

2017 RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM RESOURCE PACKET



ELCA UPSTATE NEW YORK SYNOD

A Introduction from Bishop Macholz

In June of 2016 toward the close of the Assembly a resolution was brought to the floor that created a fair amount of conversation; it was around the concerns focused in extremism and the work of groups that are labeled as being involved in the same. Because there was not enough time to fully process the resolution the Assembly moved it to the Synod Council for follow up. The Synod Council, at the suggestion of Bishop Macholz, appointed a team composed of Samantha Rossi, Pastor Lexa Liepe, Pastor Krista Mendoza, Pastor Dustin Wright, Pastor AJ Striffler and Bishop John Macholz. Bishop Macholz invited Pastor Amy Walter Peterson to lead the team.

Over the past year the team has met four times for conversations, planning and editing of resources that would be useful for congregations in this synod in moving the conversation forward. Those resources are included in this document and are very timely given the political climate in which we find ourselves.

The materials included in this document offer a beginning point to help us deal with extremes and extremism in our lives and in our world. If nothing else they extend to us an understanding of process and reality and encourage us toward conversations that are constructive and helpful for the good of the whole. If we hope to survive we need to find ways in which we can talk to one another without fear of retribution or retaliation and, instead, create space for interactions that build up and live into a place where we can better understand one another.

To be sure extremism is alive and well in our society and our world, there's no doubt about it. Yet these moments are also an opportunity for us to come together and find the place where we can carry on conversations with one another that don't devolve into finger pointing, partisan bickering or ugly accusations. In the midst of it all we have to find that place of common ground where, at worst, we can agree to disagree. Perhaps this is the place where that begins. Perhaps this is a space for grace.

Introduction from the Assembly Team

In August 2016, Bishop John Macholz formed a workgroup to respond to an action of the 2016 Synod Assembly regarding religious extremism. In our discussion and discernment about how to proceed, the workgroup determined that responses to extremism can take multiple forms. Individuals and congregations bring varieties of experience, history and awareness that shape how they respond to this topic. Rather than dictate a specific course of action, the workgroup decided to divide their work into four areas and to provide resources that could help congregations grow in their awareness as well build capacity for addressing this complex issue. The areas were:

1. Understanding the Relationship Between Religion and Extremism
2. Supporting the Global Christianity in Times and Places of Persecution
3. Engaging in Civil Discourse Around Difficult Social Issues
4. Fostering Interfaith Dialogue

Within each theme the workgroup identified resources that addressed the theme and provided a summary of each. This is by no means a comprehensive list. You will be aware of other books, movies, resources, people and groups, etc. and we ask you to share those resources so this list continues growing.

We hope that what follows will spur your imagination to think about how you and others can engage more deeply in the topic of extremism, regardless of your starting point. We encourage conferences or neighboring congregations to gather leaders together to talk about how these topics might be addressed in your context. Members of the workgroup are available to lead presentations, facilitate conversations or help you think about what next step you might take.

Blessings to you on this important and timely work,

Rev. Amy Walter-Peterson

Rev. Krista Mendoza

Vicar Samantha Rossi

Rev. Dustin G. Wright

Rev. Lexa Liepe

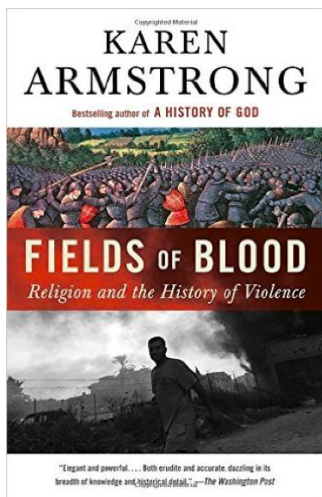
Rev. AJ Stiffler

Understanding the Relationship Between Religion and Extremism

Historically, one might argue that the religious institutions of the world have participated in their share of violent extremism. Another view may suggest that religions espousing a belief in a singular path of salvation or right way of living cannot help but turn to violence to defend or propagate their particular religious structures. Most major world religions also have significant sacred stories that showcase "God willed" violence against anyone who does not conform to the belief system (religion) of the adherents. The following resources are suggested for congregations seeking to learn more about the relationship of violent extremism and religion and the role of violence in religious scriptures.

