

# About the “L” in LVC

A brief history of LVC’s beginnings can help to put affiliation with the Lutheran Church in context. Many important factors in the early formation of LVC continue to shape the way we claim Lutheran affiliation with a spiritually diverse community. LVC was founded by a particular Lutheran congregation within a context of deep Christian and interfaith relationships with other organizations. Although LVC borrowed its core practices (with permission) from other religious traditions, LVC found these practices to be well-matched with the Lutheran tradition.

LVC was founded in 1979 by Luther Place Memorial Church in Washington, DC. During that time, Luther Place was creating a variety of ministries on N Street including a free medical clinic, a food pantry, and a continuum of day and night programs for homeless women. Luther Place created these ministries by reaching out to other religious communities including Roman Catholic and Jewish congregations, as well as organizations without any particular religious affiliation like the Community for Creative Non Violence. The congregation’s work and alliances with these religious and non-religious communities shaped the congregation and its ministries in profound ways.

In the context of Luther Place’s ecumenical and interfaith partnerships, the congregation recognized the value of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps and the Mennonite Volunteer Service for the ministries on N Street. Luther Place received volunteers from JVC and MVS and then desired to create a “Lutheran” volunteer corps. Luther Place, with permission, almost literally copied the program and basic tenets of JVC and MVS. The congregation proposed the creation of a LVC to its nation-wide denominational offices, but the proposal was rejected by the national church. The congregation decided to forge ahead anyway. The founding director of LVC was a Presbyterian graduate of Eastern Mennonite University.

Although the congregation initially borrowed LVC’s core practices from Roman Catholics and Mennonites, Luther Place also recognized that the core practices have affinity within the Lutheran tradition. For example, the congregation named the first Volunteer house after Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor during the Nazi era. He called Christians to stand for justice by resisting the public evil manifested by Nazism, war and the oppression and murder of Jews. He also called Christians to live together in community.

## LVC’s Affiliation with the Lutheran Church

Founded in 1979 as a ministry of Luther Place Memorial Church, and sustained and nurtured by that congregation, **Lutheran Volunteer Corps is a Christian ministry steeped in Lutheran traditions and theology, but open to persons of all faith traditions.** It is the intent of Lutheran Volunteer Corps to maintain affiliation with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). On this firm foundation Lutheran Volunteer Corps continues to grow and serve the community. (From LVC Bylaw, Section 5)

**LVC is the most religiously diverse faith-based volunteer program in the US. Recently about half of LVC Volunteers are Lutheran and the other half come from a variety of other religious and spiritual traditions, and atheism or agnosticism.** LVC is also not under the authority of any particular church organization and is governed by an independent, national board of directors (most of whom are Lutheran and some of whom are not).

# So What is a Lutheran?

## The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF)

The ELCA is a community of faith that shares a passion for making positive changes in the world. ELCA members believe their faith is built around a strong belief in God as made known in Jesus Christ. Through worship, service, and education, ELCA members and congregations practice their faith, grow their relationship with God and experience God's grace in their lives. The ELCA has more than 10,300 congregations across the U.S., Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, and 4.5 million members.

The ELCA has formal "full communion" agreements with six other Christian denominations. The ELCA also engages in theological dialogues and social justice actions with Jews, Muslims and others. For more information about what Lutherans believe and their ecumenical and interfaith relationships, please see [www.elca.org](http://www.elca.org).

The ELCA is also part of a global network of Lutherans called the Lutheran World Federation which represents 70 million Lutherans in 79 different countries. For resources on theology, worship and social justice from Lutherans around the world please see [www.lutheranworld.org](http://www.lutheranworld.org).

LVC is part of a national network of over 300 Lutheran social ministry organizations called Lutheran Services in America. Many of these organizations are affiliated with the ELCA; some are affiliated with other Lutheran denominations such as the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. For more information, including a searchable list of LSA members, please see [www.Lutheranservices.org](http://www.Lutheranservices.org)

## What do Lutherans Believe?

ELCA congregations in the United States and Lutherans around the world vary in their worship styles and theological emphases. What follows is a general summary of core Lutheran beliefs, but even on these there are differences among Lutherans.

- **Lutherans understand ourselves to be a part of the historic and global Christian community - catholic with a small 'c'**

Lutherans sometimes use the phrase "catholic church" (with a lowercase "c" in catholic to distinguish it from the Roman Catholic denomination) to describe this global community of followers of Christ. Lutherans share the Bible, the Creeds (Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian), and the writings of the early church theologians with most other Christians around the world, although there is debate among Christians about how to interpret those ancient documents for our life today. Martin Luther was a Roman Catholic priest and professor of theology who began voicing strong concerns about some of the practices of the Roman Catholic Church in the early sixteenth century. Luther's original intention was not to break away with his followers into a separate denomination, but to remain part of the Roman Catholic Church, while encouraging certain changes. This strong desire to remain in community with other Christians can still be observed today through ELCA efforts to promote ecumenism. Ecumenism refers to efforts to build unity among Christians of different groups or denominations. Although these ecumenical relationships have been approved by 2/3 vote, some ELCA congregations and other Lutheran denominations in the United States disagree with the official ELCA positions.

