

# ENCOUNTERING PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS

## INTERFAITH GUIDELINES

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada  
July, 2017

### THE RELIGIOUS FACE OF CANADA

“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)

Who are our neighbours? If we grew up in a small town or rural area in Canada, our neighbours were probably Christian. Even in our biggest cities, that was likely the case. Most of us were not concerned about interfaith matters nor did we have much opportunity to get to know people of other faiths. As recently as 1991, more than 80% of Canadians called themselves Christian; an additional 13% acknowledged no religious affiliation. Only about 4% of Canadians were people of other faiths.

We have new neighbours! By 2011, only 67% of people saw themselves as Christian, 24% had no affiliation, and people of other faiths had increased to about 8% of the population. [The religious face of Canada](#) has been changing and that means that the opportunities for Lutheran Christians to meet and interact with people of other faiths are greater now than ever before. Such interactions may be as casual as a conversation at Timmy’s or as complex as helping people to sort out a new life in Canada.

In 2011, Church of the Cross in Victoria sponsored a series on “Understanding Our Neighbour’s Faiths.” The congregation had been involved with Multifaith Services at the University of Victoria for many years. At the dedication of a new building addition in 2007, University Chaplains representing other faiths participated in the prayers. This partnership provided a natural connection for the series. Each week a representative from one tradition made a presentation followed by questions and discussion. The series included Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and the Baha’i faith. Thirty to forty people attended each week, with about half from the wider community. The response was very positive with many people commenting on how much they learned and enjoyed the presentations and conversation with our “neighbours.” When the local Muslim community opened a new Mosque a few years ago, members of the congregation were present for the opening. And recently when the Mosque, in response to violence in Canada, held an open house, a number of people from the congregation participated wanting to show solidarity with our neighbours. The presentations helped to create understanding and a relationship. Still today, people of the congregation and community remember the series, and wonder or ask when we will plan something like it again. Maybe it is time. (Pastor Lyle McKenzie, Victoria BC)

The people of Islam represent our most numerous neighbours of another faith, followed by Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jews in that order. The Canadian Muslim community grew from about 1% to slightly more than 3% of the population between 1991 and 2001. In our larger cities the number may be as high as 6% (Montreal) or 8% (Toronto). Like Christians, Muslims reflect both great commonality and great diversity in faith, tradition, language and culture of origin. Like us, they’re not all the same. That’s something Christians and Muslims have in common!

We have greater opportunity than ever to encounter the stranger—and people of other faiths—in our own communities. There were 65 million refugees at the end of 2015 according to the UNHCR. A significant number of these have come, or are seeking to come, to Canada. Some months into 2016, the ELCIC had surpassed its [Reformation Challenge](#) refugee resettlement goal. Behind every congregational story which contributed to this good news, there was some sort of encounter between a Lutheran community and some folk who were, for the most part, people of another faith. Many were/are Muslim.

“Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13: 1-2)

In 2015, the ELCIC endorsed [Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders](#). All major religions embrace compassion, caring and respect, and the rule of granting protection to those in danger. In *Welcoming the Stranger*, representatives of major faith groups, including the [Lutheran World Federation](#), created a code of conduct for faith leaders in welcoming migrants, refugees and other displaced persons. It affirms that compassion, mercy, love and hospitality are for everyone: the native born and the foreign born, the member of the community and the newcomer.

When I was a student at the Vancouver School of Theology, I was asked by First Lutheran Church, Vancouver, if I could facilitate a session on Christian-Muslim relations. I said yes, as long as I could bring along a Muslim friend. They agreed, and so I asked my friend Khaled to come with me. He is a Palestinian Muslim who had been born in a refugee camp, where his family had lived for generations since 1948. He had come to Canada to study and work. He was apprehensive, though, as he had been ill-treated by a Lutheran pastor in the past. Still, he agreed to come. On the appointed day, we all met outside in the beautiful sunshine after worship. We spoke about Islam. We spoke about Christianity. We spoke about Khaled’s family and his experiences as a refugee. At the end of the afternoon, everyone had a much deeper appreciation of Muslim faith and Khaled experienced healing in the care of a very gracious congregation. And for an afternoon, at least, there was peace, there was understanding, and there was healing. (Pastor Michael Kurtz, Winnipeg MB)

Our Christian faith invites us to greet the stranger with humility and a sense of hospitality that is more than mere tolerance, and in a manner that is loving and merciful. How do we welcome people whose faith is different from our own? How do we demonstrate the love of Jesus?

