# Guidelines for Lutheran-Jewish Relations

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**Adopted by the ELCA Church Council at its meeting on November 16, 1998. An outgrowth of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America?s April 1994 Declaration to the Jewish Community.**

## Guidelines for Lutheran-Jewish Relations

### Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

*The following suggestions for fostering Lutheran-Jewish dialogue and cooperation were drafted by the Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations of the Department for Ecumenical Affairs of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and were adopted by the ELCA Church Council at its meeting on November 16, 1998. These guidelines are an outgrowth of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's April 1994 "*Declaration to the Jewish Community,*" which repudiated the anti-Jewish writings of Martin Luther and expressed "our urgent desire to live out our faith in Jesus Christ with love and respect for the Jewish people."*

*The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America hopes also to issue guidelines for relations with members of other faith communities in the United States.*

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As Lutherans, we seek to renew and enhance our relationship with the Jewish people, a relationship long distorted by misunderstanding and prejudice. In its 1994 *Declaration to the Jewish Community*, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America publicly repudiated the anti-Jewish views of Martin Luther, expressed repentance for Christian complicity in hatred and violence against the Jews through the centuries, and committed itself to building a relationship with the Jewish people based on love and respect. For Lutherans to read, understand, and acknowledge this Declaration (*see accompanying text*) can be a first step in renewing our relationship with the Jewish community. Reconciliation always begins with an understanding of the offense and a willingness to repent and amend one's ways. Only then can further steps be taken to forge a new relationship.

We as Christians share deep and common roots with Jews, not least books of Scripture revered by both communities. There is much to be gained in exploring those common roots, as well as the reasons for the "parting of the ways" during the first generations of the followers of Jesus. New Testament texts reflect at many points the hostility between the two communities, but also point to ways in which a new spirit of mutual respect and understanding can be achieved.

We as Christians also need to learn of the rich and varied history of Judaism since New Testament times, and of the Jewish people as a diverse, living community of faith today. Such an encounter with living and faithful Judaism can be profoundly enriching for Christian self-understanding. It is to nurture this blessing that we offer these guidelines for honest and faithful conversation and cooperation between Lutherans and Jews.

1. Lutherans are urged to take the initiative in fostering Lutheran-Jewish dialogue. In many cases, it will be helpful to cooperate with other Christians in organizing and sustaining such conversations.
2. Meetings should be jointly planned so as to ensure sensitivity toward and accurate

information about the other group. For example, Lutherans need to remember the importance of the Sabbath and other holy days and of dietary observance for their Jewish partners in dialogue.

3. Because time is needed to cultivate relationships and build mutual understanding, planners of such dialogues should anticipate the need for a series of sessions.
4. On both sides, living communities of faith and worship are involved. Because of strong commitments and painful memories, emotions may run deep. Participants should be prepared to hear one another out and to help all move toward healing.
5. It should be understood that the aim of such conversations is not shallow tolerance or mere surface agreement, but greater self-understanding and mutual enrichment. Honest differences will remain, even as broad areas of commonality are discovered.
6. On the basis of new understandings reached through dialogue, plans can be made for cooperation in spiritual and social concerns, struggling against those forces that deny or degrade the divine image in humankind. Among such issues of common concern are questions of church-state relations, religious freedom, and social justice.
7. Joint activities such as the following can be planned:
    a. Visits to one another's houses of worship, either at regular services or at specially arranged open houses, accompanied by explanation and discussion. Such visits are appropriate both for adults and for youth groups and confirmation or Bar/Bat Mitzvah classes. Lutherans should consider, however, that Christians may be able more easily to share in a typical weekly Jewish worship service than Jews can in a typical Christian service, since the latter includes prayers and blessings which presume faith in Jesus and the Trinity.
    b. Informal discussions in homes, using materials designed for interreligious study. Participants may be drawn from one church and one synagogue or several congregations.
    c. Joint trips and study tours to places of historical and religious significance to each tradition.
    d. Lectures and discussions on topics of mutual interest. These may include biblical, historical, theological, and ethical topics or interfaith Bible study for laity and clergy.
    e. Joint clergy and/or lay retreats.
8. Attendance by Lutherans at Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, Seders (Passover meals) in Jewish homes or synagogues, and Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) observances can be of great educational and spiritual value. Likewise, Lutherans should welcome Jews at our occasions and ceremonies.
9. Although attendance at Seders in Jewish homes or synagogues is to be preferred, "demonstration Seders" have been held rather widely in Christian churches and can serve a useful educational purpose, in which both common roots and significant differences can be learned. This should be approached with caution, however, and with the awareness that this might be considered trampling on the other's "holy ground." If such demonstrations are done, they should be done carefully, preferably in consultation with, or hosted by, a local rabbi.
10. Lutherans may be invited to offer prayer in civic settings such as legislative assemblies or public school baccalaureates. Compromising essentials of our faith to American civil religion is always a clear danger. Such occasions, however, can be regarded as times when our common faith in God finds expression, as indeed it does in the prayer that Jesus himself gave us.

    On some occasions, when persons of several faiths offer prayer, it may be possible by way of introduction to note that each will pray in language fully reflecting each tradition. In such settings Lutherans will want to witness to our tradition of Trinitarian prayer offered "in the name of Jesus" or "through Jesus Christ our Lord."
11. Groups such as "Jews for Jesus" or "Messianic Jews" consist of persons from a Jewish background who have converted to Christianity and who wish to retain their Jewish heritage and identity. Lutherans should be aware that most Jews regard such persons as having

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forsaken Judaism, and consider efforts to maintain otherwise to be deceptive.

12. Lutherans need to understand the depth of Jewish concern for communal survival, a concern shaped not only by the Holocaust but by centuries of Christian antipathy towards Judaism. Jews will thus feel strongly about topics such as the security of the State of Israel, intermarriage, and conversion, in which Jewish survival is seen to be at stake. Lutherans are not obligated to adopt the same perspective on these matters, but it is vital for us to understand and respect our neighbors' concerns.
13. Lutheran pastors should make it clear in their preaching and teaching that although the New Testament reflects early conflicts, it must not be used as justification for hostility towards present- day Jews. Blame for the death of Jesus should not be attributed to Judaism or the Jewish people, and stereotypes of Judaism as a legalistic religion should be avoided. Lutheran curricular materials should exercise the same care.
14. Topics pertaining to Christian-Jewish relations should be included in educational events at synod assemblies and professional leadership conferences and should be addressed in Lutheran seminary education. In addition, comment may be sought from Jewish scholars and leaders on issues under discussion and debate by Lutherans.
15. Student and faculty exchanges between Lutheran and Jewish theological schools and other educational institutions can be invaluable in preparing the next generation for greater interfaith understanding and cooperation.

These guidelines have been issued so that those who desire to engage in interfaith dialogue might benefit from the experience of those who have gone before. They are intended to provide practical assistance as well as the encouragement needed for a rewarding journey.

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Declaration to the Jewish Community

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