EXTREMISM AND RELIGION

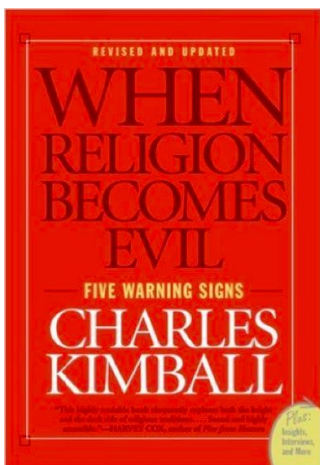
1. *Fields of Blood* by Karen Armstrong



This book is easily adapted for a congregational study. It does use a considerable amount of theological, philosophical and scientific language that may need some explanation depending on the group you are working with. Would be worth reading and developing a study guide. In these times of rising geopolitical chaos, the need for mutual understanding between cultures has never been more urgent. Religious differences are seen as fuel for violence and warfare. In these pages, one of our greatest writers on religion, Karen Armstrong, amasses a sweeping history of humankind to explore the perceived connection between war and the world's great creeds—and to issue a passionate defense of the peaceful nature of faith. With unprecedented scope, Armstrong looks at the whole history of each tradition—not only Christianity and Islam, but also Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Judaism. Religions,

in their earliest days, endowed every aspect of life with meaning, and warfare became bound up with observances of the sacred. Modernity has ushered in an epoch of spectacular violence, although, as Armstrong shows, little of it can be ascribed directly to religion.

2. *When Religion Becomes Evil* by Charles Kimball

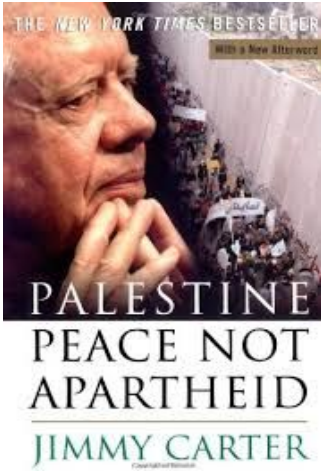


This book, if used as a study in a congregation, would benefit from an earlier conversation on truth and a Lutheran understanding of what we mean when we say that Jesus is the "way, truth and light," and that "no one comes to the Father except through the Son." Every religion has the capacity to work either for good or evil, and he contends that there are five warning signs that we can recognize when religion moves toward the latter. Whenever a religion emphasizes that it holds the absolute truth—the one path to God or the only correct way of reading a sacred text—to the exclusion of the truth claims of all other religions and cultures, that religion is becoming evil. Other warning signs include blind obedience to religious leaders, apocalyptic belief that the end time will occur through a particular religion, the use of malevolent ends to achieve religious goals (e.g.,

the Crusades) and the declaration of holy war. Kimball focuses primarily on the three major

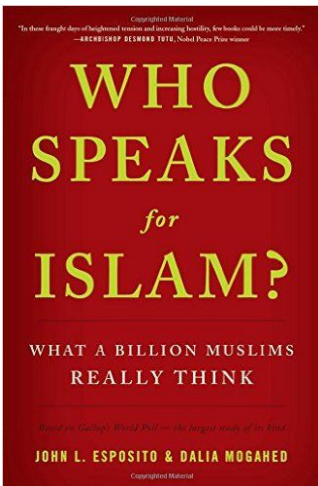
Western monotheistic religions, although his examples also include new religious movements such as the People's Temple, Aum Shinrikyo and the Branch Davidians. Religion can resist becoming evil by practicing an inclusiveness that allows each tradition to retain its distinctiveness while it works for the common good. Kimball's clear and steady voice provides a helpful guide for those trying to understand why evil is perpetrated in the name of religion.

3. *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* by Jimmy Carter



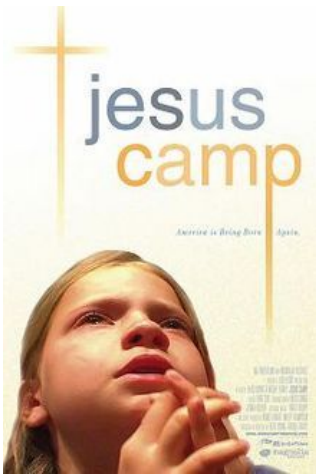
A relative easy reading discussion on the confluence of Jewish and Islamic extremism in Occupied Palestine.

