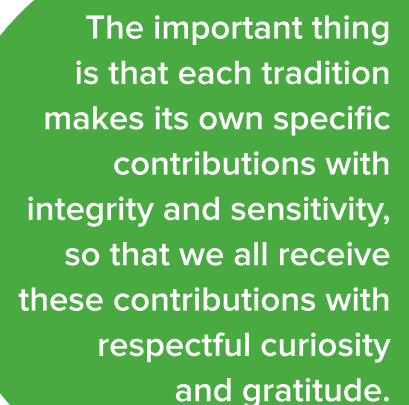
By engaging others, we come to know ourselves better too.¹⁰ We come to see ourselves through the eyes of others. Moreover, as we find ourselves reformulating aspects of how we explain our faith, as we entertain new ideas and the possibility of transformation, we discover a new appreciation for the depth of the mystery of God's grace and activity in the world. Not only can we do this without compromising our faith, but engaging with others can be a deeply rewarding experience that enriches our faith.

Preparing for an Inter-Religious Service or Event

When planning an inter-religious service or event, the most important resource is a gracious spirit — one that is ready to listen and learn and make room for another person's or group's specific identity and complex difference. This includes relinquishing the need for control so that planning can be done jointly from the start. A gracious spirit also means respecting the character of the occasion. The occasion is a time to acknowledge community ties and to demonstrate and build respect. It is a time to work together and allow the best of others to show through, with the hope that our best will also show through. It is not a time to judge, proselytize, antagonize or compete with our partners.

It is critical that inter-religious services "honor the integrity, distinctive commitments, and gifts of each tradition, and reflect prayerful understanding and careful planning."¹¹ This is best accomplished through inter-religious prayer services that weave together distinct contributions from the various traditions represented.

It is important to emphasize that "inter-religious" does not include appropriating a ceremony from another tradition by isolating it from its original religious setting. This means, for example, that Christians should not attempt to re-create a seder meal,¹² though they can participate as



The important thing is that each tradition makes its own specific contributions with integrity and sensitivity, so that we all receive these contributions with respectful curiosity and gratitude.

¹⁰ See Carol Schersten LaHurd, et al., *Engaging Others, Knowing Ourselves: A Lutheran Calling in a Multi-Religious World* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2016).

¹¹ "[A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment](#)," pp. 5-6.

¹² See "[Do Christians Hold Seder Meals?](#)," ELCA Worship Formation and Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions, and "[ELCA Guidelines for Lutheran-Jewish Relations](#)."

Whenever possible, fostering relationships of mutual trust and respect with other religious leaders and groups far in advance of planning any specific event is key.

guests in one led by a member of the Jewish community. Likewise, non-Indigenous Christians should not borrow a sweat lodge ceremony or the like. Inter-religious events involve shared leadership and shared participation.

Clarity of Purpose

It is important to be clear about the purpose of a community event and to let that purpose guide its planning. And it is crucial that this purpose be worked out together and understood by all. What is the service or event trying to accomplish? Bringing people together in lament or hope, or simply building relationships, can be worthy goals. The planners need to be patient; sometimes it is better to spend time building relationships of trust and respect before attempting to put together a formal event that can lead to misunderstanding or even harm.

Clarity of purpose and mutual trust are also important in a family event, such as a wedding or a funeral, where different religions are represented. In working out the service, much will depend on the circumstances. A wedding between a Hindu and a Christian will be different from a wedding between a Jew and a Christian. A wedding in which the differences reside in the extended family rather than the couple themselves will be different in another way. Celebrating the importance of family ties can be an essential part of the framework within which the religious differences are acknowledged. The planning and the conduct of the event itself are exercises in pastoral care. There is no one-size-fits-all template, because practices can vary depending on things such as geography, socioeconomic status, culture, etc. It is important not to assume that one knows from the outset what it means for the others involved to be members of a particular religious tradition. Conversation and mutual exploration with respectful curiosity are paramount.

Benefits to the Larger Community

When more than one religious group cooperates on a community project, its focus can be on the project's benefits to persons in need or to the general well-being of the community. The purpose of any ceremony associated with such a project can be to celebrate the cooperation itself and its benefits.

An important part of our calling can be joint advocacy to address injustices. Such endeavors are vital and most powerful when they grow out of valued relationships of trust, a shared understanding of the injustice people are facing, and a commitment to the common good.

Further, cooperation among religious communities focused on mutual understanding can itself benefit the larger community. Dialogue and mutual sharing can build bridges across difference that serve as common ground when tragedy, division or challenges confront the community.

Diversity Within Religions

Whatever the occasion, it is always helpful to remember that people of other religions and worldviews are as diverse as Christians. What we learn about a particular religion or group in one encounter may not apply in another. A response to interfaith dialogue by a Reform Jew is not likely to be duplicated by an Orthodox Jew, and Muslims from one tradition are not likely to celebrate every holiday in the same way as Muslims from another tradition. The same is true for the people from any religion or worldview.

Rather than seeing this variety as an obstacle, we can embrace and celebrate the manifold diversities of people made in God's image, both within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and among our neighbors. Open communication and agreement of mutual expectations in terms of the purpose, tone, logistics and roles will help

avoid unfortunate misunderstandings or inconvenient surprises. Clear expectations allow all involved to open themselves to the joy of being with each other and discovering beauty in each other's traditions.

PRAYER SERVICES

In recent years, people of different religious, spiritual and faith traditions have joined together in multi-religious gatherings or prayer services on occasions such as Thanksgiving, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, the World Day of Prayer or other holidays or commemorations in a community. ELCA leaders and congregants have participated in these gatherings and, over the course of decades, have accumulated considerable wisdom as to what can make these gatherings meaningful for all.