The following *Guidelines* were created to offer a word of encouragement and some examples to follow.

## INTERFAITH GUIDELINES

(Jesus asked ...) “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10: 36-37)

Take a look at [Welcoming the Stranger; Affirmations for Faith Leaders](#). While its title suggests that it’s for “faith leaders”, in fact, it lays out some important attitudes and actions for all of us as we seek to welcome strangers. See also the [World Council of Churches’s](#) [Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World](#) for a distinctively Christian voice.

It is important for every Christian to witness to the love of Jesus. However, in the real-world of day-to-day and sometimes in-crisis—as in refugee resettlement—interfaith encounter, we often do well to allow our actions to speak *before* our words or even *as* our words. Sometimes it's more important to love with the love of Jesus than to say anything at all. Our gifts—our entire witness—may lie in the web of our good works, offered diligently and silently for the love of God and the good of our neighbour. It is almost always the case that a faith well-lived will invite interest and openness to conversation.

The question “Why do you do what you do?”, asked of a Christian, will yield a far more helpful opening than “Why are you telling me this?” Both questions may issue in the answer “Because of Jesus”. The one, however, opens the door to conversation and makes Jesus look good—you'd want to get to know that sort of Jesus. The other does not.

Let our actions speak at least as loudly as our words and, in the main, we might allow them to speak first. It is important for every Christian to witness to the love of Jesus ... in a way that is humble and welcoming, merciful and loving. And credible. And inviting.

Here are some guidelines concerning how we might cultivate an inviting disposition within ourselves and a climate of welcome in our communities. To welcome people—“our neighbours”—of other faiths, we *learn, connect, pray and act*.

## Learn

In response to a Syrian refugee sponsorship effort taking place in early 2016, the Adult Bible Study group of the Lunenburg Lutheran Parish realized that many people in the area had authentic questions about Islam. So they invited the Imam of the local mosque to address these questions. The process of invitation took on a life of its own and eventually the whole town was included! Two sessions were held at Zion. The first dealt with expectations for interfaith dialogue and was led by the pastor. Participants included Christians, as well as Jews, Buddhists and people of no affiliation. Indeed, the turnout was so large that the session with the Imam was moved to the sanctuary. At the second session, over 70 were present and the father of one of the refugee families, who is Muslim, attended. After the presentation, many questions were asked by participants, refreshments were served, and much good will was created. The most commonly heard statement following the event was, “Thank you for hosting this. This was important.” (Pastor Rick Pryce, Lunenburg NS)

- What learning might be helpful for people in your congregation? Are there authentic questions about Islam or about any other neighbours we might encounter?
- Do people know how to greet their Muslim or Jewish or Sikh neighbours? What might people need to know about dietary observances, holy days or social customs before they can be fully welcoming?
- Organize a movie or book discussion which portrays people of another faith in a good light.
- Consider reading and studying some Canadian books which offer a cross-cultural and interfaith perspective. Four are recommended among the resources at the end of these *Guidelines*.
- Set up exchange visits with a nearby mosque, synagogue or temple.
- Make visits to local temples, synagogues, mosques part of your confirmation program.
- Create adult learning sessions in which people of other faiths are invited to speak about their own faith, experience and concerns. Consider making this a regular, perhaps annual, effort.

