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Study guide

Out of many, one God

By Robert C. Blezard

We share a world with people who hold beliefs that are different from ours. This simple truth has been apparent from the beginning of history, and yet humanity has never learned how to live together with complete harmony and respect. And things have gotten more tense in recent years. But Lutherans are helping lead the way through our Interreligious Task Force, which is working to present a draft interreligious policy statement at the 2019 Churchwide Assembly. Anticipating that statement, how might we all work for better relations with those of different faiths?

Exercise 1: The Abrahamic faiths

We are three related faiths—Christianity, Judaism and Islam—all monotheistic, all believing in an omnipotent creator God who has a relationship with humanity, especially those people who are believers. All three look to Abraham of the Bible as a father of faith, and all profess worship of the one true God—the God of Abraham. And together we make up a majority of people in the world—about 53 percent.

- Rooted as they are in common religious soil and claiming to worship the God of Abraham, Christianity, Islam and Judaism have a bond that is different from our relationship with other world religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism. How can we best honor our common roots?
- Because Jesus was himself a Jewish rabbi, many Christians are familiar with the connections between Christianity and Judaism. As a study group, think of as many commonalities as you can. In what ways does our shared history and tradition help create a strong relationship between Christians and Jews?
- If Christians understood better the history and traditions of Islam, especially its common roots, how might it help promote better relations between Christians and Muslims?

For action: As a study group explore the three Abrahamic faiths—their histories, common roots, shared beliefs, and distinctions in beliefs and practice. When done, share your findings with your congregation through such means as a forum, Sunday school class or newsletter article.

For action: Find out who your Jewish and Muslim neighbors are. Invite them to your fellowship events. If a mosque and synagogue are located



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in your area, connect with them for dialogue, friendship, social events or community work. Invite a representative of those faiths to talk with your congregation about their beliefs.

Exercise 2: The Golden Rule

One of Jesus' most sweeping commands is expressed best in Matthew 7:12: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets." Jesus underscores the importance of this teaching by saying it is the essence of "the law and the prophets." In Judaism, the body of knowledge contained in the law and the prophets served to guide the lives of God's people. For something to be the essence of the law and the prophets, then, it would have been very important. (Jesus also makes the claim when identifying the two greatest commandments in Matthew 22:40.)

- Make a list of your ideas and answers to these questions: As a Christian, how would you like our faith to be viewed or understood by people of other faiths? How would you, personally, like to be treated by people of other faiths? Keep thinking until the list seems complete.
- Looking over the list, do those ideas describe how *Lutherans* view and treat people of other faiths? Does it describe how *Christians* understand and treat people of different faiths? Among Christian groups is there consistency on these matters? Why are there differences?
- Is it easy or hard to view and treat people of other faiths as you would want to be viewed and treated? Why?
- It's true that some Christians are not understood or treated well by members of other faiths. Does that mean we are free to ignore Jesus' command of Matthew 7:12? Why or why not?
- In its striving to live peaceably with those of other faiths and to promote mutual respect and trust, how is the ELCA helping to lead the way? How can we all do better? How can you, personally?

Exercise 3: Love your enemies

A shorter version of the Golden Rule appears in Luke 6:31: "Do to others as you would have them do to you." But the context of Luke's version provides an important nuance. Read Luke 6:27-36 and discuss.

- What insight do the passages from verses 27-30 provide about *whom*, exactly, are the "others" referred to in verse 31 that we ought to treat as ourselves? Why is this so hard? Is it human nature to act this way? Why or why not?
- What specific insights do verses 27-30 provide into *how* we should "do to others"? In what ways is this teaching counterintuitive to how we



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think? How is this teaching contrary to what the world teaches and how the world thinks?

- Jesus goes on to explain his “do to others” teaching in verses 39-36. What do you make of his reasoning? Does he make a compelling case? Is he calling us to do the impossible?
- In the face of a world in which some Christians face prejudice, scorn, persecution and even martyrdom by some people of different faiths, how are we to follow Luke 6:31? How can you?
- Many Christians in the world face persecution and real threats of violence from people of other faiths. Does the Golden Rule mean that Christians should not defend themselves or take measures to keep themselves safe from harm? How can Christians balance the need to keep themselves safe and work to live free while at the same time obeying the command to love others as ourselves? In what ways can that be a tough needle to thread?
- Does God forgive us even when we fail to live perfectly?