Building Relationships

Those who have experience in multi-religious gatherings tell us again and again: building relationships with people from other faith communities is a priority. This relationship-building is an ongoing task and privilege, and it cannot be left to the last minute before trying to do something together. The value of this investment becomes particularly apparent in situations that require rapid response, as explored in the next section. We need to ask ourselves in advance: Are we familiar with other religious communities in the places where we find ourselves? Do pastors and deacons know the leaders of these communities? Have efforts been made to bring different religious communities together for fellowship, solidarity and common projects? Have friendships developed across religious communities?

In the work of planning together, these relationships are deepened.

Basic Practicalities and Planning

Multi-religious prayer services have a variety of aims: to invoke divine blessing upon a diverse community; to declare and build solidarity and harmony within it; to affirm shared values and commitments; to acquaint neighbors with elements of religious practice from different faith traditions, sharing something of their richness and beauty; to bring people together in peace and in hope of friendship; and to create space for imagination and creativity in addressing needs and seeking the common good.

For such aims to be realized, practical matters need to be addressed:

- Will this event be in-person, online or both?
- If in-person: What space will be used? Is the space adequate? Do public health concerns require social distancing? If the space is outdoors, is there a Plan B for inclement weather?
- Are the sound system and video streaming adequate, especially when hybrid participation is encouraged or anticipated?
- Will there be food and drink — and of what sort? Will all be able to enjoy it, recognizing different religious and cultural prohibitions?
- How can attendees from different communities be encouraged to mix?
- How will the event be advertised?
- What, if any, are the hopes beyond the service — and what steps are needed?
- If visual images are used, do they show representations of diversity?



Events that
work well are
events planned
by people who
know and trust
one another.

Attention to the “nuts and bolts” of planning and logistics is crucial.

At the heart of the planning is the program itself. In the case of a prayer service, there should be time for careful planning, so that all participants know what will happen and are onboard. (The exception is a vigil or prayer service quickly organized in response to tragedy or crisis, covered below.) The purpose and focus of the event need to be clear, first to the planners. It should then prove easy to communicate what the event “is about.” The program needs to be carefully laid out. Participants should be urged to stick to the agreed-upon service outline — and to prepare according to the time allotted.

As for individual contributions to the event, it is important that one represent *one’s own self*, or self-in-community, so that a Christian speaks as a Christian, a Jew as a Jew, and so on. In readings and recitations, chants and hymns and songs, and spiritual exercises and prayers, one hopes to experience authentic words and actions that are shared from the heart of the participating traditions.

There are always pitfalls. Religious leaders do not always stick to the agreed-upon service outline or to time limits — and ELCA participants might endeavor to set a good example! In the planning it should be made clear what the event is for — and what it is not for (e.g., partisan politics, inter-religious polemics, or proselytizing). National holidays and civic observances may present unique pitfalls; sensitivity to diversity and guarding against various forms of nationalism are important. A simple and fundamental rule is this: Be respectful to all the people involved! All these considerations and admonitions apply, of course, not only to featured speakers but to all the participants in the gathering.

One should not attempt to “fill in” for absent faith traditions by “searching online for a few prayers,” for example.

It is important to draw a distinction between what is appropriate only for Christian worship — such as the Holy Communion — and what is appropriate for a multi-religious prayer service. There are times when tension may exist between participating in a multi-religious prayer service and our Lutheran doctrinal and confessional teachings. Prayer and consultation — including with colleagues, the church’s teaching theologians and one’s bishop — can meaningfully contribute to this discernment. On rare occasions, the decision not to participate may be best.

For such events, *pragmatic/practical* issues and *relational* issues are not separate concerns; they dovetail. Good relationships enable good planning. In turn, the work of planning and execution leads to the deepening of relationships.

The best foundation for an edifying and fruitful multi-religious event is *existing relationships* of trust among those who do the planning.

Planning as an Act of Love

It should be clear that the work of planning described above is not planning for planning’s sake but an act of love and hospitality. It aims at creating and cultivating a shared, sacred, welcoming and safe space, one within which relationships can grow and flourish. As Christians, we might say it is a space where the Spirit’s work of communication, reconciliation and renewal can take place. If the goal of planning is to create hospitable and welcoming space in this way, then the success of the event cannot be measured simply in the number of people attending. When people and relationships are at the center of our attention, the work of planning may feel less like a set of technical challenges and more like a ministry that evokes joy.

Voices Around the Table

In creating a multi-religious gathering for fellowship and prayer, we should expect that there will be many voices involved in the process.

- Whose are they?
- What voices are missing that we have overlooked?
- What configuration of religious communities is meaningful for the occasion?
- Is the service truly multi-religious, or is it primarily ecumenical among Christians?
- Is there a good balance of different forms of diversity, such as gender, racial, ethnic and cultural?
- Are those at the table viewed by their own communities as, to the degree possible, representative of the faith?

It is important that leadership truly be shared.

- Whose voices are in fact being heard?
- Who is making decisions, and why?
- How can space be made for all voices on the planning team?

Guard Against Cultural Appropriation and Christian Supremacy

In multi-religious events, we come alongside neighbors from different faith communities with confidence and humility: confident that we have something to share with others but humble with regard to what others have to share. We will be on guard against cultural and religious appropriation. We will avoid speaking for others, allowing participating religious communities to represent themselves and their traditions and practices, and will avoid prioritizing one tradition over another. We will seek to speak with wisdom, sensitivity and gentleness, and to avoid the polemics that are too common in our day. We have much to learn from our neighbors — about them and about ourselves.

