



Theological Discernment

The Theological Discernment team in the Office of the Presiding Bishop supports the presiding bishop's responsibility for theological teaching and discernment. It assists in discerning, understanding and responding theologically to the needs of human beings and the whole creation, and addressing systems, structures and policies of society. The work falls into various functions, including theological reflection, justice for women, theological ethics and theological resources and networks.

Justice for Women program

During the 2016–2019 triennium, the work in the Justice for Women program focused on its central responsibility to assist this church in addressing sexism. Program staff, including an annual Lutheran Volunteer Corps assistant, engaged multiple networks and people to address sexism and its intersections with other forms of privilege and oppression scripturally, theologically and structurally. The work focuses on collaboration and partnerships, dialogue, education, policy formation, and resource formation and sharing. Annually, scholarships and networking opportunities are provided for diverse cohorts of young scholars, and practical support is extended for the gathering of Lutheran Women in Theological and Religious Studies.

Major areas of work during the triennium involved thousands of Lutherans nationally and globally. As part of the 2017 Reformation 500th anniversary, staff supported “Embodied Freedom,” a renewing and theologically grounded gathering, at Augsburg University in Minneapolis. Staff supported the ELCA Task Force on Women and Justice in each phase of the process that led to the recommended proposed social statement *Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Lutheran Call to Action*. Additionally, staff continue to participate in the work of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) on behalf of the ELCA. The director serves as the North American regional coordinator for gender justice and as such was involved in preparations for and advisory leadership at the 2017 LWF XII Assembly in Namibia. This leadership supported significant resolutions approved by the assembly to address gender-based violence and other gender-based inequities within each member church. Justice for Women serves on behalf of the ELCA in an ongoing LWF initiative, Theological Education and Formation, to strengthen global sharing of theological resources and access to theological education.

Justice for Women is providing support to the committee chaired by Bishop Jessica Crist of the Montana Synod, for the 50th anniversary of the decision to ordain women. Historical and contemporary contextual resources, as well as Bible studies, are under development. The anniversary will be lifted up at the 2019 Churchwide Assembly, at the Women of the ELCA Triennial Gathering (a stand-alone event) and during the Rostered Ministers Gathering, the latter two scheduled for July 2020 in Phoenix, Arizona.

Theological Ethics

The work of Theological Ethics assists the church through the development of social teaching documents and study resources, as well as supporting Lutheran ethical reflection, moral deliberation, corporate social responsibility and efforts to engage the intersection of faith and science. Social teaching documents developed during the last triennium include the recommended proposed social statement “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Lutheran Call to Action” and the social message on “Human Rights.” This social message provided the social teaching basis for the human rights social-criteria investment screen developed and implemented by Portico Benefit Services. The screen was called for in the 2016 Churchwide Assembly resolution “Justice for the Holy Land Through Responsible Investment.”

Moral discernment projects included a major revision of “Policies and Procedures of the ELCA for Addressing Social Concerns,” which provides information about the theological foundations and practices that lead to the development of social teaching, as well as the review and archiving procedures for social teaching documents. An ongoing project is the publication of the *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, a unique online publication that draws upon biblical interpretation, social sciences and the resources of historical, theological and ethical tradition. Theological Ethics also carries major responsibility for efforts such as the annual Lutheran Ethicists’ Gathering; translations of teaching documents into Spanish; a new study guide on the statement *For Peace in God’s World*; the Lutheran Alliance for Faith, Science and Technology (an independent Lutheran organization); and the Ecumenical Roundtable for Faith, Science and the Church.

Theological resources and networks

Attention to theological engagement across this church is carried out in various ways and was illustrated this triennium by coordination of the ELCA Theological Roundtable, which met five times. Begun in 2013 with a consultation process through the vision of the late Rev. James K. Echols, the Theological Roundtable is composed of members from a diverse array of theological networks and associations across this church, many of which represent minorities or marginal voices in the Lutheran theological tradition. *Luther's Small Catechism With African Descent Reflections* and *Luther's Small Catechism: An Asian Exposition of the Christian Faith in Asian Contexts and Cultures* both emerged from conversations in the Theological Roundtable, supported by funds from the ELCA's observance of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. The Roundtable has also collaborated with the Theological Education Advisory Council.

500th anniversary of the Reformation

Oct. 31, 2017, marked the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. The 2016 Churchwide Assembly and its concurrent "Grace Gathering" prepared the ELCA for further observances and reflections on the ongoing Reformation under the theme "Freed and Renewed in Christ: 500 Years of God's Grace in Action." The Grace Gathering consisted of workshops, plenary sessions and a keynote address from Nobel Laureate and ELCA International Leaders scholarship recipient Leymah Gbowee.

On this foundation, significant activity took place in 2016–2017 in local and regional settings, which was cataloged and shared through the website ELCA500.org. Across the church, the anniversary observance focused on celebrating the achievements of the Reformation while also acknowledging the sin and division that resulted during the emergence of the Lutheran reform movement. The defining dimension of the anniversary was its focus on the ecumenical progress toward reconciliation, especially over the last 50 years of Lutheran-Catholic dialogue. For more information, see the Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations report.

Through the website and social media [page](#), the churchwide organization also provided resources, templates and graphics to assist synods, ministries and congregations in reflecting on and commemorating the anniversary. The Grace Gathering (with 500 attendees) and "Looking Back and Called Forward: A Commemoration of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation" in Washington, D.C., on Oct. 31, 2017 (with 370 attendees in person and 6,500 streaming online) were the two main events facilitated by the churchwide organization's Mission Advancement unit and the Office of the Presiding Bishop. "Looking Back and Called Forward" explored 500 years of Reformation through the lens of 50-plus years' of ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, with a focus on repentance and healing for the past and common action for the flourishing of the world in the future.

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