- **Lutherans are evangelical by sharing the good news of God's grace through faith**

Lutherans believe that God loves the creation, including human beings, unconditionally and we wish to share that message with others (and remind ourselves of it on a regular basis!). We believe that God's love, forgiveness and redemption is shown in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. **Lutherans believe that God's love is a gift of grace that is received now by faith.** In other words, there is nothing that we humans can do to make ourselves any more or any less worthy of the love of God. This is the "good news" (also called the Gospel) that Lutherans share with the world. Because Lutherans wish to share this good news with all people, we claim an identity as evangelical Christians. The word "evangelical," from Greek, literally means "public proclamation of good news." And yet, Lutherans (at least in the U.S.) have a reputation for being somewhat shy about sharing our trust in an unconditionally loving God with others. Many Lutherans seem to subscribe to this quotation, attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the Gospel always; if necessary, use words."

- **Lutherans are continually reforming the church and society**

Lutherans also believe that a process of continuing change, or reformation, is necessary to bring the life of the church in alignment with our beliefs about God's love for all people. **Lutherans believe that the good news about God's love for all people calls us to be a reforming church.** Lutherans recognize that some of the ways we behave as individuals and in organizations and communities are in conflict with what we believe about God and need to be changed. For example, in the summer of 2009 the largest group of Lutherans in the US, called the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), voted to officially allow pastors and other leaders in same-sex, committed relationships, to serve in ELCA churches. (Some of these pastors and leaders had already been serving in the Lutheran church, but were subject to possible disciplinary actions which had been unevenly enforced.) Lutherans believe that it is important to examine our lives as individuals, and as members of communities, organizations, and societies to see where we need to change in order to share and show our belief that God loves all people unconditionally.

**Further Resources:**

Lutheran World Federation <http://www.lutheranworld.org/lwf/>

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America [www.elca.org](http://www.elca.org)

Lutheran Services in America [www.lutherservices.org](http://www.lutherservices.org)

*Baptized, We Live: Lutheranism as a Way of Life* by Daniel Erlander

<http://www.augsburgfortress.org/store/item.jsp?clsid=113663&productgroupid=0&isbn=6000020724>

*The Lutheran Handbook*, edited by Kristofer Skrade & James Satter

<http://www.augsburgfortress.org/store/item.jsp?clsid=160860&isbn=0806651792>

## Why Lutherans Engage in Anti-Oppression work, Supporting our Journey to an Inclusive Community

The ELCA has expressed commitment to several groups of people who are included in LVC's Journey to an Inclusive Community. They have adopted Social Statements on Sexuality and Race, Ethnicity and Culture and Economic Life, a Social Message on Human Disabilities and have had national staff for Justice for Women and multicultural ministry. There is a churchwide commitment to racial justice ministries along with several ethnic associations, including a European American Lutheran Association purposed with dismantling racism and white privilege within the institutional church and wider society. Lutherans Concerned/North America ([www.lcna.org](http://www.lcna.org)) has been a catalyst in moving the ELCA toward greater inclusion of GLBTQ leaders in ministry. Another resource is the Lutheran Disability Network ([www.lsa-dn.org](http://www.lsa-dn.org)). Lutherans understand sin as separation from God and one another, manifested too often in excluding groups of people both intentionally and subconsciously. Lutherans also believe that we are at the same time freed from sin through God's grace to live into Christ's new creation - one of inclusion: free from racism, sexism, homophobia, classism and all other ways we separate ourselves. LVC's JIC work is a commitment to be a leader moving the church closer to that vision.

## Why Vocation is Important to Lutherans

We are saved by grace through faith not works! That is how God justifies us, because we believe that Jesus Christ saves us from our sins. We cannot earn God's justification through good works (Ephesians 2<sup>8</sup>; Romans 3<sup>28</sup>). Good works are actions that flow from faith and thanksgiving to God for what God has done in Jesus. Our good works are connected to our vocation as spouse, parent, teacher, doctor, helper, even as a financial contributor (I Corinthians 16<sup>1</sup>) or whatever we do to praise God for saving us. The "particular work" of a person's calling is not limited to work in the church. This is not a more holy calling. Our salvation propels us to serve in gratitude and God calls us to a variety of roles. This is our call as LVC. Our good works of advocacy and service are intended to confirm our vocation.

References: Augsburg Confession and The Apology to the Augsburg Confession by Philip Melanchthon; Luther's Works Vol 45, Martin Luther; [Lutheranism](#), Eric W. Gritsch & Robert W. Jenson

# Lutherans and LVC's Core Practices

## Lutherans' Commitment to Community

Lutherans are taught that there are two kingdoms to be aware of: The Kingdom of God and Earthly Kingdom. In the Kingdom of God, the Holy Spirit always operates through the Gospel to make us righteous before God. In the Earthly kingdom, God rules through the agency of secular government by means of the law which works for the sake of good order or to restrain the wicked and maintain peace and justice. Sometimes, Lutherans may use other words to refer to the two kingdom proposition, i.e., Gospel (with its promises) and Law (with its accusations), the phrases "right hand" and "left hand" of God, "spiritual" and "temporal" have the same meaning.