Being Authentic and Finding Common Ground

An honest point of tension exists between wanting everyone to be authentically themselves and finding common language that celebrates our shared humanity. This tension manifests itself in down-to-earth questions without obvious answers. For example: As a Christian, shall I pray “in the name of Jesus,” perhaps with an explanation that this is what Christians authentically do, or seek an acceptable form of words that might draw more people into the prayer, such as “in your holy name”? Should the bishop wear a pectoral cross as one might ordinarily do or forgo that for the occasion? On questions such as these, there is no one-size-fits-all rule other than: be authentically yourself and be respectful and sensitive. Do your best to find your balance between these two imperatives. Consulting with others, particularly with participants from other traditions, especially on basic matters of dress and protocol, can be very helpful in making certain decisions and putting your mind at ease.

Shared Space, Shared Meals

It is important to consider how *space* may shape the dynamics of the event. Some kinds of events may naturally take place in spaces that “belong” to one or another of the traditions, e.g., a *Ramadān iftār* (literally “breaking the fast”) meal in a hall connected to an Islamic center.¹³ But what would be the most appropriate space, say, for a multi-religious Thanksgiving event? If the event takes place every year, an equitable solution may be to rotate the hosting through the participating communities, or to consider a public or shared venue or even an

¹³ In the case of outrages committed against a particular faith community (as will be seen in the next section), it may well be natural to gather in a space belonging to and specified by that community, as a sign of solidarity.

online or hybrid event. For other events, it may be advisable to seek out neutral space where symbols from a variety of traditions can be displayed, or none at all. Also be mindful that, even though food and drink can make for good community building and hospitality, religious traditions have different practices around various kinds of food. These can include mandates for the way food is blessed and prepared, such as kosher and halal, as well as various restrictions, such as prohibitions of pork or alcohol. Make sure to work ahead of time with the groups that will be present to ensure that any food or drink are offered in a way that makes all feel welcome and respects the dietary needs of participating religious groups.

Joy

Experiences of ELCA Lutherans in multi-religious prayer gatherings have been overwhelmingly positive. Be prepared to rejoice in what happens!

RESPONDING TO TRAGEDY AND CRISIS

One appropriate response to a community tragedy is gathering to share sorrow, lament in a public setting and benefit from each other's support. When there are diverse religious communities within a city, town or neighborhood, this can take the form of a multi-religious service. It can also be appropriate to come together in response to events in another part of the nation or the world, even more so when there are close ties between some local residents and the place where the tragedy occurred.

The character of the response will depend on the religious groups in the grieving community. If a joint service involves representatives of the Abrahamic faiths (Jews, Christians and Muslims), the possibilities will differ from a service that includes Christians, Hindus and Buddhists, for example, or practitioners of Indigenous or Afrocentric traditions. Similarly, the possibilities for a service where all the Christians are mainline Protestants will differ from those in a service that also includes Roman Catholics and Orthodox churches. Consideration of the potential presence of diversity of languages is also important in order to make all feel welcome. Context matters.

Tragedies and crises can be of various kinds. Examples include an attack on a place of worship, a school shooting, a natural disaster, a racial incident, a rally led by a hate group, a refugee crisis or the destruction and displacements of war. Unfortunately, this list can easily be extended.

Careful consultation with the leaders of the affected community is essential and should drive the nature of the response. The community may need time for its own internal response and reflection. It is vital that planning prioritize the needs — and honor the boundaries — of the impacted community.

In any of these situations, a good first step is to gather leaders from the various religious communities to ponder what kind of response is most appropriate. When a specific group has been targeted, it is important to find a way to stand with that group. This may take the form of encouraging that faith community to hold a service that others attend. In this case, the point is to surround the group affected by tragedy with the support of others. It may be appropriate to hold a community-wide inter-religious service — a shared lament. It may be appropriate to organize more tangible assistance, such as refurbishing a damaged worship center or providing housing or meals or the like, or to hold a press conference demonstrating inter-religious solidarity and concern. In any case, a careful discussion should occur regarding the appropriate response. Clarifying its purpose is crucial. Being helpful includes responding with grace when help is declined.

How quickly a response needs to be organized will vary depending on the circumstances. Because in some cases it needs to be done quickly, it is good that a pastor or leader establish and maintain good, respectful relations with the leaders of other religious communities in advance. If there is already trust when a tragedy occurs, plans can be made relatively quickly. In some cases, an already existing inter-religious council can serve as a vehicle for building and maintaining relations. In other cases, it is important to take the initiative, gather an inter-religious group and start building interpersonal relationships. From the start, full partnership is key. This enables input from all, mutual decision-making and shared accountability.

If a service of lament or other prayer service is planned, the details should be worked out very carefully. Will the service be designed for all to participate? Or will the service be divided into parts so that one tradition leads each part and others listen and/or participate as possible? In either case, plans (including the wording of prayers or any remarks) should be shared in advance and reviewed by each religious leader. In this way, difficulties can be identified and addressed in advance, and explanations can be crafted that will help those who assemble understand what is occurring and how/when they are invited to participate. Each leader will need the help of other leaders to figure out what is appropriate.

Be mindful of everyone's needs when planning. For example, the timing of an event is important (e.g., taking into account the Muslim prayer schedule or the Jewish Sabbath). In addition, consider location, whether in-person, online or both. Is it accessible by all, in terms of both physical accessibility and any emotional, spiritual or communal barriers? Is it the right size to accommodate those who want to attend? What sensitivities might make a site inappropriate for one or more of the groups? What sort of artwork and adornments can cause problems? What special accommodations do the worshipers need? Will there be need for translation and language interpretation of some kind? Have you provided the appropriate in-person and online securities to avoid any infiltration by hate groups? What kinds of trauma-informed leadership and follow-up resources will be needed?