Exercise 4: Rising tide of hate

In May 2017 an avowed white supremacist in Portland, Ore., reportedly stabbed three men, two of them fatally, who were trying to calm him down as he harassed two women he believed were Muslim. In recent months Jewish community centers and synagogues have been targets of graffiti and bomb threats, and several Jewish cemeteries have been vandalized. These are signs of a wave of anti-Islamic and anti-Jewish sentiment, says the Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks incidents of intolerance and hatred. “2016 was an unprecedented year for hate,” the center’s senior fellow Mark Potok said in *USA Today*. “The country saw a resurgence of white nationalism that imperils the racial progress we’ve made.”

- What evidence of hatred or intolerance, especially against Jews and Muslims, have you witnessed in your personal circles? In your community? In your state?
- When you hear of these things, what do you think? What do you feel? What are the factors fanning the flames of intolerance and hatred?
- As people who are commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves and be neighbor to all, how can we work together to promote tolerance and decency? Why is it important always to start, first, with our own heart? Why is it important to try?

Exercise 5: Misinformation

When it comes to understanding the Muslims who are our neighbors, our modern means of communication often does not help us. First, on



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respectable news outlets much of the coverage of the Islamic world centers on ISIS and terrorists around the world who represent a very small sliver of Muslims. This might give us a skewed view of that faith. More dangerous are the misinformation and “fake news” that is maliciously promoted by the slanted, special-interest media that is unbound by the principles of good journalism that are found on respectable news outlets. The result is a perfect storm for widespread misunderstanding about Islam.

- When you think of Muslims, what impressions, images and words come to mind? (Make a list.) Don’t censor your thoughts ... they are not good or bad ... they are just part of the culture we live in. When the list is complete discuss: Where do these images come from? To what degree are they accurate? How do you know?
- How do you understand the distinction between Islam and radical Islam? How would you define or describe each of them? Do respectable news outlets do a good enough job distinguishing between the two? How could they do better? In what ways do the slanted, special-interest media do their best to blur the distinction between the two, painting all Muslims with the same brush?
- Put the phrase “misinformation on Muslims” into an internet search engine and peruse the results. How would you characterize the information most people get about Islam? How much misinformation is out there, and why?
- How can you work, in your own life, to correct misinformation about Muslims? In your church? In your community? Why is it important to do so?

Exercise 6: ‘Who is my neighbor?’

Because this question from Luke 10:29 has guided our denomination’s work in understanding and shaping our relationship with the non-Christian world, a closer look at the context of that question may provide insights. Read Luke 10:25-37 and discuss:

- Who asks the question, “Who is my neighbor?” What do you know about him? Why is he concerned about the identity of his neighbor? Looking more broadly at the passage, what discussion has prompted the question of verse 29? And what question prompted *that* discussion? What was Jesus’ answer to the lawyer’s question of verse 25? So what’s at stake in this whole passage?
- The familiar parable of the good Samaritan is Jesus’ answer to his question, “Who is my neighbor?” What does it reveal? What made the good Samaritan a neighbor to the man beaten and robbed? What can we discern from the parable about who our neighbor is?
- In what ways can we be a good neighbor to our Muslim and Jewish

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brothers and sisters who are facing prejudice and acts of hatred?

- What does verse 37 mean for us? Referring to verse 25, what was this parable about again?

Discussion questions

- How would you characterize the relations between Christians and Jews, and Christians and Muslims? Where are the tension spots, and why do they exist? How can we, as people of peace, work to help create better relations?
- Jesus taught, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9). What does it mean to be a peacemaker in the sometimes-tense arena of religious interaction?
- What do you think about Judaism and Islam? How do you feel about those religions and why? What are your sources of information about those faiths? Are the sources trustworthy, and do they present a full and balanced picture of the two? Do you have any friends who are Muslim or Jewish? If so, how have those friendships helped you understand the faiths better? If not, why not? How might you and your congregation engage people of other faiths to give you a fuller understanding of them?