4. *Who Speaks for Islam: What A Billion Muslims Really Think* by John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed



The concept of this book is simple. After collecting vast amounts of data representing the views of the world's Muslims, we asked the questions everyone wants answers to: What is at the root of anti-Americanism in the Muslim world? Who are the extremists? Is democracy a desired construct among Muslims, and if so, what might it look like? What do Muslim women really want? With questions in hand, we let the empirical evidence — the voices of a billion Muslims, not individual “experts” or “extremists,” dictate the answer.

5. *Jesus Camp*, directed by Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady



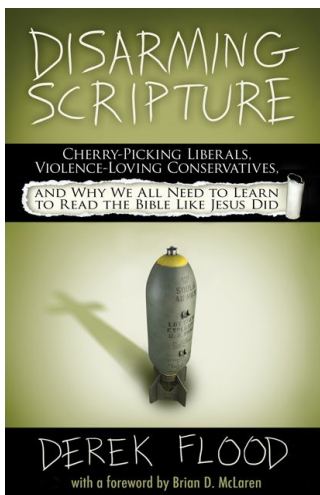
Jesus Camp follows several young children as they prepare to attend a summer camp where the kids will get their daily dose of evangelical Christianity. Becky Fischer works at the camp, which is named Kids on Fire. Through interviews with Fischer, the children, and others, *Jesus Camp* illustrates the unswerving belief of the faithful. A housewife and homeschooling mother tells her son that creationism has all the answers. Footage from inside the camp shows young children weeping and wailing as they promise to stop their sinning. Child after child is driven to tears.

Can be accessed for free at

<https://freedocumentaries.org/documentary/jesus-camp>

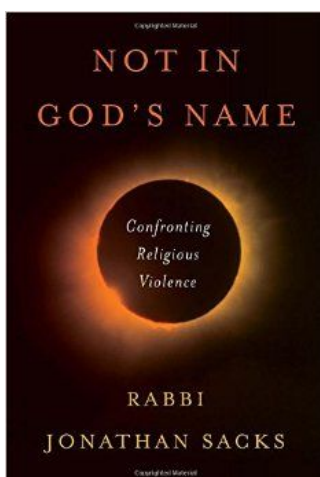
VIOLENCE AND SCRIPTURE

1. *Disarming God* by Derek Flood



A GOD OF LOVE AND GENOCIDE? For many Christians the problem of violence in Scripture can result in a crisis of faith—especially when we see how such passages have been used throughout history to justify horrific bloodshed in God's name. Moving beyond typical conservative and liberal approaches, which seek to either defend or whitewash over violence in the Bible, *Disarming Scripture* takes a surprising yet compelling approach: Learning to read the Bible like Jesus did. Along the way the book deals with some very big issues, ranging from passages commanding genocide and infanticide in the Old Testament to passages in the New Testament that have been used to justify slavery, child abuse, and state violence. The take-away is an approach to Scripture that not only sees questioning as an acceptable part of a healthy faith, but as an absolutely essential part of it.

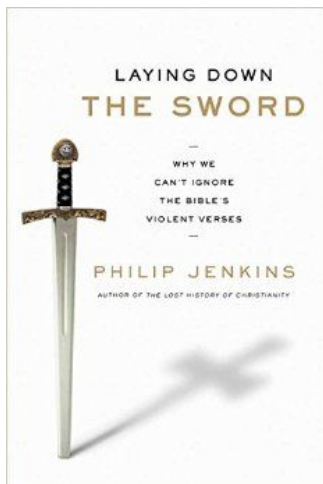
2. *Not in God's Name* by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks



In this powerful and timely book, one of the most admired and authoritative religious leaders of our time tackles the phenomenon of religious extremism and violence committed in the name of God. If religion is perceived as being part of the problem, Rabbi Sacks argues, then it must also form part of the solution. When religion becomes a zero-sum conceit—that is, my religion is the only right path to God, therefore your religion is by definition wrong—and individuals are motivated by what Rabbi Sacks calls “altruistic evil,” violence between peoples of different beliefs appears to be the only natural outcome. Through an exploration of the roots of violence and its relationship to religion, and employing groundbreaking biblical analysis and interpretation, Rabbi Sacks shows that religiously inspired violence has as its source misreadings of biblical texts at the heart of

all three Abrahamic faiths. By looking anew at the book of Genesis, with its foundational stories of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Rabbi Sacks offers a radical rereading of many of the Bible's seminal stories of sibling rivalry: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, Rachel and Leah.

