

A message on...

Living in a Time of Terrorism

Adopted by the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on April 18, 2004.

The Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America encourages members to talk together about what it means to be peacemakers in a time of terrorism and to take part in the ongoing public discussion on terrorism, security, and peace. Drawing on the social statement "For Peace in God's World," the Church Council offers this message as a means to facilitate deliberation by congregations and participation as citizens by ELCA members.

It is a resource for reflection on such questions as:

- What is terrorism?*
- How in light of our faith should we oppose terrorism?*
- What are the responsibilities and limits of government for earthly peace and security?*
- What gives rise to terrorism?*
- How does our faith address the fear that terrorism causes?*
- How should we as Christians relate to Muslims?*

Terrorism haunts our times. People throughout the world live with frightening memories of terrorist attacks and with the uncertainties of possible future attacks. Terrorist networks continue to operate in many countries, some with ability to strike far from their home base. While terrorism has a long history, its threat to peace has intensified in our time.

On September 11, 2001, when the world was again shaken by terrorism's murderous destruction and its ability to terrorize millions, the United States experienced its own vulnerability to international terrorism. The attacks of that day can only be condemned. Our hearts and prayers continue to go out to all those whose lives were shattered by the events of that day.¹

Since then the United States has been engaged in a struggle against terrorism in which some actions have provoked controversy and division in this country and around the world. Terrorism and counterterrorism are complex, crucial, and long-term concerns for all people who seek a more peaceful world.

“We of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America share with the Church of Jesus Christ in all times and places the calling to be peacemakers.” This opening sentence in the ELCA social statement “For Peace in God’s World” reminds us that in these times also God calls us “to proclaim the Gospel of God’s final peace and to work for earthly peace.”² This message draws on that social statement to give a theological perspective on earthly peace, recall the role of governments, call for public vigilance of counterterrorism and for international cooperation, affirm the Gospel’s gift of living beyond fear, and highlight the importance of interfaith encounters.

Earthly Peace

“Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). In light of the Gospel’s promise of peace, Christians recognize both the goodness and limits of earthly peace.

Earthly peace is not the same as the promised peace of God’s present and future eternal reign.

As a human achievement built in the middle of strife, earthly peace is often fleeting and always partial. It is difficult to build and maintain. It is easily and frequently disrupted by violence and war. All the more, then, is earthly peace a most precious gift. It embodies God’s intention for creation, serves human and planetary good, and gives space to proclaim the Gospel, keeping hope in God alive.³

This distinction between God’s eternal reign of peace and earthly peace offers perspective for approaching terrorism. Terrorism threatens earthly peace, not the peace given in the Gospel. The struggle against terrorism belongs to earthly peace and shares its characteristics. This struggle is not a

matter of God's ultimate salvation, which God has already secured for us and for all creation in the cross of Christ. It will not end sin and evil or bring about God's reign of peace. Our task is rather to restrain destructive acts and promote just peace among finite, sinful human beings within the constraints of our historical context.

Because earthly peace is a precious yet fragile good, there is reason for all to be vigilant, self-critical, and active in preventing and suppressing terrorism, holding terrorists accountable, and addressing what gives rise to terrorism. Complacency and wishful thinking endanger peace; pride and self-righteousness endanger peace as well.

In pursuing earthly peace, we must make judgments about good and evil, recognizing that we make them as sinful human beings who are accountable to God for our judgments. Terrorist acts are rightly called "evil," and the cause to protect innocent people from them is good and worthy.⁴ Yet counterterrorism should not be seen as the righteous waging a holy war against God's enemies, even when terrorists may understand themselves to be fighting a holy war. Religious leaders and others who criticize counterterrorism measures need to resist the temptation to be self-righteous in their judgments. "Because all are sinners before God, efforts to build **earthly peace must recognize sin's persistent, pervasive, and subtle power.** We easily deceive ourselves about our own righteousness. Even our best intentions can produce harmful results."⁵

Acting in a good cause does not mean being free from sin. We act "knowing what we do or do not do falls short of what love requires. No matter what conscientious people decide, they remain under God's judgment and in need of God's mercy given in the cross of Christ."⁶ Living in forgiveness encourages a spirit of humility, which recognizes legitimate disagreements about counterterrorism as well as the burdens and risks that decision-makers face before an uncertain future.

The Role of Governments

Terrorism may be understood as violence or the threat of violence directed toward civilians to create a climate of fear and uncertainty. State actors use terror to maintain their grip on power. Non-state actors use terror to disrupt a political, social, or economic order.⁷

Terrorism is political violence. It is planned and organized violence that aims to undermine a society's civic peace. Terrorists kill and injure civilians in order to generate fear and panic in society. Because terrorists aim to influence an audience, "terrorism is theatre" and terrorism is "propaganda by deed."⁸

According to both international law and the just war tradition, some political violence may be justified (like wars of self-defense), while other political violence is not (like wars of aggression).⁹

The principles for deciding about wars include right intention, justifiable cause, legitimate authority, last resort, declaration of war aims, proportionality, and reasonable chance of success. The principles for conducting war include noncombatant immunity and proportionality.¹⁰

By these principles, terrorism is one kind of unjustifiable political violence. Just as human rights laws and just war principles condemn violent acts by a state to terrorize its people, so the same standards condemn terrorist acts by non-state actors. Many such terrorist acts fail to meet any of the just war standards. Even when the terrorists' cause is viewed as just, terrorism cannot be justified because it intentionally targets noncombatants. Few people claim to be terrorists; yet if they intentionally kill or threaten to harm civilians to generate fear in order to disrupt a social order, they are terrorists.