## Connect

In 2016, Jennifer Ardon, a program officer with [Canadian Lutheran World Relief](#), in conversation with a Muslim friend, learned of his community's interest in resettling families from Syria. However, the local masjid (mosque) did not have the mechanism to act as, or with, a local Muslim "sponsorship agreement holder", one like CLWR. At the same time, CLWR was not mandated to work directly with the masjid. She explained this reality to people at Christ Lutheran Church, Waterloo, where a project to resettle people from Burundi was already underway. Very soon thereafter, representatives of the masjid and the congregation came together and a new effort was begun. By linking the congregation and masjid, CLWR could work directly with the Lutheran community using regular sponsorship documents while the Lutheran community could work with the masjid via a simple memorandum of understanding. (Pastor André Lavergne, Waterloo ON)

- Take the initiative! Pastors could contact the local mosque, synagogue or temple and introduce themselves to the imam, rabbi, granthi or other leader. Follow up with a request for coffee. Do a little Googling about the community, its leaders, customs before you knock on the door.
- When people move into the neighbourhood, introduce yourself to your new neighbours. Where they represent another culture or faith, hear their stories with gentle curiosity and openness. An invitation for tea or coffee goes a long way to break the ice.
- Our first instinct is often to find a Lutheran congregation or to look to the Christian community for a refugee resettlement effort. Consider opening your project to other faith communities.
- School functions and the community playground are good places to connect with people of other faiths with parenting and the living of daily life as shared interests. Your children or grandchildren may have friends of any number of different faiths at school.

Years ago, Dr. Roland Miller invited Rabbi Jeremy Parnes, Zarqa Nawaz (Creator of Little Mosque on the Prairie) and me to sit on a panel as "Children of Abraham". The three of us met and presented as "siblings" with a deep appreciation and understanding of each others' faith traditions. Fast forward to 2016, and the three of us still meet for monthly lunches. We've also planned a now yearly event called, "The Tents of Abraham". We invited our communities together to eat a meal, and to listen to Lyndon J Linklater, Office of the Treaty Commissioner, about commonalities. A large number of people came together from four communities, and we played "Spiritual Pursuit", a game written with questions from our faith traditions. We learned, we talked, we listened, we ate, we deepened understanding and it was good. (Pastor Carla Blakley, Regina SK & Winnipeg MB)

## Pray

Every Saturday, I tweet out a number of timely prayer concerns which may be retweeted and worked into the Sunday prayers. These often pertain to people and places of various faiths and cultures and often address the bruised and broken places of God's world. Frequently, the particular ties to family touch our neighbours deeply. If, in our prayers, we can bring a neighbourhood face and local names to such hurt, this can help to build enduring bridges to people of other faiths. (Bishop Susan Johnson, Winnipeg MB)

- For several years, Bishop Johnson has [called our church](#) into a process of spiritual renewal and deepened discipleship. She has asked us to *pray, read, worship, study, serve, give* and *tell*. How might each of these contribute to a loving and humble witness to our neighbours of other faiths? How might each of these inform a witness that is merciful and welcoming?

- Commit to praying for the well-being of your neighbours and for their kin in foreign lands. Pray for them by name.
- As you get to know your neighbours, ask them what they pray for and tell them that you and your community will join them in their concerns and prayers.
- Pray for Muslim refugees still in war-torn countries or trapped, with little or no future, in refugee camps or detention areas.
- Pray for the faith assemblies in your neighbourhood by name (The Waterloo Masjid, The Cedars Community ...). Let their people know that you are doing so and that you do so regularly.
- Inquire whether you might be invited to accompany a friend to their mosque, temple or synagogue for prayers, sometime. Ask what might be expected relative to dress or other customs. Let them be your guide.

