

Intersections

Volume 2014 | Number 40

Article 7

2014

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Lohre, Kathryn M. (2014) "Building on a Firm Foundation: ELCA Inter-Religious Relations," *Intersections*: Vol. 2014: No. 40, Article 7.

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Building on a Firm Foundation: ELCA Inter-Religious Relations

Today's rapidly changing religious landscape provides new opportunities for thinking about and engaging in inter-religious relations. Over the years, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has built a firm foundation of relationships and resources, and now is undertaking new projects to address emerging needs.

Jewish Relations

Inheriting significant work in Jewish relations from its predecessor bodies, the ELCA's initial inter-religious focus was on Jewish-Christian relations. In the early 1990s, a Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations was established, serving in an advisory role to the Presiding Bishop and to the whole church in order to increase cooperation with the Jewish community, to advance the conviction that anti-Semitism is "an affront of the Gospel, a violation of our hope and calling," and to live out our faith "with love and respect for the Jewish people" ("Declaration"). The Panel invested its initial efforts in building a firm foundation for this mandate by developing a document that would become central to our inter-religious life.

Twenty years ago, in 1994, the ELCA Church Council adopted the "Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community," rejecting Luther's later anti-Judaic writings, acknowledging their tragic effects throughout history, and reaching out in

reconciliation and relationship to the Jewish Community. This Declaration served a dual purpose; it enabled the ELCA to address a troubling aspect of our legacy and sent an important message to our Jewish partners. The Jewish community received the Declaration with a great deal of appreciation, expressed in various ways. To offer some examples, in Allentown, Pennsylvania, the modern Orthodox synagogue reached out to the Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding at Muhlenberg College in a spirit of cooperation. The National Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC included mention of contemporary American Lutheran rejection of Luther's anti-Semitic views in one of its featured films. One of our Jewish dialogue partners and colleagues has a framed copy of the Declaration hanging on her office wall as a reminder of our commitments to her community.

In 2005, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, then president of the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), addressed the ELCA Churchwide Assembly, the first Jewish leader and inter-religious guest to do so. He acknowledged his appreciation for "the role played by the [ELCA] in forging meaningful relationships between Christians and American Jews" (ELCA



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"Assembly"). This was in reference to the bilateral dialogue between the ELCA and the URJ, but also to longstanding local and national Christian-Jewish dialogues. Over the years, the Consultative Panel had undertaken significant work to develop resources in support of such dialogues, including *Covenantal Conversations*, a book and companion DVD published by Fortress Press in 2008, which explores "the shared theological framework, special historical relationship, and post-Holocaust developments and current trouble spots that situate the contemporary Jewish-Christian relationship" (Jodock).

Muslim Relations

Luther also wrote some troubling things about Islam in the context of the Ottoman Turkish advances in Europe, as they approached German borders. Nevertheless, while addressing difficult theological and pastoral questions about warfare and possible crusade, he sought reliable information about Islamic teachings, and insisted that Muslim Turks could live virtuous lives—a useful precedent for contemporary Muslim relations. In this vein, the ELCA and its predecessor bodies nurtured a variety of relationships and participated in several initiatives with Muslims over the years. In response to 9/11, however, the ELCA, like many other churches in the United States, sought to give greater focus to Muslim relations, both bilaterally and through national Muslim-Christian dialogues.

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In 2007, the ELCA participated in efforts to respond to "A Common Word Between Us and You," an open letter from 138 Muslim leaders around the globe addressed to Christian leaders that both underscored religions' emphases on love of God and neighbor and called for unity and peace on that basis. The following year, a group of ELCA scholars and leaders convened to explore

how the church could enhance its Muslim relations, an initiative that became the Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Muslim Relations. With the work of the Lutheran-Jewish Relations Panel as a model, this new panel set out to develop several resources to educate ELCA members on Islam and to nurture local dialogue and engagement (see Sample of Resources on adjacent page). The need was only increasing. By Fall of 2010, Islamophobia had reached a fever pitch as pundits weighed in daily on the so-called "Ground Zero Mosque" controversy and as Terry Jones threatened to burn copies of the Qur'an. Together with over 20 interfaith partners, the ELCA became a founding member of the Shoulder to Shoulder Campaign: Standing with American Muslims, Upholding American Values.

In 2011, on the tenth anniversary of 9/11, Dr. Sayyid Sayeed of the Islamic Society for North America (ISNA) was the first Muslim speaker to address the ELCA Churchwide Assembly. He described how "during the last millennium mountains of hate [and] discrimination have been built." "Our job," he said, "is to see those mountains of hate removed." He was received by the Assembly with a standing ovation. Later that same year, with the endorsement of ISNA, Discover Islam: USA generously offered ELCA members and leaders complimentary copies of their six-disc DVD series entitled, *Discover Islam*. The Consultative Panel, in partnership with A Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, developed a study guide for use with the series, providing an interpretive framework from a Christian (Lutheran) point of view. This study guide is also used by several ecumenical partners (see Sample of Resources).