3. *Laying Down the Sword* by Philip Jenkins



Philip Jenkins delivers a fearless examination of the dark and violent verses of the Bible—and a call for us to read them anew in pursuit of a richer, more honest faith. From “one of America’s best scholars of religion” (The Economist), this daring exploration of the Scripture’s most difficult passages forces us to confront and accept the violence that was as integral to the formulation of Christianity’s message as it was for many other of the world’s religions, and shows us how a full understanding of the Scripture will allow us to finally move towards a more peaceful, spiritual world. Readers of Bart Ehrman’s *God’s Problem*, John Selby Spong’s *The Sins of Scripture*, and Jenkins’s own *The Jesus Wars*, as well as every Christian eager to square the recurrent violence of the Scripture with Christianity’s enduring message of peace, will find these difficult questions explored in full in *Laying Down the Sword*.

Supporting the Global Christian Community in Times and Places of Persecution

Bible Passages for Reflection

“That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the Apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8:1b).

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:10).

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet, put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the Gospel of peace. With all these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints” (Ephesians 6:10-18).

An Introduction

As you work your way through the guidance below, be aware that many of the sites and resources that are available have been developed by organizations who follow a literal interpretation of scripture. In addition some of the organizations highlighted view the role of Christians as being active converters of others to faith in Jesus Christ. These perspectives are not shared by all Christians, including many Lutherans. This does not make their information invalid, but it does invite us to take care in evaluating their insights and conclusions and to be cautious in supporting them or sharing their resources.

As we think of ways to be in communion with Christian sisters and brothers around the world who are suffering, here are a few things to keep in mind:

Keep in mind that there are many circumstances, conflicts, and contexts throughout the world that result in the suffering of many different communities, including Christian communities. It is helpful to know and understand something of the background of any situation that is causing suffering in the world. Just because a Christian community is in a place of conflict, does not mean that they are being ‘persecuted’.

Persecuted Christian communities are those that are suffering because of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and their participation in the Christian Church. This religious persecution is different from suffering brought about by political conflicts, ethnic pogroms, territorial wars, ideological struggles, etc.

Consider the Christian Church in the Holy Land. Palestinian Christians suffer terribly because of the land-based Israeli-Palestinian conflict (see: https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/12/23/evangelicals-side-with-israel-thats-hurting-palestinian-christians/?utm_term=.630cb4d938b7). What we are left to decide is whether the suffering is being caused by their Christianity, or because they are

Palestinian?

In the end however, what really matters is our support and solidarity with all our sisters and brothers who suffer. Understanding how to read conflict is one tool. There are others ...

Pray.

As Paul says in Ephesians 6, "To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints" (v.18). When we encounter a community that is suffering, we are enjoined to lift them up before God and entrust them to God's mercy and care.

If we are left wondering how exactly to pray for them, there are some suggestions that exist on the internet and can be found at the following web addresses:

<https://www.opendoorsusa.org/take-action/pray/>

<https://www.cru.org/train-and-grow/spiritual-growth/prayer/pray-for-persecuted-church.html>

<http://christiananswers.net/q-eden/edn-persecutedchurch.html>

<http://usa.maisnomundo.org/engage/prayernetwork/>

As Jesus reminds us, and as is always the case, we are not only encouraged to pray for the persecuted and the suffering, but also for the persecutor and perpetrator. Jesus says, "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:44-45).

Watch. Read. Research.

There are a number of ways that we can stay informed and up to date about the struggles of the Church throughout the world. As members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we partner with two global organizations that readily invite us into their work and presence: The Lutheran World Federation (www.lutheranworld.org) and Lutheran World Relief (www.lwr.org).

There is also a great deal of journalism, some Christian, available dealing specifically with Christian persecution. For example:

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2016/december/12-most-read-stories-of-persecuted-church-2016.html>

<http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/17/world/christian-persecution-2015>

<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/religious-liberty/upload/Human-Rights-in-Cradle-of-Christianity-Backgrounder-2015-02.pdf>

<http://www.chinaaid.org/2016/10/chinas-religious-persecution-report.html>

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/religious-persecution/>

<https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/topics/40/persecution-of-christians>

These, of course, are just a few places to begin. However, as with all reported news, we should be on guard against the biases and prejudices of any publication, any news agency, source, or reporter.

