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## Study guide

# A fuller understanding

*Living out the ELCA's religious commitments*

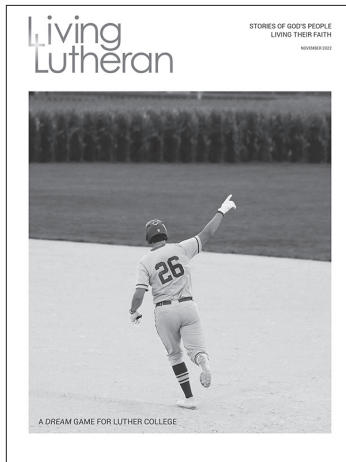
By Robert C. Blezard

We inhabit a religiously diversified world, with a variety of faith threads woven into the spiritual fabric. Since its founding, the ELCA has made strides in continuing the work of our predecessor bodies and the Lutheran World Federation to strengthen our relationship with other faiths. How is that commitment reflected in your life, congregation and synod?

### EXERCISE 1: WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

After Jesus affirms that the second most important commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves, an expert in Jewish law promptly wants to know, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). Jesus’ answer is the parable of the good Samaritan. Read Luke 10:25-37 and discuss:

- The expert in Jewish law begins the encounter with what question? What do you think is on his mind?
- Jesus asks a counter question and then affirms the expert’s response. What follow-up question does the expert ask? What do you think is on his mind?
- The story involves a victim and three passersby. What do we know about the nationality and faith of the first two passersby? Why is this significant? What do we know about the nationality and faith of the third passerby? Why is this significant in light of what we know about the first two men?
- What do we know about the nationality and faith of the victim? Why is the absence of any information significant?
- Which passerby was a neighbor to the victim? Why?
- With which of the three passersby would the expert in Jewish law have identified most closely? Least closely? Why is this significant?
- Looking at what Jesus reveals about the nationality and faith of the four characters in the story, what is he trying to tell us about who is our neighbor? What is Jesus telling us about how we are to relate to those neighbors?
- What was the question that starts off the entire encounter? Why is this significant?
- What does this passage tell us about how we are to love and treat our non-Christian neighbors?



## Study guide: **A fuller understanding** *continued*

### EXERCISE 2: WHAT IS NEIGHBORLY LOVE?

The parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37 reveals not only who is my neighbor (see above), but also how that love is to be expressed. Read the passage again and discuss:

- The parable answers a question posed by the expert in Jewish law: “Who is my neighbor?” When he is finished with the parable, Jesus throws it back at him. What is the expert’s answer?
- What, specifically, did the Samaritan do? Why was it risky? Why did he do it? What reward or repayment did he expect for his trouble? What does this say about how to love one’s neighbor?
- How does the expert answer Jesus’ question of verse 36? What is the common understanding of showing mercy? What does it mean to you? What does it mean in the context of the parable? How do we show mercy in our everyday lives? In light of the parable, how should we?
- After the lawyer answers Jesus’ question correctly, what is Jesus’ command? Discuss what “go” and “do likewise” means for the expert and for us.
- According to this passage, what is the difference between loving our neighbor and tolerating them?
- Can one love our neighbor and be indifferent about their suffering and well-being?
- What’s the connection between love the static emotion and love the emotion that leads to a response?
- What does this parable say about loving our neighbors who are non-Christian?

### EXERCISE 3: HATE SPEECH AND CRIME

Authorities around the world report that hate speech and crimes against non-Christians by people of Christian heritage has risen in recent years. Consider:

In 2022, Kanye West made headlines when his anti-Jewish remarks caused Adidas to drop him from a deal worth an estimated \$250 million. Other business partners also canceled contracts with him. Civic and religious leaders condemned his comments, while some white supremacists cheered and praised them.

In 2019, a 28-year-old gunman attacked two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing 51 people and injuring 40. A white supremacist, Brenton Harrison Tarrant, pleaded guilty to 91 counts of murder and attempted murder. He is serving a life sentence without parole.

In 2018, an armed man entered Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, killing 11 worshipers and wounding six. Police arrested Robert Bowers, then 48, a white supremacist who had posted on social media: “Jews are the children of Satan. The Lord Jesus Christ [has] come in the flesh.” His trial is expected in 2023.