It is important to avoid politicizing the event. Local leaders often will want to speak. Along with the invitation to speak, clear instructions need to be shared so that the remarks are suitable for the occasion. It is also important to avoid any forms of proselytizing. The instructions given to all religious leaders need to indicate this shared expectation.

Do not overlook the smaller details. Have a checklist for the event and plans regarding how each aspect will be covered. For instance, make sure the planners know who the technology person/people will be, that they will test the audio and video, and that they have a backup plan in case of technical challenges. Or, to cite another example, if the plan is to hold an outdoor candlelight vigil, be aware that candles can pose safety concerns or easily blow out. Think through all the variables.

The focus of a response to a tragedy can be local, regional, national or even international. Some tragedies elicit broader engagement across several communities. The degree of local control may vary, but planning is still important. At other times, one community may want to join in expressing solidarity with those affected in another location. Online events can provide a meaningful way to connect across distances. This will elicit a slightly different kind of response, but the response still needs to be planned carefully.

SOCIAL MINISTRIES

Community service projects are often where inter-religious cooperation begins. This is possible because assisting neighbors in need is a common theme across religions. Lutherans have a long history of engaging in social ministries that intentionally serve all people, regardless of their religious identity. This is a faithful response to our calling to love our neighbors without any prerequisites.

Working together across religious lines can be a helpful way for people from different religious communities to come to know each other better and to build trust toward equitable partnerships. These personal relationships can have other benefits, such as a readiness to stand with each other, the possibility of healing the wounds of the past, and the social capital needed to undertake other projects.

Because any list of possible social ministries would be very long, only a few examples will be identified here:

- Food services, including prepared meals, food shelves, community kitchens, community gardens and the like.
- Promoting physical and mental health by providing clinics, counseling services, preventative health measures, instruction for better nutrition, and measures to promote vaccine literacy.
- Free legal counsel.
- Teaching English as a second language.
- Citizenship classes.
- Voter registration.
- Community cleanups.
- Eco-justice projects.
- Reentry programs for released prisoners.
- Refugee resettlement.
- Serving the unhoused.

Inter-religious cooperation can occur not only among the social ministry partners but also with and among those being served. For example, two or more faith communities might cooperate in refugee resettlement in their community, receiving refugees of various religious identities. Both the partnership and the ministry require careful consideration and sensitivity. How are the refugees' spiritual and religious needs provided for in their resettlement? What are the unique strengths — and different approaches — of each faith partner, and how can they be leveraged to provide the best possible resettlement experience for the refugees they are serving? Projects are context-specific, so assess the needs of a particular community led by those who live there and allow those needs to shape any social ministry. Religious leaders are often aware of things in the community that might otherwise be overlooked.

Joint inter-religious leadership is essential at all stages — from assessing needs and designing and creating the program to leading and managing the project itself. Modeling mutuality at the leadership level can foster a successful partnership.

It is important to craft language to describe the program that can be shared by all partners and is not offensive to any of the communities involved. Cultural differences also need to be considered. For example, a food bank serving a diverse community needs to provide food that is halal and kosher.

At the same time, ELCA leaders need to articulate clearly (for their own people) the theological reasons both for inter-religious cooperation and for social ministry such as those articulated in the preface of this document. Otherwise, exclusivist versions of Christianity and “it’s their own fault” versions of American meritocracy are likely to jeopardize the entire effort. Providing a theological foundation can be an opportunity for spiritual growth and an expanded sense of vocation. Resources such as the ELCA’s “A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment” (2019) and ELCA social teaching¹⁴ on racism, economic justice and other social issues can be helpful when formulating a theological foundation for social ministry.

¹⁴ See [Social Statements - Evangelical Lutheran Church in America \(elca.org\)](https://www.elca.org/social-statements) and [Social Messages - Evangelical Lutheran Church in America \(elca.org\)](https://www.elca.org/social-messages).

Whenever specialized knowledge and skills are needed, seek to partner with organizations that can offer those skills. For example, partnering with medical professionals when offering health care or with a law firm when dealing with immigration problems or renters' rights will ensure that the ministries are effective and safe. The same is true about offering language translation and interpretation services to make sure that the relevant information and services provided to the community are communicated effectively and clearly. Establishing or building partnerships with Lutheran and other faith-based refugee resettlement agencies is another example.¹⁵ This can be vitally important to ensuring not only just and humane care for refugees based on time-tested models but also advocacy for public policies that provide additional measures of support.

Social justice is a common theme among many religious traditions. It can be the basis for collaborations and partnerships that move beyond assistance to advocacy for the common good. Working together in multi-religious coalitions, especially on the local level, to ensure equitable policies for all is also a way to learn more about the faith-based commitments of our neighbors, even as we live out our own vocations.

PASTORAL CARE

Pastoral Caregiving in a Multi-Religious World

Pastoral care, or spiritual care as it is known in some settings, can be provided by a variety of people. In our multi-religious world, Lutheran caregivers — pastors, chaplains, deacons and laypeople — will encounter people of other faith traditions who need a listening ear, a caring heart, practical help, spiritual wisdom and ritual expertise. Spiritual and pastoral caregivers, by vocation, often cross religious boundaries. Doing so always requires special sensitivity.

Pastoral care can take many forms. It begins with attentive listening and may include counseling, prayer, spiritual healing and ritual. Such care can be offered to support many difficult human experiences including medical conditions or decisions, end of life and hospice care, mental health challenges, grief, matters of sexuality and gender identity, pregnancy and childbirth, family relations, domestic abuse, and displacement and resettlement. Joyous occasions may also invite pastoral care and presence, including house dedications or the arrival of new babies, as well as certain ethnic-specific practices and traditions. Specific forms of pastoral care take place at the time of marriages and funerals; these are discussed in other sections of these guidelines.