## Act

Some years ago, the cemetery of the Jewish community in Kitchener was vandalized. A meeting was planned at the synagogue where people could show solidarity with the Jewish congregation. The practice at St Peters Lutheran Church in Kitchener was to arrange a visit to the synagogue for the Confirmation class, but because of the vandalism, we decided to go with the class to the meeting. As well as listening to Jewish leaders and seeing an unfamiliar worship space, the youth were part of a huge group of people of all faiths showing their concern, sympathy and support for the Jewish congregation. (Jackie Nunns, Kitchener ON)

- Invite your Muslim neighbours to work with your congregation on a community service project—perhaps a Habitat build, community clean-up day or safety effort.
- Invite your Sikh neighbours to help create a community garden on some congregational land.
- Offer to host ESL classes for recent immigrants with coffee and conversation afterward.
- The needs and concerns of the local community or neighbourhood—such as affordable housing, desire for an arena, kids on the streets—can serve as a helpful focus for interfaith encounter and positive action.
- Working together at a foodbank or in a winter clothing drive is a terrific way to get to know your neighbour of another faith.
- Be clear about your support for your neighbours when they face issues of discrimination, injury to their religious freedom or other injustice. Tell them of your support and tell those who can help to make a difference.
- Following the violence in a Canadian mosque, Bishop Susan wrote a letter of support to the Canadian Council of Imams and a pastoral letter to our church. In times of sadness and celebration, how might you communicate your love and the love of Jesus to your neighbour?
- Knocking on the door and asking “How can we help?”, when a community of another faith is hurting, offers a powerful Christian witness.
- Invite your neighbours of other faiths to observe [World Interfaith Harmony Week](#) with you. Take up a community service endeavour together. The ELCIC signed on in 2012 following the lead of the [Lutheran World Federation](#).

## RESOURCES

It is important for every Christian to witness to the love of Jesus in ways that are humble and welcoming, merciful and loving, credible and inviting. These guidelines were created to offer a word of encouragement and some examples to follow. For further study or discussion here are some resources.

### Meeting Our Neighbour

- < Created by the [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#) (UNHCR) with input from the [Lutheran World Federation](#) (LWF), [Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders](#) was endorsed by the ELCIC in 2015. *Welcoming* is a brief, clear and accessible-to-all code of conduct for anyone whose life or ministry takes to interfaith boundaries.
- < The [World Council of Churches](#), [Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue](#) and [World Evangelical Alliance](#) have published [Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct](#). This guide complements the UNHCR's *Welcoming the Stranger*.
- < The [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#) (ELCA) has produced *Engaging Others, Knowing Ourselves: A Lutheran Calling in a multi-Religious World* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2016.) An experience-based resource for community reflection which is especially appealing to young adults. Available from [www.lutheranupress.org](http://www.lutheranupress.org).
- < The National Council of Churches in the USA has published a number of accessible on-line study guides on [Interreligious Relations and Collaboration](#). These are geared toward church leaders. <C:\Users\Desiree Mendoza\AppData\Local\Temp\notes90C43B\www.nationalcouncilofchurches.us\interreligious-relations-and-collaboration>
- < [Lutheran Social Services of Minnesota](#) offers some excellent [Resources for Congregations](#) dealing with interfaith and other contemporary realities.
- < Here are four Canadian books which offer a cross-cultural and interfaith perspective.
  - Tasneem Jamal, *WHERE THE AIR IS SWEET* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2014; Ismaili Islam)
  - Madeleine Thien, *DO NOT SAY WE HAVE NOTHING* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2016; Chinese)
  - Camilla Gibb, *SWEETNESS IN THE BELLY* (Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2005; Islam)
  - Shyam Selvadurai, *THE HUNGRY GHOSTS* (Toronto: Doubleday, 2013; Sri Lankan Buddhism)

### Interfaith Dialogue

- < For resources regarding interfaith *dialogue*—the process of engaging people of other faiths in focused, intentional conversation—see this [Principles and Guidelines for Interfaith Dialogue](#) page of the [Scarboro Missions](#) website.
- < The ELCA has produced *Talking Points* for interfaith dialogue with Muslims & Jews, together with helpful sets of *Guidelines* for Lutheran-Jewish Relations and Lutheran-Muslim Relations. All are available on the same [Resources](#) page.
- < In 1995, the ELCIC offered a [Statement to the Jewish Community](#). *A Statement to Muslims in Canada by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC)* is coming to the 2017 National Convention together with this *Encountering People of Other Faiths: Interfaith Guidelines*.