“E PLURIBUS UNUM DEUS”:

By K.T. Sancken



OUT OF MANY, ONE GOD

As Christians, we are called to love and serve the neighbor. The question posed in Luke 10:29—“Who is my neighbor?”—has been one the ELCA has explored since its founding in 1988. In an increasingly diverse America, neighbors aren’t always Christian.

“The Scriptures don’t specify what that neighbor’s ethnic background is. I think that’s intentional,” said Kathryn Lohre, assistant to the ELCA presiding bishop and executive for ecumenical and interreligious relations.

For the ELCA, a diversity of religious belief systems coexisting in society isn’t a threat—it’s an invitation to conversation and understanding. “It’s part of our baptismal vocation as Lutherans,” Lohre said. “We’re responding faithfully to [Martin] Luther’s explanation of the Eighth Commandment by engaging in mutual understanding.”

In explaining that commandment, Luther wrote: “We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light” (Small Catechism).

This has been the basis for the ELCA’s interreligious work over the last three decades. Soon after its formation, the ELCA recognized non-Christians as neighbors by establishing the ELCA Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations. In 1994 the ELCA was the first Lutheran denomination to apologize to the Jewish people and repudiate Luther’s anti-Semitic writings from 1543.

In 2008, in response to an open letter from Muslim leaders looking for common ground and understanding with Christians, the ELCA Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Muslim Relations was formed.

This year the church has reflected deeply on how to continue to serve Muslim and Jewish neighbors. In January, President Donald Trump attempted to restrict entry of refugees and visitors from predominantly Muslim countries into the U.S. A month later there were attacks on Jewish cemeteries in Missouri and Pennsylvania, and threats of violence against 13 Jewish community centers across the country.

In reaction to these occurrences, ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton issued statements encouraging members and congregations to “[reach] out and [show] up with our Jewish neighbors” and to “offer safety to people fleeing religious persecution regardless of their faith tradition.”

Eaton also appointed the ELCA Interreligious Task Force in 2016 to develop a draft interreligious policy statement that is slated to be presented to the 2019 ELCA Churchwide Assembly.

Task force member Jacqueline Bussie, director of the Forum on Faith and Life at Concordia College, Moorhead, Minn., said: “As a Lutheran Christian, I think of Christ as a reconciler, as in 2 Corinthians 5:18 that says, ‘God reconciled us to Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.’ I’m called to reconciliation. In a world that is so divided and in conflict over religion, a ministry of reconciliation must include interfaith cooperation, service and dialogue.”

“WHICH OF THESE THREE, DO YOU THINK, WAS A NEIGHBOR
TO THE MAN WHO FELL INTO THE HANDS OF THE ROBBERS?”
THE ANSWER IS, “THE ONE WHO SHOWED HIM MERCY.”

LUKE 10:36

Bussie has led Concordia students in interreligious service projects as part of Better Together, a division of the Interfaith Youth Core.

“Better Together starts not with a conversation, but with service,” she said. “We don’t have to agree on the doctrine of the Trinity to agree that we have to feed a homeless child. That’s how people can organically get to know one another. If we serve our neighbors, we get to better conversations.”

Jesus answers the question of “Who is my neighbor?” with the parable of the good Samaritan. When Jesus asks in Luke 10:36, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” the answer is, “The one who showed him mercy.”



Photo: Courtesy of Fred Schenker

Fred Schenker and his family designed a 2016 presidential election yard sign to help send a positive message of hope and unity. The sign was met with neighbors’ appreciation.

Making room

In 2004, Muslims joined to form an *ummah*, or worshiping community, in a north suburb of Pittsburgh. While the *ummah* saved money to build a community center, they approached several local churches to request the use of their space for Friday midday prayers and daily prayers during Ramadan. They were consistently turned down until they went to Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wexford, Pa.

Unbeknownst to the *ummah*, Fred Schenker, then pastor of Trinity, had participated in the Abrahamic Initiative of the Chautauqua Institute, where he learned about the commonalities of Christianity and Islam. “You read in the Quran that ‘no one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself.’ To me, that’s pretty close to the golden rule,” he said.