Not only are there different forms, but there are also different settings for spiritual and pastoral care. These range from colleges/universities to hospitals, from military bases to workplaces, from community organizations to local congregations, and from coffee shops to people's homes. The caregiver's role will vary from setting to setting.

When we think about "religious diversity" we may be inclined to think about demographics, about pie charts and statistics. However, at the heart of this terminology are real people and communities whose lives are informed by a variety of religious identities, beliefs and practices. "Religious diversity" is shorthand for all sorts of realities, including fervent believers in particular traditions; those who participate in traditional and Indigenous religions and spiritual practices; people whose families (both biological and chosen) include members of different religious traditions; people whose attachment to a religious tradition is tenuous, or those who espouse no particular religious tradition (the "nones"); and individuals who claim multiple religious traditions and practices for themselves.

¹⁵ See [Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service | LIRS](#).

Preparing for Caregiving

We live in a complex religious world. Even if we have studied other religious and spiritual traditions, we cannot assume we know what people believe or how they practice their religion. As noted earlier, there is also tremendous diversity within religious traditions, including our own. It is important to be curious about how the community understands and presents its identity. Are beliefs given greater prominence? Or are rituals, practices and communal life more central?

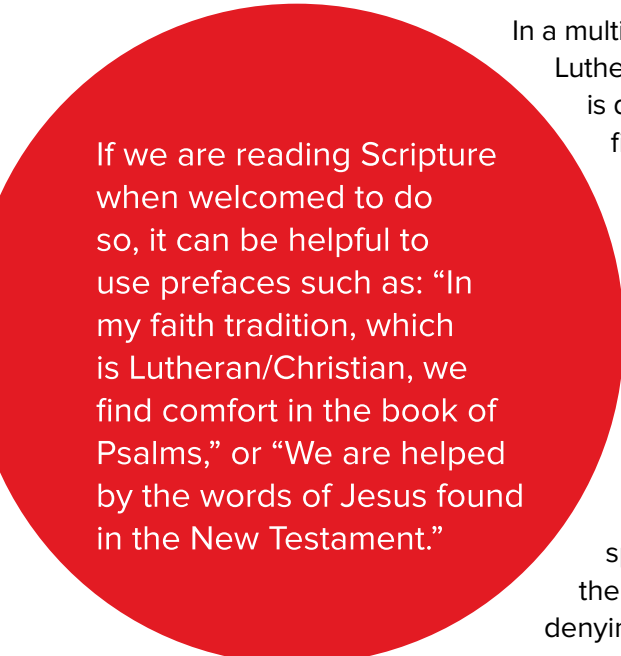
Thus, we must listen carefully, attending with our minds and our hearts in order to learn more about the pastoral needs present in any situation. We hope that by honoring the people we are caring for with our attentiveness, we will build trust. Indeed, much of what is possible in pastoral/spiritual care depends on trust.

How do we prepare for such conversations? It can be helpful to learn about the other religions we might encounter. But again: we cannot assume that the lived experience of any person will conform to any textbook or stereotypical description of a religion. Still, investment in learning and study (best done with inter-religious partners!) will give a Lutheran caregiver some orientation to the terminology and typical practices of another tradition, so that differences do not become obstacles to careful listening.

As pastoral caregivers, we need not be on our own! We can seek counsel from those with more experience in the multi-religious realm, including our colleagues of other religions and worldviews, as well as ELCA rostered leaders and laypeople who are living this reality in their own lives, families and homes. Increasingly, various institutions have multi-religious chaplaincy programs designed to meet the diverse needs of the people they serve. Of course, it is also very important to know our limits. If we are “in over our head,” there is a real possibility of causing harm. Specialized education and experience are needed to assist people with significant mental health and emotional issues or those in situations of potential or actual violence.

Practical Counsel

Spiritual and pastoral caregiving seeks to support people, to meet needs and to bring a word of grace and compassion; it is not an occasion for proselytizing. Though changes (even conversions) of various sorts may occur through spiritual and pastoral care, this is the work of the Holy Spirit. Recipients of such care should feel safe in being able to share who they are and what they believe. Creating this kind of safe space is a key responsibility of the spiritual or pastoral caregiver.



If we are reading Scripture when welcomed to do so, it can be helpful to use prefaces such as: “In my faith tradition, which is Lutheran/Christian, we find comfort in the book of Psalms,” or “We are helped by the words of Jesus found in the New Testament.”

In a multi-religious setting, the Lutheran caregiver should self-identify (as a Lutheran Christian pastor, deacon, chaplain, volunteer, etc.) and inquire if care is desired. In some cases, a sensitive response may be to offer to help find a pastoral caregiver of their own tradition. If welcomed to extend care, the Lutheran caregiver should invite those with whom they are engaging to describe their situation — and, as appropriate, something about their own religious identity, their relationship to their tradition and/or religious community, family history, etc. The aim is to focus on listening in order to provide the best possible pastoral care.

To the degree that our own religious witness is appropriate, it may be helpful to focus on God — God’s love, God’s forgiveness, God’s presence at a time of suffering. Some spiritual and pastoral caregivers who cross religious boundaries have found it easy and helpful to speak about Jesus, emphasizing his actions and teachings rather than the doctrinal claims Christians make about his status (without, of course, denying those claims).

It is appropriate for the spiritual or pastoral caregiver to offer to say a prayer. It can be helpful to ask what the person, family or community wants the prayer to include. At times, it may be valuable to explain our understanding of prayer. In some cases, it may also be good to invite the person, family or community to offer their own prayers and to explain any attendant rituals with which we are unfamiliar. The invitation to share in prayer can be a bridge-building experience.