In 2012, white nationalist Wade Michael Page, then 40, entered the Sikh Temple in Oak Creek, Wis., and shot to death six people and wounded four others. A friend

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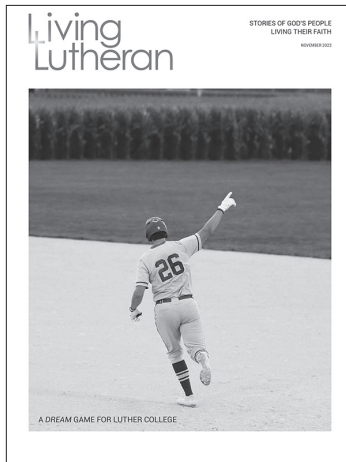
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## Study guide: **A fuller understanding** *continued*

told authorities that Page had talked about starting a holy war. Page killed himself at the scene.

Discuss:

- What have you thought as the news has shown increasing incidence of religious intolerance in speech, writing and violence?
- As a Christian, what have you thought and felt about the victims? About the perpetrators? About the state of our world generally?
- What do you think the Muslim, Jewish, Sikh and other communities think when they are victims of intolerant speech and violence?
- As Christians, how do we regard people who belong to other faiths?
- What is the difference between loving, as opposed to merely tolerating, our neighbors who are non-Christian? Which are we called to do?
- As Christians who are called not only to love our neighbor but also to speak truthfully and be salt of the earth and light of the world (Matthew 5:13-14), how are we to respond to hate speech and violence toward non-Christians?

### EXERCISE 4: REPUDIATING LUTHER

In 1994, the ELCA Church Council approved a statement to the Jewish community condemning Martin Luther's "anti-Judaic diatribes and the violent recommendations of his later writings against the Jews." The statement continues: "We reject this violent invective, and yet more do we express our deep and abiding sorrow over its tragic effects on subsequent generations." It ends with a pledge "to oppose the deadly working of such bigotry, both within our own circles and in the society around us." (The one-page statement can be found by searching for "Jewish relations" at [elca.org](http://elca.org).) Discuss:

- Does Luther's anti-Semitism negate the power and brilliance of his teachings? Why or why not? What was the nature of anti-Semitism in 16th-century Europe? Is it fair to expect Luther to be perfect according to our 21st-century standards? Why or why not?
- Why is it important that we modern Lutherans, while revering Luther for his insights, acknowledge and condemn his anti-Jewish writings?
- In what way does the Bible call us to be bold truth-tellers and people who work for justice? Can you recall any Scripture to support that? How is the ELCA's statement an act of truth-telling? An act that promotes justice?
- How can we, in our lives and congregations, speak the truth and work for justice?

### EXERCISE 5: YOUR NEIGHBORS

Many faiths make up the religious landscape of the United States. How well do you know your non-Christian neighbors? Begin by making a list of the non-Christian

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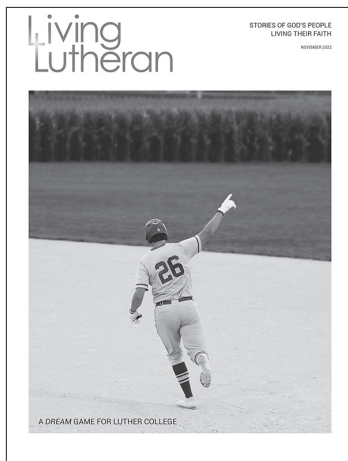
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houses of worship in your community or area. (If there are none, research what faith groups are active in your county or state.)

- What do you know about each of these groups—their history, tenets of faith, how they live out their religion, etc.?
- As a study group project, assign members to research groups and report back later. Better yet, invite a member of the non-Christian group to speak at your study group or church.
- What interaction have you or your congregation had with non-Christians? Is it enough? How could there be more?
- Why would it be helpful and fruitful for you to engage in conversation and fellowship with non-Christians in your area? For your congregation? For the non-Christians?