After a discussion with Trinity’s council based on what he’d learned at Chautauqua, a majority agreed to let the *ummah* use their fellowship hall. In return, the Muslims invited Trinity to join them for *iftar*, the meal when Muslims end their Ramadan fast. They also helped on church cleanup days.

Though some within the congregation worried that they wouldn’t be safe if they were accepting of the Muslim community, the opposite happened. They became protective of each other.

“It’s a group that’s different from us, but we became friends with them. It raised our consciousness,” Schenker said. “St. Paul said in Philippians 2 that we should develop the mind of Christ, which says you should look at the other person as better than you are. In the Quran, Surah 49 says: ‘God made you different nations and tribes that you may come to know one another.’”

Though the Muslim community now has their own community center, they continue the tradition of an interreligious *iftar*. In 2016 more than 200 people attended, professing a communal desire for peace.

“They basically want the same things that we do,” Schenker said. “Love their God, love their families and contribute to our country.”

Peace across religions

Scottie Lloyd had an unusual job. He was the first Army chaplain tasked with developing relationships with religious leaders in another country, and he was given a wide berth of 27 from which to choose. Lloyd chose Jordan because of its strong military chaplaincy program and its connection to Mecca and Medina, two holy sites for the Islamic faith.

“The religious messages going on within and around Jordan have been exceptionally negative and false,” Lloyd said. “The religious leaders of that chaplaincy had never been interfaced by another religion—not even another branch of Islam.”

After some cajoling, the Jordanian chaplains allowed a visit from five American counterparts, including one of only six Muslim chaplains in the U.S. Army and Lloyd, an ELCA pastor.

Through conversations and trips together around Jordan, the group began finding common ground while discussing how they could promote peace in dangerous situations.

Lloyd and his fellow chaplains were careful not to say or do anything to offend the muftis, or Islamic scholars. They also didn’t share any passages from the New Testament in conversation. But when the tables were turned and





Photo: Courtesy of Scottie Lloyd

Abdula Hulwe (left), an Islamic Army chaplain; the deputy chief of chaplains for the Jordanian armed forces; a tour guide; and Scottie Lloyd toured the Roman ruins in Amman, Jordan, as part of their relationship-building and better understanding of each other's faiths and cultures.

Drawing a diverse future



Fifteen-year-old Sarah Harrison (left), a member of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Monroe, Conn., was chosen out of 4,200 entries for Google's "Doodle 4 Google" contest. Her art was featured on the Google homepage on March 31.

The prompt for the contest was "What I see for the future."



Photo and illustration: Sarah Harrison/Google

Sarah's doodle, named "A Peaceful Future," featured eight diverse teenagers lined up in an over-the-shoulder embrace. On their shirts were symbols of Islam, Judaism, Christianity, LGBT pride, gender nonconformity and disability rights.

For Sarah, who was recently confirmed, interreligious conversations come naturally. She has close friends who are atheist and Muslim. "You can't base your judgments off whatever religion they worship," she said. "It's not fair to minimize people because of what they believe."

She credits her pastor, Doug Ryniewicz, for modeling inclusion in her church.

"I'm very proud that my pastor allows you to come up for communion no matter who you are. And if you don't feel comfortable taking it, he will bless you anyway," Sarah said. "It's nice to offer refuge without stipulations based on who you are."

As a child, Sarah struggled to explain who she was. She was shy and other kids used it as a reason to single her out. Though painful, the experience gave Sarah wisdom and empathy beyond her 15 years.

"I didn't like that people were making judgments before they got to know me," she said. "It's about time we cut each other a break and learn to accept each other for their differences. Diversity is a beautiful thing."



Members of Faith Lutheran Church, Chico, Calif., and Congregation Beth Israel participated in a joint seder meal. The congregations have held events and celebrated holidays together since 2009.

the Jordanians made two visits with the American chaplains in the U.S., the muftis noticed.

“We have not held back from our faith. We are who we are, and we are not ashamed of it. Why are you doing this? It’s almost as if you’re ashamed of it,” Lloyd recalled a mufti saying. It was a moment of humility for Lloyd. He then read them the Beatitudes.

“Sometimes we become so uptight and fearful that we’re going to show disrespect that we dilute who we are and what we believe,” Lloyd said. “The Muslims taught us not to be ashamed of who we are and to say what we truly believe.”