Expanding the Table

ELCA inter-religious relations have historically focused on the "Abrahamic" traditions of Judaism and Islam, and for good reason. Not only does our specific legacy as Lutherans connect us, albeit in difficult ways, to Judaism and Islam; Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are also connected through history and tradition. Yet as our religious landscape becomes increasingly diverse, reflecting the spectrum of the world's religions and the diversity of global Christianity, we must continue to ask ourselves: What kinds of inter-religious relations are

Sample of ELCA Inter-Religious Resources

Developed by the Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations and the Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Muslim Relations.

- Talking Points: Topics in Lutheran-Jewish Relations
- Windows for Understanding: Jewish-Muslim-Lutheran Relations
- Talking Points: Topics in Christian-Muslim Relations
- Discover Islam DVD series Study Guide (DVDs available at: www.discoverislam.com/elca)
- Why Follow Luther Past 2017: A Contemporary Lutheran Approach to Inter-Religious Relations

Each is available for download: <http://www.elca.org/Resources/Ecumenical-and-Inter-Religious-Relations>

needed today? How can we most faithfully respond to the eighth commandment?

The ELCA participates more broadly in inter-religious relations through bodies such as Religions for Peace USA and the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions, and in partnership with organizations such as the Interfaith Youth Core. Conversations have recently begun about possibilities for national ecumenical dialogues with the dharmic traditions, beginning with Sikhism. For the ELCA, this is a growing edge. After the Oak Creek shootings in 2012, the ELCA was amongst the first interfaith partners to reach out, and a fledging relationship was established with Sikh leaders in the United States. As a sign of this, Tarunjit Singh Butalia of the World Sikh Council, America Region was the first inter-religious guest from a dharmic tradition to address the 2013 Churchwide Assembly. Who else are our neighbors? How do we understand what it means to be neighbors in an era of globalization and global migration?

In order to discover the real-life practical and theological challenges facing Lutherans today, the ELCA Consultative Panels jointly launched an inter-religious case studies project in early 2013. After receiving dozens of submissions over the course of a year, a drafting team has begun to weave them together into a narrative of best practices and challenges, with the goal of publishing a resource booklet for study and reflection in local contexts. This project is a first step toward building a framework for the future of ELCA inter-religious relations on the firm foundation that has already been established.

An important question as we look toward the 500 year anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 will be: What of Luther's legacy, then, is instructive with regard to inter-religious relations? The ELCA's newest resource for inter-religious relations explores this question in depth. "Why Follow Luther Past 2017? A Contemporary Lutheran Approach to Inter-Religious Relations" lifts up four underlying principles of Luther's theology as particularly instructive: (1) God adopts people solely out of God's generosity, without any prerequisites; (2) God is active in the world in such a way as to empower but not to control; (3) theology of the cross; and (4) vocation as a calling from God.

"Who else are our neighbors? How do we understand what it means to be neighbors in an era of globalization and global migration?"

The development of this resource, like the others preceding it, modeled one of the key learnings of inter-religious relations, namely, that "the common experience of individuals who have engaged in inter-religious dialogue is that their understanding and appreciation of their own tradition is enhanced in the process" ("Why Follow"). But it also enhances relations as well. The Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations invited Jewish partners to review and offer input as part of

the revision process, which strengthened the content and demonstrated an ongoing commitment to mutual accountability. The ultimate hope is that the resource will be used by Lutherans to better understand our legacy, and to “equip Christians to engage Jews and others in positive, constructive and honest ways” (“Why Follow”).

Expanding the table of our inter-religious partners must be done with careful attention to the reasons for doing so. There is a real concern that if we engage in inter-religious relations, we are participating in a form of religious relativism, sliding down the slippery slope to a compromised faith in Jesus Christ. Yet, one of the learnings from inter-religious relations is that, in practice, precisely the

opposite is true. By authentically engaging with others, we become more deeply grounded in who we are, reinforcing our faith and witness. In dialogue with others, we are challenged to clarify what it is we believe, and why. In partnership with our neighbors who share our concern for the common good, we find opportunities to collaborate for the sake of the world. In other words, inter-religious relations both strengthen and support our Lutheran vocation. The role of ELCA colleges in vocational formation for a multi-religious world has been and will continue to be significant. Together we have a firm foundation on which to build. Thanks be to God!

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