We have to be aware of the widely held image of Christianity as judgmental and manipulative and seek instead to exhibit a “face” of Christianity more in tune with the mercy and generosity of God. Spiritual and pastoral caregivers cannot assume that those with whom they are in conversation have not had bad experiences with Christian individuals or communities. We strive to embody an approach that is consistent with a Lutheran emphasis on grace.

Is It Lutheran?

There is no one answer to the question of how Lutheran caregivers can, in inter-religious situations, speak authentically, respectfully, helpfully and with theological integrity. Different caregivers will find their individual ways, learning from and with those with more experience and trusting in the presence of the Holy Spirit to guide and support their ministries. But in every case, spiritual and pastoral care seeks to embody the love of God in Jesus Christ, and to be alert to the various ways in which God is at work in the world.

This flows out of fundamental Lutheran teachings about how we are freed in Christ to love and serve the neighbor — including the neighbor of another faith. It is because we are Lutheran Christians, not despite our being Lutheran, that we seek a spiritual and pastoral care that is attentive, thoughtful and gracious amid complex realities.

The bottom line is this: Be real, be honest, be open. Let genuine and authentic compassion guide you.

WEDDINGS

Marriage is a public, legal covenant between two people, solemnized in the presence of witnesses and, usually, family and friends. From a religious perspective, marriage is also considered to be a holy state, a sacred bond, beyond its secular and legal nature. For the ELCA, the role of the church is to celebrate the union, to invoke God’s blessing upon it and, when appropriate, to walk with the couple as they prepare to enter that holy covenant — for example, by suggesting or providing opportunities for premarital counseling. The wedding ceremony also invites the support of the members of the faith community. In the case of inter-religious marriages, planning the service can be a challenge. The pastor’s role in this is critical.

In the United States, a pastor who officiates is functioning as both a servant of the church and an agent of the state. Within the ELCA, pastors are given a good deal of flexibility in crafting a service. Ideally, ample time is allotted for planning an inter-religious wedding, given the complexities involved. That allows for the pastor to reach out to seek advice from key partners in other religious traditions.

When planning or helping to plan a service for a couple with differing religious backgrounds, one should try to understand what marriage means for the religious tradition of the partner who is not Lutheran. This includes helping each partner understand their own tradition and the tradition of their partner. Often the differences will have to do with ceremonies and symbols. Whenever possible, guidance should be sought from the appropriate religious leaders of the other tradition.

A pastor can and should work with the couple to design a service that honors both the common ground and distinctiveness of their religious identities and traditions, and addresses the need for pastoral care and accompaniment. The focus needs to be on the couple and providing a solid foundation for their marriage. The pastor should invite them to consider how their respective faith traditions provide solid foundations on which to build their relationship, including how to balance being true to their individual commitments while also learning from each other. Helping a couple with different religious backgrounds negotiate plans for their wedding ceremony will help them learn to navigate their religious differences at other points in their married life. To support this, the pastor may also provide spiritual care for the couple, and sometimes also their families. The pastor also should encourage them to seek equivalent guidance from a religious leader of the partner's tradition and can offer to be part of the meeting if that is helpful.

The pastor and the couple need to decide whether the service will be organized by the pastor, with some attention to the traditions of the non-Christian partner, or organized jointly with an authorized leader from the other religion. A third way, chosen by some couples, is to have two separate religious ceremonies. When these occur in direct succession, communication between the officiants is key.

If the wedding is jointly organized, the two planners should seek as much common ground as possible and then plan a service accordingly. It is important that the elements of each tradition not conflict with the core understanding of marriage held by the other. Each authorized leader should lead their respective elements and provide careful instructions for the assembly about whether they are invited to participate or observe. Common prayers or blessings can provide a meaningful bridge between these elements.

It may be that a Lutheran pastor is invited to participate in a ceremony planned by others in the context of another religious or spiritual tradition. This is an opportunity to accept one's role as a guest, honoring with one's presence the couple and their promises to one another. It is helpful to discuss the invitation with the hosts, and to clarify what role is expected. Participation can be a meaningful way to symbolize the community's care and support for the couple as they begin their marriage, and to help nourish inter-religious understanding. If Holy Communion is included in a Christian wedding service where others are present, care needs to be given to communicate its significance and its purpose for the worshiping Christian community, and to make clear what the expectation is during this part of the ceremony for those who are not Christian. For instance, in what ways is it appropriate for them to participate, and when should they refrain from participating? This can be done with printed instructions in the program or by verbal explanation by the officiant. Don't leave participants awkwardly wondering what they can or cannot do. Additionally, special sensitivities about the ritual use of alcohol may require explanation, either spoken and/or printed in the program, especially in cases where there are religious prohibitions against alcohol to be considered.

It is important that the couple be involved at every stage of planning and that they understand the decisions that are made, not only for their own sake but also to enable them to explain the service to their respective family and friends.

In the Lutheran tradition, a wedding service is not a pageant to watch. Rather, it is a participatory celebration and a sacred event. Finding ways to enable appropriate participation is one way to highlight this purpose. When parts of the service are unfamiliar to some guests, those parts should be explained. In some cases, this is best done with the guests assembled before the service itself begins. It may include practicing parts of the service in order to equip guests to participate.

