

A Statement to Muslims in Canada by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC)

Adopted at the July 2017 National Convention

“We do not tell lies about our neighbours, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead, we are to come to their defence, speak well of them and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.” – Martin Luther

We live in an age in which interfaith relationships and respect for persons of other faith communities is of the utmost importance.

We acknowledge, with regret and sorrow, that people of the Christian faith have not always been respectful of people of other faith communities. Prejudice, intolerance, stereotypes and misunderstanding have a way of infecting communities, and very few Christian communities have completely escaped this bias.

In our current context, people of the Muslim faith have been singled out for particular forms of biased and prejudiced treatment. The tone of some national debate regarding the rights of Muslims in Canada has been troubling. At times the discourse has been derogatory, prejudiced, and characterized by a suspicion or fear of the other in our midst. Such rhetoric has consequences. Some incidents have been aggressive, violent and even deadly.

All this is happening while there is a growing Muslim community in Canada, and while there is a huge number of Muslim refugees around the world, including many who immigrate to Canada seeking a safe, new home. Many ELCIC members have gotten to know refugees who are Muslim by serving as sponsors to displaced persons who are welcomed to Canada.

Given our current context, the ELCIC feels called to affirm our respect for people of the Muslim faith and for Islam.

As Lutherans, we value how the teachings of our faith encourage us to love God and to love our neighbours. We believe that we are called to honestly acknowledge errors in thought, word and deed, to receive and offer forgiveness as a path to healing relationships, and to trust in God for support in all that we do. In a spirit of truth-telling, we acknowledge that there have been times within our Lutheran history when we have perpetuated dismissive, disrespectful and hostile attitudes toward people of other faiths. We seek new insight beyond any teachings from our tradition that promote hatred, violence or hostile attitudes towards people of other faiths, including Muslims.

In 1995, the ELCIC Convention adopted a *Statement to the Jewish Community in Canada*. Recalling words from this statement, we affirm our fervent wish to live our faith in Jesus Christ in love and full respect for all Muslims. Hostility toward people of other faith communities is an affront to the Gospel, a contradiction of its central teachings, and a violation of our hope and calling. We pledge this church to oppose prejudice and bigotry in our own circles and in the society around us. We pray that greater understanding and cooperation may continually grow between Lutheran Christians and Muslims in Canada.

In 2015, the ELCIC Convention endorsed the document “Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders.”¹ Through this action, the ELCIC joined other Lutherans represented in the Lutheran World Federation in making a commitment to:

- Respect and honor the reality that the stranger may be of a different faith or hold beliefs different from mine or other members of my community.
- Respect the right of the stranger to practice his or her own faith freely
- Seek to create space where others can freely worship.
- Speak of our own faith without demeaning or ridiculing the faith of others.

Jesus encourages his followers to welcome those who are different from us and new to us by saying “I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:35 & 40.) When we say stranger, we mean neighbours who we do not know as well as we might.

In 2014, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW) signed a Memorandum of Understanding to cooperate in humanitarian work.²

This agreement recognized that both faiths value dignity, justice, compassion, mutual respect, as well as caring and helping vulnerable communities and people affected by disasters. The agreement also made a particular commitment to address the faith-based needs of refugees. Inspired by this agreement, we hope for similar opportunities in Canada where Lutherans and Muslims might work together to demonstrate mutual respect, to build community, to care for neighbours in need and to seek social justice.

The ELCIC challenges members and congregations of the ELCIC to engage in developing respectful, meaningful and mutual relationships with Muslims. The ELCIC encourages use of the 2017 resource *Encountering People of Other Faiths: Interfaith Guidelines*. We believe that respectful interfaith dialogue can lead to deeper understanding of our own faith. We trust that God will guide us in all that we do.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself. – Luke 10:27

¹ https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Welcoming_the_Stranger.pdf

² <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/lwf-and-islamic-relief-sign-memorandum-understanding>

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2016 was a year marked by a huge refugee migration crisis. The people fleeing their homes are measured in the millions, and the reality is that many of those who are fleeing are Muslims. The crisis continues into 2017. Many ELCIC members and congregations have been engaged in sponsoring refugees.

There is a growing Muslim community in Canada. The people of Islam represent our most numerous neighbours of another faith, followed by Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jews in that order. Freedom of religion is enshrined in Canadian law, and the value of multiculturalism is encouraged. Nevertheless, there have been incidents where people of the Muslim faith have been singled out for particular forms of biased and prejudiced treatment.

Of particular note are the horrific events of January 29, 2017 when there was a mass shooting at le Centre Culturel Islamique de Québec during Sunday night prayers. ELCIC leaders began preparing this Statement on Muslims in Canada in the fall of 2016. The memories of the tragic events of January 29th at the Quebec City Mosque are a poignant reminder of the importance of building respectful interfaith relationships and of addressing prejudice.

This year marks the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. In commemorating this moment in the life of the church, the LWF has encouraged Lutherans around the world to ponder the meaning of the words Liberated by God's Grace: Human Beings – not for sale. We hear in this message a call to multiply the ways in which we honour the dignity and rights of all persons and each person.

As members of this worldwide family of faith, the ELCIC wants to state publicly and unequivocally its rejection of theological justification or support for biased attitudes towards people of other faith communities.

In approving this statement, we ask the Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada to communicate this action to appropriate interfaith leaders and to the synods and congregations of this church.