As Christians we are to serve both kingdoms until Jesus comes back. But we are also to serve using our faith and our conscience to be disciples and make disciples for Jesus. That is how we get connected with the idea of community. Community is not an ideal which we must realize, but a reality in which we must participate. Our humanity causes us to construct images of other people, but we are asked to recognize Christ in each person. We cannot see one person's faults or sins as greater than our own--we must be equally horrified by our own sins and failures in community. We cannot make a claim on the experience of community, but must live it out and have faith in humankind. Community is formed in the physical acts of sharing bread and work, but also in taking time for solitude, silence and prayer. We Lutherans believe that all Christians are priests (I Peter 2<sup>9</sup>) because of their baptism. A priest is a "bridge builder" between God and God's creation. We cannot exist or work without community.

Reference: Life Together by Dietrich Bonhoeffer  
Martin Luther's Works

## Lutherans' Commitment to Sustainability

The ELCA has a social statement entitled "Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice" that was adopted by more than a 2/3 majority of the churchwide assembly in 1993. This assembly is the body of the church that holds the highest legislative authority for the ELCA. The statement was developed over the course of several years of study, feedback and collaboration. It acknowledges our brokenness and complicity in the current environmental crises we face at the same time as it offers a vision of God's care and embrace for all of creation. Lutheran biblical interpretation of the creation stories affirms the goodness of creation and human responsibility for being good stewards of this gift. Lutheran theology offers a response of hope in the face of brokenness and despair because of God's action through Jesus Christ and the continuing power of the Holy Spirit. This hope moves us into action both individually and collectively, in our private lives and in the public sector. Specifically addressing sustainability, the social statement calls for justice so that we might provide "an acceptable quality of life for present generations without compromising that of future generations." Thus, the biblical, theological and practical vision of the ELCA follows LVC's spiritual core practice of living simply and sustainably. In addition to the social statement, the ELCA's commitment to environmental justice is demonstrated by their Washington advocacy office staffing decisions. Among a staff of five, one full position is dedicated to environmental justice.

## Lutherans' Commitment to Social Justice

These ten statements were distilled from official ELCA social statements regarding the church's work for justice and peace in society. Please see [www.elca.org](http://www.elca.org) for the original documents.

1. We're human. God's passion for righteous relationships and just social structures is written on every heart, not only upon believers' hearts. Working for justice is informed by our common and diverse human experiences and histories. The suffering and aspirations of many peoples and creatures strengthen and inspire us.
2. God, the Holy Trinity, creates, liberates and encourages. We experience God present in creation, rejoicing and nourishing where there is wholeness and love, weeping and resisting where there is suffering and injustice. In God's image, within the web of life, we are stewards of creation.
3. Sin exists. Pain like childbirth may be integral to creation's life, but human sin violates creation. To place our trust in something other than God is the essence of sin. It disrupts our relationships with God, one another, and the rest of creation, resulting in injustices and exploitation.
4. The Gospel—Jesus Christ's life, crucifixion and resurrection for us and for all—embodies love, proclaims peace, forgives sin, works justice, renews creation and promises a future with hope. We believe the Gospel is the heart of justice.
5. It's in the Bible. God's steadfast love, mercy and justice are proclaimed throughout the Holy Scriptures and in the stories of God's people. God's Word addresses us, calls us to life and weaves us into the narratives of the whole creation.
6. We're part of a church—a community of disciples commissioned to proclaim repentance and forgiveness in all the earth. We share God's means of grace to renew and sustain our community and commission in the world. The church and its members work with others to resist, confront and dismantle systemic sin and oppression within itself and other institutions.
7. We're neighbors. God's radical love frees and encourages us to love our neighbors as ourselves. In the light of the Gospel, others are no longer strangers, enemies and aliens. We are neighbors, in whom Christ lives. We are neighbors, and Jesus calls us friends. Within these relationships, service, mercy, justice and freedom become mutual, shared practices.
8. We're hopeful, not idolatrous, fatalistic, pessimistic or optimistic. Humans, including Lutherans and other Christians, have set up and perpetuated social systems and structures that idolize a few and enslave many. When at our best we anticipate the realization of God's promised future, recognize the provisional character of human structures, and are emboldened to reform our current communities and systems.
9. We're called. God works justice and makes peace within and through human work, relationships and social institutions to care for all people and the world. We live our vocations—our callings to love God, neighbor and creation—within and through relationships and institutions like household, work, school, church and civic communities.
10. We're thankful. We struggle, suffer and die, it's true. Yet in the meantime, we enjoy the promise of God and the simple abundance of creation. Our work for peace with justice, then, is a life of praise.

The social statements and messages may be downloaded at: <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements.aspx>