The situation is similar in the case where one partner is a practicing Christian and the other is nonreligious. In this case, too, a pastor needs to help the couple negotiate their ongoing relationship as well as the character of the wedding service. Given a Lutheran understanding of marriage, a pastor here too has a good deal of flexibility regarding how to organize the service, but it is important to find ways to invoke God's blessing on the marriage. Beyond the wedding ceremony, consideration of religious restrictions against certain things such as foods

and beverages, music and dancing should be given when planning the reception. There may also need to be planning and conversation about any religious activities or rituals that will take place beyond the wedding ceremony. What do the partners and their respective families need to know and to do to ensure a joyful, respectful celebration of their new life together?

FUNERALS

For many in the Lutheran tradition, the funeral is an exercise in pastoral care, an opportunity to address those who are grieving with words of consolation, the assurance of God's grace and the hope of the resurrection. The gathering provides an opportunity to tell stories and often to celebrate the life of the one who has died. This understanding is not universally shared, as needs to be remembered also when working with Christians of other denominations. Some preachers, from Christian antiquity to the present, take the funeral as an opportunity to remind their hearers of the inevitability of death and judgment. Lutherans typically focus instead on the gracious initiative of God, who will leave the 99 sheep in search of the one who is lost (Luke 15:3-7). As in any kind of ecumenical or inter-religious gathering, good planning is helpful — and one must be alert to departures from the agreed-upon service outline.

It is precisely at this point, however, that the special character of the funeral is apparent. Weddings require careful planning, but usually there is enough time for that to take place. For the funeral, however, there often is less time. And thus, participation in an inter-religious funeral will be a test of one's alertness, of trust in existing relationships and of the humility to receive guidance from others. In some cases, a pastor should help connect the bereaved with a community religious leader who may be better prepared to meet the special needs of the family.

Many in the Lutheran tradition are accustomed to a certain liturgical flexibility when it comes to funerals. Rites vary widely and are often amended and stretched in ways that help the family and make pastoral and theological sense. Remember, however, that for many of the world's cultures and faith traditions, the rituals surrounding death are very highly structured and scripted. The experience of the funeral most common in ELCA worshiping communities — which often leaves the care of the body and the details of burial or cremation to specialists — is not the experience of all. Many of our neighbors have intricate rituals of consoling the grieving, or of washing and dressing and preparing the body for burial or cremation. The body may have to be positioned in a particular way. Specific people may have specific roles to play. Certain sorts of behavior may be expected from the mourners. And other examples could be named.

There is much to learn.

Our experiences with the funeral and burial practices of others can help us think about our own practices. Are we participating in a cultural "way of death" that hides and tries to shield us from the reality of death?¹⁶ What can we learn of the diversity of practice within the ELCA, as well?

For ELCA leaders who are engaged in inter-religious work, learning about and observing the funeral and burial customs of other religious traditions, e.g., at the local mosque or synagogue or temple or gurdwara, is a loving investment of time that will help us to honor our neighbors when the time comes.

¹⁶ Some present-day reflections on these matters from within the ELCA can be found in Melinda A. Quivik, ed., *In Sure and Certain Hope: A Funeral Sourcebook* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2017).

As we participate with inter-religious partners at funerals and the other events surrounding the deaths of valued community members, we are again reminded of our need for humility: it may be that we are being invited into another world of meaning at an exceedingly sensitive time.

RELIGIOUS RITES AND CEREMONIES, INCLUDING ELCA ORDINATIONS AND INSTALLATIONS

Multi-religious participation in rites and ceremonies can be a meaningful expression of our inter-religious commitments. Whether we are guests or hosts, these experiences often deepen mutual understanding, solidarity and support. They are significant milestones in our journey together as neighbors.

Guidance for Being a Guest

Being a good guest is a unique opportunity to learn. Sometimes we can feel anxious or uncertain. When in doubt about anything, you should feel free to ask your host. By extending an invitation to you, they have already expressed their hope to make you feel welcome and included.

For deacons and pastors, you may want to wear your stole and pin, clergy shirts, and/or vestments, depending on the occasion. This will be a visible sign of your presence to those who do not know you personally. All participants should consider dressing in ways that are respectful of the religious and cultural norms of the host community. Again, feel free to ask your host about appropriate dress.

It is acceptable to say that you do not feel comfortable and to invite conversation about how to ensure that your participation reflects your convictions, as well as your commitment to accompanying your hosts.

It is important to consider the part you may be invited to offer in light of who you are representing and what your context is. Does it fit into our Lutheran theological self-understanding and liturgical practices? Joining in a procession, reading from Scripture, and praying for God's people typically do not present any challenges. Other roles may need to be assessed. Communication with your host is key. There are times when simply being present is most meaningful and suitable.

Regardless of your role in the occasion, you may want to consider bringing a gift to express your joy for the occasion, and your gratitude for being included. Such gifts do not need to be expensive but should be heartfelt. At times, it is important for the gift to represent the broader community you represent and its ministries. Gifts are sometimes shared in a reception following the event, along with refreshments and fellowship. You may be invited to share greetings or words of congratulation.

Hospitality looks different from community to community. You may be received by someone whose role is to ensure your welcome and to provide for any needs you may have, including interpretation of the service. Sometimes, you will be on your own to participate and enjoy the experience. In the latter situation, it's helpful to watch the host community for cues. Sitting or standing respectfully is always an option. Silent prayer is often a lovely way to harmonize your spirituality with that of your neighbors.

Guidance for Being a Host

Receiving our neighbors of other religions and worldviews as guests at our ELCA rites and ceremonies is a joyous part of our witness as Christians in a multi-religious world. Serving as a gracious host requires humility and gratitude for our neighbors' presence with us.

Communication with our guests is a way we can extend hospitality before the event even begins. Our invitations should include what the occasion is, why it is important in the life of the church, how we hope they would participate, when they can feel free not to participate and why their presence is important to us.