At the last meeting between the two groups of chaplains, a mufti shared how his mind and heart had been changed through the relationship. “There are voices saying that you are a godless people who only care for yourselves. These voices are wrong. ... We will help still these violent voices with the truth,” Lloyd remembered the mufti saying.

Lloyd now serves Lutheran Church of Our Savior in San Bernardino, Calif. When Islamic extremists opened fire on a Christmas party in the city in 2015, killing 14 people, he did what the mufti promised him on behalf of Muslims. “Whether from the pulpit or from other opportunities, I’ve tried to speak out publicly to inform [others about] the true aspects of Islam,” Lloyd said.

Mutual hospitality

In 2009 swastikas were spray-painted and shrubbery was set on fire at a synagogue in Sacramento, Calif. It was prosecuted as a hate crime and it shook up the Jewish community in northern California.

The following year the rabbi at Congregation Beth Israel in Chico, Calif., asked members of nearby Faith Lutheran Church if they would stand as *shomrim* (guardians) while they observed Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of atonement. What began was a friendship between the two congregations that has lasted even after the original rabbi and pastor moved elsewhere.

Ben Colahan, pastor of Faith, and Sara Abrams, rabbi of Beth Israel, have been at their posts for less than a year, but they’ve already had joint events. They will celebrate Pentecost and Shavuot together as a creative way to discuss immigration. The traditional activity during Shavuot is to read the book of Ruth, which is the story of an immigrant woman who cares for her mother-in-law after they become widows.

“Since Pentecost celebrates the different languages of the world, it’s also a time for the church to think about how they serve people beyond their ethnic and linguistic borders,” Colahan said.

For Abrams, the spiritual connection between the two holidays is significant. “Shavuot is the holiday where Israel marries God,” she said. “When we hear about the Holy Spirit descending upon the disciples, it’s a revelation. Whether it’s the Israelites or whether it’s the disciples, we’re not separated from God. The spirit of the Lord can come down and descend upon us.”

Colahan has learned a lot from Abrams. “It is a blessing to sit at the





Photo: Courtesy of Muhlenberg College

In Allentown, Pa., Jewish students at Muhlenberg College's Hillel began the school year with "Havdalah and S'mores," ritually marking the end of Shabbat with a Havdalah ceremony and then hosting a bonfire with snacks.

foot of this rabbi and hear her explain the Torah in ways that I never would have imagined, and in ways I didn't learn in seminary," he said. "To hear what thousands of years of rabbinical commentators say about a story gives me much more insight into the Bible."

This year threats against Jewish communities in Northern California escalated again. Congregation Beth Israel invited Faith members back, not only to protect their synagogue during Passover but to join them in their seder.

"Learning to embrace each other and not fear each other is really important," Abrams said. "You're not just tolerating each other; we're understanding how we can uplift and elevate one another."

Interreligious education

Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pa., is known for its pre-med, pre-law and theater programs, and one other thing—it has more Jewish students than Duke, Princeton, Georgetown or Johns Hopkins. Nearly 30 percent of Muhlenberg's 2,300 students identify as Jewish.


"In the 1930s when a lot of colleges in the U.S. were limiting Jewish students using quotas, Muhlenberg never had a quota," said Darrell Jodock, founder of the Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding at Muhlenberg and a member of the ELCA Interreligious Task Force. The campus became known as a haven for Jewish students.

"In a very real sense, that's an expression of our

Lutheran heritage. We're educating more broadly than just educating Lutherans," Jodock said. "It's because of our Lutheran heritage, rather than despite it."

Today the campus serves as a sort of interreligious laboratory. The chaplain's office coordinates a student group called Interfaith Leadership Council, which meets regularly for interreligious dialogue. They also plan programs for the greater college community, such as "Speed Faithing," which is like speed dating but for questions to learn more about someone's religion.

During two weeks in April, the campus celebrated Holi (the Hindu festival of colors and love), Passover, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter, and held a panel discussion on women in religion.

"Interreligious dialogue can be the kind of training program for the kinds of skills that we need to hold our nation together," Jodock said. "To maintain coherence and maintain pluralism, we start with interreligious dialogue as a school for democracy." 

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