

## Guidelines for Christian-Muslim Relations

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18).

Beginning in 1990 the ELCA's Division for Global Mission (DGM) made Christian-Muslim relations a central focus of its work and asserted,

The Gospel of Jesus Christ calls Christians to mutual understanding and friendship with Muslim people in the United States and around the world. By learning about Islam and seeking opportunities to know Muslim people better, we bear witness to God's saving love incarnate in Jesus ("Our Muslim Neighbors").

Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is crucial for Christians to understand Islam and to reach out to Muslims because

1) they comprise one-fifth of the world's population, about 1.2 billion people. In many places Christians and Muslims are living and working in close proximity, including the United States with several million Muslims. In order for Christians to be better neighbors, it is important to know something about the religious commitments of our Muslim neighbors, friends, colleagues and family members. Their faith plays a major role in shaping their world views, their practices, and their relationships. Understanding Muslims' lives and beliefs does not necessarily mean that we must always agree with them. It does mean that we accept our Muslim neighbors as fellow human beings created and loved by God. When we care in such ways, the result may be deep friendships that become channels of God's reconciling love.

2) The encounter of Christians and Muslims through nearly fourteen centuries has been both positive and painful. For instance, in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century Baghdad and 12<sup>th</sup> century Toledo Christian and Muslim scholars collaborated in critically important chapters in the history of civilization, both East and West, and made possible important developments in science, medicine, mathematics, architecture, literature and philosophy, which later influenced Europe and contributed to the Renaissance. Unfortunately, periods of hostile discourse and actual warfare between Christians and Muslims, such as the Crusades and the Ottoman conquests, have left a legacy of mistrust, misunderstanding and stereotypes. This legacy has been confirmed in the imaginations of many by the rise in recent decades of militant Islamist ideologies that have spawned acts of terrifying violence--acts repudiated, it must be emphasized, by the great body of Muslims. There is an urgent need to become more familiar with the history of relations between Christians and Muslims—in both their positive and negative dimensions—and how this history has contributed to the way we view and relate to one another in the present.

3) The eighth commandment can and should guide our speaking about Islam and Muslims: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16). Martin Luther explained this commandment in these words:

What does this mean for us? We are to fear and love God so that we do not betray, slander, or lie about our neighbor, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain his actions in the kindest way (*The Small Catechism*).

Striving for a correct understanding of another in interfaith relations is difficult work that needs to be done prayerfully to protect ourselves from distorting, misrepresenting and perpetuating simplistic stereotypes of the other. Ideally, we should be able to explain Islam in such a way that Muslims can recognize themselves in our portrayal. In addition, we should be ready to defend our Muslim neighbors and speak well of them even in times of tension and confusion, as hateful attacks go against Jesus' injunction to love in all circumstances.

4) Christianity and Islam have important similarities and differences. Christians and Muslims believe that God is one, although there are significant differences in how they understand the unity of God. Together we believe that God is the creator of all that exists, and

1 that humans have a unique role as stewards of the creation under God’s sovereign rule.  
 2 Together we believe that God is active in history and provides guidance through revelation. We  
 3 both revere Abraham as an archetype of faith and Jesus as a vehicle of God’s revelation,  
 4 although in significantly different ways. We all understand that God invites human beings to  
 5 speak to God with prayers of praise, thanksgiving, repentance and intercession. We all believe  
 6 that God has “the last word”: God shall raise the dead, and all will be judged. Finally, both  
 7 Christianity and Islam are “religions of the book.” Muslims view their holy book, the Qur’an,  
 8 with its many parallels to Jewish and Christian scriptures, as the final stage of God’s revelation  
 9 to humankind.

10 While for many it is important simply to strive to understand Islam in and of itself, for  
 11 those who want to be effective communicators of the gospel among Muslims it is also important  
 12 to understand what Christians and Muslims hold in common as well as where they diverge. Such  
 13 a focus is equally vital for helping Muslims understand us and our faith commitments. And,  
 14 indeed, through such interfaith communication, “Christians will be open to being changed—to  
 15 expect that their faith might be strengthened even when they do not embrace the other person’s  
 16 faith” (DGM’s *Global Mission in the Twenty-first Century*, p. 11).