We should consider offering our guests guidance with regard to their participation while remaining open to their feedback. In the case of ordinations and installations, it is appropriate for inter-religious guests to be part of the procession, to be seated in a place of honor and to be listed in the service folder along with ecumenical guests. Inviting people of other religions to offer prayers, blessings or readings from Scripture texts that are shared is usually a possibility to be explored. If guests are given a more open time to speak, be sure to convey any limitations of time or topic. It may be helpful to rehearse any logistics related to the service itself. It is important to clarify as many details as possible, including any situations to be avoided. These communications will help your guests feel as comfortable as possible. The ELCA Worship office of the churchwide organization provides detailed guidance for the participation of ecumenical and inter-religious guests in the installation of synod bishops.¹⁷

Consider assigning a host to your inter-religious guests who can extend hospitality by caring for their needs, interpreting the service and providing a personal experience of the welcome and grace of your community. Special care should be given to explaining any liturgical or sacramental components of the service in which only the Christians will participate, such as Holy Communion. Helping guests to avoid feeling awkward or excluded is key to hospitality.

If your guests are invited to stay for refreshments or a meal, take religious dietary needs into consideration in your planning. Receptions or events following the service sometimes are the most appropriate time for guests to offer their blessings and greetings, and for their presence to be publicly acknowledged and appreciated by you. You should always be prepared to offer a brief greeting, prayer or congratulation. Spend some time in advance thinking through what you would want to say — and then be ready to abandon that if something more fitting suits the moment.

When we invite inter-religious guests to participate in our important rites and ceremonies, including ordinations and installations, we will be blessed during those occasions and as our relationships are deepened and strengthened over time.

INTER-RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

Many ELCA members, especially rostered leaders, have a considerable amount of experience with inter-religious organizations. Some of these were once “councils of churches” that expanded to include leaders of other faith traditions in the community. Others were formed to be multi-religious by design. In either case, those who have experience with such organizations often issue the following warning: avoid any tendency toward Christian hegemony! Too often it has been the case that, even in explicitly inter-religious groups, it is Christian members who lead, monopolize discussions, make decisions and handle finances, sometimes in a casual way. Even without conscious intent, they too often presume a dominant role.

¹⁷ See www.elca.org/Resources/Synods#BishopInstallation.

It is essential to consider the mission and vision of any such organization and to ensure that its partners have an equitable stake in realizing them. As in other spheres of inter-religious relationships, the inter-religious organization is a place to seek true *mutuality* in work and relationships. The work will require integrity, diplomacy and a sense of humor. In some cases, this will require the Christians to adopt new habits of consultation, discernment, leadership and engagement. While there may be growing pains, there is usually much to be gained in mutual understanding and cooperation for the common good.

What are such organizations *for*? Sometimes inter-religious organizations seem to exist for the sake of existing — and become like salt that loses its taste (Matthew 5:13). Colleagues with positive experiences of such organizations stress that they should go beyond talk to concrete projects (e.g., of service and advocacy). “Do things together!” is a common word of exhortation. And yet, the importance of such groups goes beyond lists of projects. They provide a framework — for those ready to take advantage of it — for coming to know and learning to trust one another, as well as for learning about one another’s traditions. This can happen both informally and with some planning, through presentations, workshops, text or spiritual study, and visits. Sometimes the inter-religious friendships developed in these groups makes them worthwhile even if no other goal is accomplished. As relationships deepen and trust develops, so does confidence in knowing whom to call and what to do in the event of a tragedy (see “Responding to Tragedy and Crisis”) or of ceremonies calling for inter-religious participation (see “Religious Rites and Ceremonies, Including ELCA Ordinations and Installations”). Opportunities for online, inter-religious engagement have increased and expanded the possibilities for participation and shared gifts, but finding creative ways to meet in person can yield deep benefits.

Inter-religious organizations can also provide critical spaces for leadership by youth, women and other often-marginalized groups, providing opportunities that may not exist within some religious or spiritual traditions.¹⁸ In some cases, women are leading inter-religious organizations, and in others they have created their own to provide spaces for solidarity, spiritual sharing and social change. It is also worth stressing the place of youth and young adults in inter-religious life. For example, exchanges in which young people visit one another’s religious sanctuaries or houses of worship can have a meaningful impact on their lives and help adults learn how to build bridges, too!

While inter-religious organizations may be an established part of the religious landscape in urban areas, in small town and rural settings they may not be “on the radar” of many ELCA congregations and their leaders. Opportunities for inter-religious engagement may seem distant. However, we urge ELCA leaders to be alert to opportunities for such engagement: in small towns across the continent, a startling diversity of religious belief — both ecumenical and multi-religious — is often to be found in places where it did not exist some decades ago. Look around a community — who is there? Assess needs in the community — what groups might be overlooked? Think about ministry in the community — who might partners be? ELCA congregations and their leaders can take the initiative in coming to know the neighbors they are called to love — those of other Christian denominations as well as those of other faith traditions.

Our denomination is called the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We bear this name to remind ourselves that we live by God’s gracious word of life in the gospel (evangel) of Jesus Christ, and that our lives and deeds are to bear witness to this gospel. We do so in our loving service to and understanding of the neighbor — and by avoiding premature, formulaic invitations to convert to Christianity. We seek, in our organizations, to participate in the hospitality of God, so that all will feel welcome and esteemed. We seek to grow and tend spaces within which differences are respected, trust becomes possible and friendships might flourish — trusting the Spirit of God to do God’s work in this space.

¹⁸ See [America’s Interfaith Infrastructure: A Summary Report \(2012\) | The Pluralism Project](#).

ELCA GUIDELINES
**FOR MINISTRY IN A
MULTI-RELIGIOUS WORLD**



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America