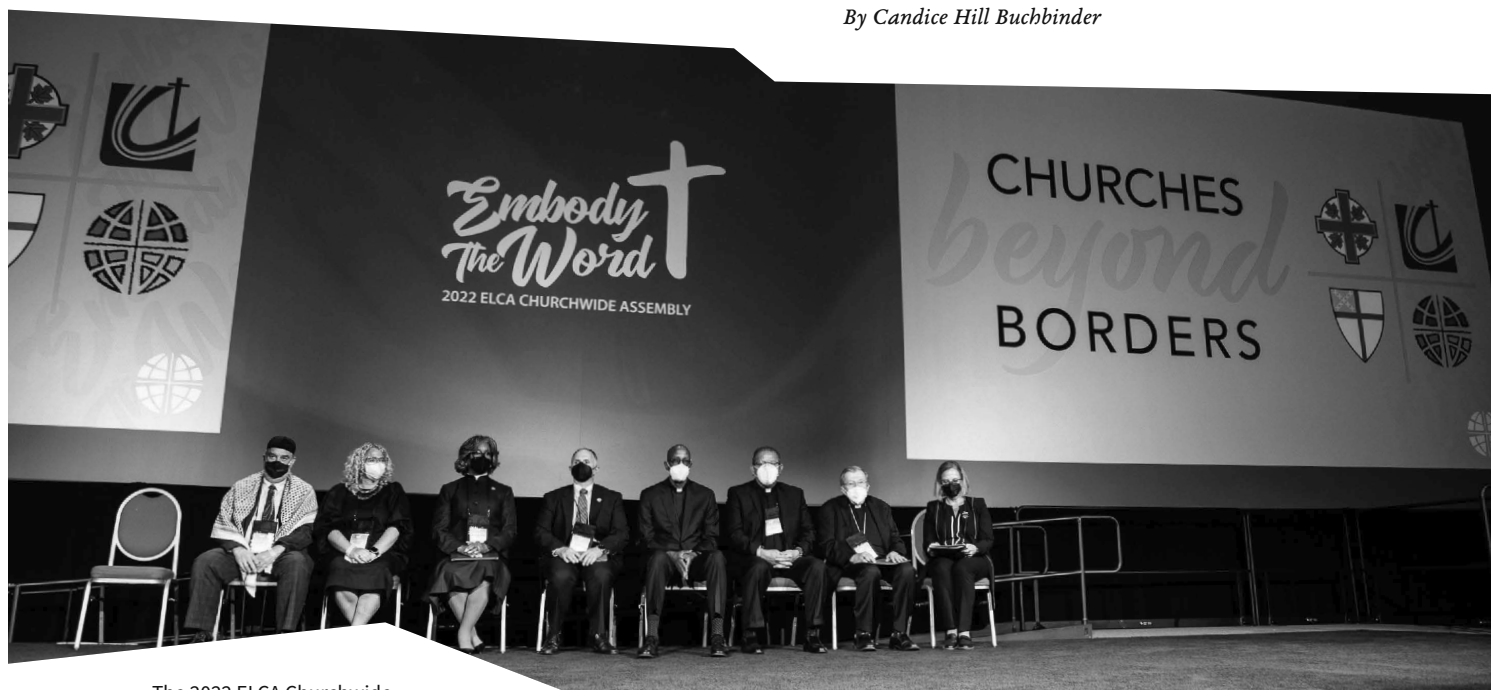
### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Christians are persecuted and harassed in some corners of the world. Do you have sympathy for them? Do you have the same emotional response when contemplating harassment and persecution of non-Christians for their faith? Why or why not? What would be the most appropriate response to any harassment or persecution of people because of their faith?
- Jesus said, “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31). How would or should this teaching guide our attitude, conduct and relationship with people who are non-Christians?
- Jesus declared that we are the salt of the earth and light of the world (Matthew 5:13-14). What are practical, specific ways that we can, in our personal lives, be salt and light to a world of religious intolerance and hatred? How can our congregations be salt and light?
- While not facing overt hatred, some non-Christians say they suffer from “microaggressions”—an insensitive or poorly thought out comment, an unpleasant look, an insult, a rude attitude, a put-down or being stereotyped. Have you witnessed these (or even unwittingly committed a microaggression)? What was your response? What would be some helpful ways to respond?
- Our denomination has taken bold stances in support of the non-Christian minorities who suffer from our nation’s religious intolerance (particularly the Jewish and Muslim communities). Why is this a good thing? How can we reflect and extend that support in our daily lives? In our congregations? In our synods?
- How did Jesus treat and talk about people who were outside of his own religious circle? Was a person’s faith tradition important for Jesus to love them? Why or why not? What can we learn from Jesus’ treatment of others?

# A Fuller Understanding

LIVING OUT THE ELCA'S INTERRELIGIOUS COMMITMENTS

By Candice Hill Buchbinder



The 2022 ELCA Churchwide Assembly recognized the ecumenical and interreligious commitments of the church, including declarations of ecumenical commitment (1991) and interreligious commitment (2019) and declarations to the Jewish community (1994) and to the Muslim community (2022).

As Mandy France began her pastoral internship at Grace Lutheran Church in Dawson, Minn., during the 2016 presidential campaign, she became concerned about negative comments she was hearing in the community about Muslims and Islam. So, the following year, she invited Ayaz Virji, a local medical doctor, to share his story with the community.