A good Rule of Thumb when researching and staying informed would be to shy away from any publication that appears to be sensationalizing emotion (i.e. fear, anger or hatred) over reporting facts.

Support.

We might, in our prayerful watching over the world and Jesus' Church, be moved to seek out active ways that we can support Christians in areas of suffering and persecution.

Again, as members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America we have the ability (and hopefully the desire) to support our global partners, working in areas of conflict and suffering, i.e. The Lutheran World Federation and Lutheran World Relief. There are numerous ways that support can be given listed on their respective websites.

There are also a multitude of interfaith organizations that exist to help raise awareness and provide relief for Christians that are suffering persecution. Some of their collective ideas are:

- Pray (individually or in groups).
- Ask others to pray with you for communities undergoing persecution.
- Write letters of encouragement to Christian Communities in areas of conflict and suffering.
- Write letters of encouragement to Christians in prisons throughout the world.
- Provide Bibles and faith-based materials to Christian Communities in areas of suffering and conflict.
- Write letters to legislators.
- Write letters to humanitarian relief organizations.

More information can be found at:

<https://www.opendoorsusa.org>

<http://dova-international-charities.org>

<https://www.persecution.com>

<http://www.kofc.org/un/en/charities/articles/stop-christian-genocide.html>

<https://worldhelp.net/persecuted-church/>

<https://billygraham.org/donation/world-summit-in-defense-of-persecuted-christians/>

Again, these are but a few of the resources and organizations that have an on-line presence. It is recommended that you do a throughout background check on any organization that you choose to partner with or send financial support.

A Theology and Ethics of Non-Violence.

Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also ..." (Matt. 5:38-39). Also, "Suddenly one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the High Priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, 'Put your sword back in its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword'" (Matt. 26:51-52).

Whereas it may be our most human nature to stop the violence perpetrated against our Christian sisters and brothers throughout the world by any means necessary, and to call upon governments and armies to meet suffering and violence with suffering and violence, as the Church we must ask ourselves if that would be Jesus' response, or if that would be how Jesus would wish for us to respond?

Rather than venture a singular response to a very complex question, let us first refer back to our ELCA Social Statement, entitled For Peace in God's World.

From the ELCA website:

"For Peace in God's World conveys ELCA teaching on matters related to war, domestic and international security, and the Christian call to be peacemakers. The statement is grounded in the scriptural understanding that God desires shalom (the Hebrew word for complete well-being) for all human beings but that such eternal peace is fragile and imperfect within even the best earthly peace human beings may achieve. Because of the sin-filled reality of earthly life, this statement affirms just war teaching in the service of just peace, with attention to what this means for culture, economics, politics, military conduct and international security.

The statement also recognizes the significant witness of conscientious objectors and others who, as a matter of faith, cannot condone war in any circumstances. It calls all disciples to be advocates for Christian peacemaking, one that strives for political alternatives to war, human rights, social justice, control of the arms trade and all means of working for peace in God's world. This social statement was adopted by the 1995 ELCA Churchwide Assembly." This is the address where the Statement can be found:

<https://www.elca.org/en/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Peace>

A thorough study is recommended, both individually and in group settings, as we seek to create responses to war and violence, both at home and abroad, that reflect our commitment to life together in Jesus, as God's one Church, united by the prayerful guidance of the Augsburg Confession and under the banner of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

We hope that this information is helpful to you, as you desire and seek to live your Christian faith in communion with your sisters and brothers throughout God's whole world. Please let us know if there are ways that we can be of further assistance.

A Final Word

Finally, let us dance again with Paul, who writes,

"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with

mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:9-21).

Engaging in Civil Discourse Around Difficult Social Issues

From the time of the early church, the New Testament records the struggles of Jesus' earliest followers as they sought to be faithful disciples in the midst of different cultures and contexts and as they encountered new believers who came to faith from diverse backgrounds. Living faithfully in the midst of difficult circumstances and diverse opinions has been the calling of Christians since the beginning of the church and remains our call today. The following resources are intended to help congregations grow in their ability to engage their neighbors in civil and respectful conversations recognizing that people of good faith and goodwill do not always agree.

1. *Talking Together as Christians about Tough Social Issues*, ELCA, 1999.