17 Such mutual interchange invites Christians to bear witness to “the hope that is in us”  
 18 (1 Peter 3:15) while receiving the witness of others, in the confidence that we will learn from it  
 19 and that we will gain new insights for living out our faith in the world. Especially important for  
 20 North American Christians and Muslims is learning how to enact our faiths’ requirements of  
 21 evangelism and *da’wah*, but to do so in a way that is non-manipulative and life-giving to all in  
 22 the community.

23 5) In the contemporary environment of clashes in culture and politics and  
 24 misunderstanding between Christians and Muslims, reconciliation and healing are imperative,  
 25 both within the United States and among nation states. American Christians must learn about the  
 26 diversity in global Islam and understand the religious and political debates going on among  
 27 Muslims so that Christians and Muslims can seek common ground and visions for the good of  
 28 all. It is urgent that they find ways of working together for justice and peace.

29 Lutheran Christians are well-equipped to serve enhanced Muslim-Christian relations for a  
 30 number of reasons, including our reliance on God’s grace, rather than our own accomplishments,  
 31 and our legacy from Luther of *simul justus et peccator*, “at once just person and sinner.” These  
 32 elements in our tradition free us to live with the ambiguities inherent in human existence,  
 33 including the ambiguities of dealing with religious pluralism. Thus, ELCA Lutherans can lead  
 34 the way in building bridges of understanding, mutual respect, and cooperation. To this end,  
 35 ELCA members, synods, and church wide units are encouraged:

36 1) To demonstrate a commitment parallel to the ELCA focus on Jewish-Christian  
 37 relations by creating a part-time staff position to monitor and enhance Muslim-Christian relations  
 38 or to guide ELCA interfaith relations generally.

39 2) To take the initiative in fostering Christian-Muslim dialogue, cooperating where  
 40 possible with other Christians in organizing and sustaining such conversations. The goal is not a  
 41 shallow tolerance or superficial agreement, but greater mutual understanding and enrichment.  
 42 Differences will remain, even as areas of common ground and agreement are discovered.

43 3) To demonstrate the biblical virtue of hospitality (Romans 12:13, Hebrews 13:2) by  
 44 knowing who are their Muslim neighbors, visiting with them, greeting them especially on the  
 45 occasions of Islamic feasts, accepting invitations to events hosted by Muslims, and inviting them  
 46 to open houses at their churches or into the homes of church members. Such gestures of courtesy  
 47 and hospitality are signs of genuine interest and caring. Activities involving women and  
 48 especially children are imperative. Our children are the future of Christian-Muslim relations.  
 49 Both Christians and Muslims must work to shape positive and respectful attitudes toward the  
 50 other from the early stages of life.

1           4) To conduct youth and adult studies within congregations that are aimed at better  
2 understanding of Islam and Muslims. There are many helpful printed and audio-visual resources  
3 for guiding such studies, and an ELCA-sponsored web site could list regional experts on Islam  
4 willing to speak to congregations and synods. Where possible, however, there is no substitute for  
5 personal encounter with Muslims and for allowing them to speak for themselves.

6           5) To increase focus on Muslim-Christian relations in the colleges of the ELCA and make  
7 further use of the Islamic studies programs at ELCA seminaries.

8           6) To join with Muslim neighbors in addressing social concerns, the challenges of raising  
9 our children in the contemporary world, care of the creation, issues of justice, and the search for  
10 peace; and to better educate ourselves about the political dimensions of other religions where  
11 religion and state are conjoined in ways different from our own American context.

12           7) To increase advocacy efforts on behalf of Muslims in the United States and abroad in  
13 collaboration with such Lutheran agencies as Division for Global Mission (and the companion  
14 synod program), Lutheran Office on Government Affairs, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee  
15 Service, and Lutheran World Federation.