France and Virji started a series of workshops called “Love Thy Neighbor,” and France found that the opportunity to come together helped create open dialogue among the community.

“People were asking questions that they weren’t asking before. There was safe space created in the community to ask those hard questions. And in turn, growth and learning

happened,” she said. “We need to create more safe space for people to ask questions without feeling judged.”

The workshops are a tangible representation of the ELCA’s interreligious commitments, one of many examples of how Lutheran faith and vocation play out in a multireligious world.

The ELCA has engaged in interreligious relations since its formation in 1988, building on the work of its predecessor bodies and the Lutheran World Federation and the witness of the ELCA’s ecumenical partners.

The 1991 Churchwide Assembly adopted “A Declaration of Ecumenical Intent,” which tasked the ELCA with creating an official statement to reflect the “distinct responsibility for the church to enter into conversations and reach deeper understanding with people of other faiths.” From that challenge evolved “A Declaration

of the ELCA to the Jewish Community” (1994), which repudiated Martin Luther’s anti-Semitic writings. The 2019 Churchwide Assembly adopted “A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment,” and in 2022 the ELCA Church Council adopted “A Declaration of the ELCA to the Muslim Community.”

“Through three declarations—to the Jewish community, to the Muslim community and of interreligious commitment—the ELCA affirmed our commitments to our neighbors of other religions and worldviews,” said Elizabeth Eaton, ELCA presiding bishop.

“A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment” underscores the calling for Lutherans to love and serve the neighbor, working toward the common good of justice and peace for all people. “Religious diversity, when accompanied by mutual understanding and cooperation, enriches the whole,” it states.

“Our church has a reputation as a bridge-building church because of our formal interreligious declarations and statements—but even more so because of the care we invest in their implementation,” said Kathryn Lohre, executive for Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations. “Our resources equip us to live out our faith in our local congregations and communities, and through our daily vocations. They also help our partners know what to expect of us and how to hold us accountable.”

Recognizing the challenges of ministry in multireligious communities, the ELCA developed “ELCA Guidelines for Ministry in a Multi-Religious World” in 2021. The resource provides pastoral assistance for leaders in the planning of interreligious prayer services, responses to tragedy, social ministry work with partners, and pastoral care for interreligious couples and families. An accompanying resource, “Preaching and Teaching With Love and Respect for the Jewish People,” was developed this year.

The new resources “help us to reflect on our theological grounding while considering the practical steps to take in our preaching, teaching, planning and partnership,” Eaton said. “I commend them to the whole church, and especially to our rostered ministers.”

### Deepening our own faith

Members and leaders across the church have found that being in relationship with people from different faith backgrounds often leads to a deeper and more meaningful understanding of one’s own beliefs.



Elizabeth Eaton, ELCA presiding bishop, thanks Saffet Catovic, head of the Islamic Society of North America’s Office for Interfaith Alliances, Community Alliances and Government Relations, following his greeting at the 2022 ELCA Churchwide Assembly.

“Listening to [the] faith stories of others can cause me to question areas of my faith, and doing that work eventually reshapes my faith and deepens it,” said Mari Larson, a pastor of St. Andrew Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, and president of the Lutheran Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations Network (LEIRN). The network serves as a model for ecumenical and interreligious engagement throughout the ELCA, with representatives appointed by synod bishops.

Larson said her congregation has experienced opportunities for interreligious relations evolving from worship and from Bible and book study discussions. “In what began as a journey to become a Reconciling in Christ congregation, we have expanded our conversations to talk about all kinds of isms and phobias and how much we learn from those who are not exactly the same as we are,” she said.

Nathan Allen, a pastor of Holy Spirit Lutheran Church in Grand Blanc, Mich., and the LEIRN representative for the Southeast Michigan Synod, said, “[By] honoring the unique faith of our neighbors, we will also honor and appreciate our own faith in Jesus Christ.

“There is great benefit in helping explain our unique Lutheran voice [in a way] that doesn’t compromise who we are and our faith in Jesus while also allowing us to go out and be better witnesses of that faith in a community.”

France agreed: “Relationships with people of other faith backgrounds have enriched and deepened my own faith experience.

“Learning about how others understand and experience the divine brings me to a fuller understanding of who God is. I find myself asking larger questions and finding deeper answers.” †

To learn more, visit [elca.org/ecumenical](https://elca.org/ecumenical). Download a study guide for this article by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab at [livinglutheran.org](https://livinglutheran.org).