This guide provides a strong starting point for congregations who want to work on developing and exercising their skills in faith-based deliberation about tough social issues, which can be any topic that people of faith disagree about. It assumes talking about social issues from a faith perspective can be learned and takes into account personal and community experiences of a given issue, as well as Scripture, church tradition and teachings, human knowledge and reason. The guide addresses why the church would do this work and provides ground rules for conversation. The guide can be downloaded for free here:

[http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Talking Together as Christians About Tough Social Issues.pdf](http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Talking_Together_as_Christians_About_Tough_Social_Issues.pdf)

2. *Living Faithfully in the United States Today*, Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research, Collegeville Institute, 2001.

A resource for study, discussion, and conversation developed in 1999 and 2000. The Institute believes interreligious dialogue is critically important in our time, and believes also that how to engage in interreligious dialogue is a critically important ecumenical issue. The resource provides some old data about religious diversity in the United States, but more significantly outlines a process used for engaging people of various faith traditions to discuss how to live faithfully according to personal convictions in a religiously plural society.

3. *National Council of Churches Interfaith Resources and Study Guides* (available for download here: <http://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/shared-ministry/interfaith/>)

A series of five study guides that outline the missional, moral, theological, ecumenical and identity challenges of interfaith dialogue and engagement. Each short guide contains study questions to guide conversation.

Civil Conversations Project: <http://www.civilconversationsproject.org/>

The Civil Conversations Project (CCP) is an emergent resource for renewing public discourse and nourishing common life. The CCP began as a series of public radio shows broadcast nationally through On Being. It contains a collection of radio shows, podcasts, videos of live events, and digital offerings that open, inspire, and ground new spaces for conversation and

relationship across differences. The site includes links to podcasts and videos as well as downloadable guides to facilitating public conversations.

Fostering Interfaith Dialogue

Interfaith dialogue refers to cooperative, constructive and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions or faiths and can happen at both the individual and institutional level. The term is sometimes also used to refer to interaction between people of a single faith, (i.e. Christianity) who practice their faith in different denominations (i.e. Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, etc.).

[Interfaith Center of Great Philadelphia](#)

This website offers ideas and contact information on how to reach out to our neighbors of different faiths. It offers a wide variety of outreach ideas for youth groups, the community, the workplace, and congregation.

[Engaging Others, Knowing Ourselves: A Lutheran Calling in a Multi-Religious World](#)

Book with study materials and case studies, offered through Lutheran University Press This book offers a way into congregational study and work of Ecumenical and Interfaith issues. The book offers study materials and case studies for Bible Study or Book Groups.

[Discover Islam/ELCA](#)

This is a DVD study guide with added materials. This resource is produced by the ELCA, and is meant to be used with congregational study groups.

[My Neighbor is Muslim](#)

Study developed Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota as an offering to churches to help learn the basic tenets of Islam and better understand Muslim neighbors. Website includes links to a study guide and a youth curriculum.

[Shoulder to Shoulder Campaign](#)

Information on the Campaign between the ELCA and the Islamic Society of North America. Very useful for deeper study and background information.

[A Center for Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice](#)

Teaching and other community and congregational resources from the Center located at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

[A Common Word](#)

A Common Word materials (from Wiki: A Common Word between Us and You is an [open letter](#), dated 13 October 2007, from leaders of the [Islamic religion](#) to leaders of the [Christian religion](#). It calls for peace between [Muslims](#) and [Christians](#) and tries to work for common ground and understanding between both religions, in line with the [Qur'anic](#) commandment to "[Say: 'O People of the Scripture! come to a common word as between us and you: that we worship none but God'](#)" and the [Biblical commandment to love God, and one's neighbour](#). In the time since its release, "A Common Word" opened an interfaith dialogue

between Christians and Muslims. In 2008 the initiative was awarded the "Eugen Biser Award", and the "Building Bridges Award" from the UK's Association of Muslim Social Scientists.

[Honoring our Neighbor's Faith: A Lutheran Perspective on Faith Traditions in America, Revised Edition](#) by Robert Bucklee Farlee

This book explores thirty-two faith traditions that represent a wide spectrum of beliefs or stand out due to their size or public profile in America. Each tradition constitutes a "chapter" that includes key teachings, worship patterns and practices, and how each is governed. This revision also includes updated statistics, enhanced tools for group study and discussion, and updated resource and website lists to facilitate further study.