Lawful governments are authorized by God to protect society and secure the blessings of just order.¹¹ Without minimal civic peace, people cannot carry on their daily activities that allow life to go on or attain the benefits of a just society. "We also advocate an earthly peace that provides

security from violence and aggression, seeks just order in place of tyranny or anarchy, checks unrestrained power, and defends and enhances the life of people who are poor and powerless.”¹²

Governments often abuse and violate their authority under the guise of seeking security. They may deny the rightful aspirations of an oppressed group, violate human rights, or inflict their own unjustifiable violence on people in the name of fighting terrorism. They may use terror to guard the interests of an elite ruling group instead of protecting the security of all citizens. In their counterterrorism activity, governments have the obligation to adhere to basic human rights, the rule of law, and just war standards.

The security that governments—including that of the United States—can provide from the threats of terrorism has limits. Human beings, finite creatures that we are, are always vulnerable; eliminating vulnerability would also do away with freedom. Governments cannot provide perfect or total security; when they claim or seek to do so, they become agents of arrogant pride and the injustice and insecurity that flow from pride.¹³ If they are to secure freedom for vulnerable people, governments must recognize their limits in providing security.

Public Vigilance and International Cooperation

Different perceptions of the nature and seriousness of the threat of terrorism are often a major reason for disagreements within and among nations on what should be done in response to it. Faith provides perspective in approaching terrorism, but it does not give Christians or the Church special knowledge or competence in evaluating this threat. Like other concerned citizens, Christians must rely on others—terrorism analysts, government, media, international voices—for information in forming judgments about the threat of terrorism. The credibility of such individuals and institutions depends on their provision of trustworthy information and unbiased interpretations to the public. Assessing the reliability and significance of the information and interpretations, however, belongs to the responsibility of citizens. Careful and

critical public discussion is essential to sort out truth from deceit and genuine security concerns from self-serving manipulation.

Policy makers face risky and difficult decisions in calculating what kind of security is either too little or too much, determining priorities and allocating expenditures, and balancing security with other responsibilities of government. Public scrutiny is needed to ensure that the costs and burdens of security measures are shared fairly and that the needs of people who are poor and marginalized are met. Continuing public vigilance is essential to evaluate whether or not the security measures are needed, effective, and, above all, respectful of the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution and in accord with the best of our country's traditions.

Security measures and practices that make people their target only because they belong to a particular ethnic or religious community endanger the well-being of the particular community and betray the nation's commitment to equal treatment under the law.¹⁴ Government policies and practices that deny or weaken due process for people accused or suspected of terrorist activities jeopardize these protections for all. In tracking potential terrorists, laws and practices that invade or infringe upon civil liberties without proper judicial oversight threaten the security that comes from being a free people. Policies, practices, and attitudes that are hostile to immigrants living in the United States and that unduly curtail the legal arrival of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers fail to live up to our country's tradition of welcoming newcomers in a fair and generous way.¹⁵

Security from terrorism requires nations to cooperate with one another and with international organizations. Nations must work together to find and track terrorists, to cut off their funds, to prevent terrorists from crossing international borders, to provide protection for high-risk targets, and to improve readiness to respond in the event of new terrorist attacks. International conventions can provide a common framework for national laws and their effective enforcement. It is therefore significant that all 191 nations in the United

Nations in 2001 united in condemning terrorist acts and in pledging to work together to prevent and suppress them.¹⁶

Even with this important cooperation, deep differences exist in the international community about how to respond to terrorism. These differences are evident in opposing views on the political roles of the United Nations and the United States, as may be illustrated in these questions: Are the interests and worldviews of the members of the Security Council so divergent that they render the United Nations ineffective in addressing the threat of terrorism? Or is the dominant power of the United States, with its “war on terrorism,” a greater danger to peace than terrorism itself?

Many in other nations perceive that the United States too often acts arrogantly and without sufficient consultation, agreement, and participation of other nations.¹⁷ Citizens in the United States need to hear and evaluate this perception of their nation’s actions. According to the social statement “For Peace in God’s World,” the United States with its “vital leadership role in world affairs...cannot and should not withdraw or isolate itself from the rest of the world. Neither should it seek to control or police the world.” Like all nations, the United States in pursuing its interests has “an obligation to respect the interests of other states and international actors and to comply with international law. Nations should seek their own common good in the context of the global common good.”¹⁸

Whenever military action is considered, citizens have responsibility to hold their government accountable to just war principles. “At their best, these principles provide a moral framework, ambiguous and imprecise though it be, for public deliberation about war, and guidance for persons deciding what to do when faced with the dilemmas of war.”¹⁹ Especially contentious in the struggle against terrorism is the meaning of three of these principles: legitimate authority (who authorizes war?), last resort (questions of pre-emption), and reasonable chance of success (does this military action increase or decrease the threat of terrorism?). Public vigilance also is needed in times of war to judge whether the war is being rightly fought according to the principles of discrimination

(noncombatant immunity) and proportionality (determining whether the evil effects are more or less than the evil prevented). In clarifying and applying these principles, “Christians need to be prepared to say ‘no’ to wars in which their nation participates.”²⁰

Living Beyond Fear

Fear generated by the threat of terrorism may be a reasonable response to danger, alerting us to take steps to address it. Yet fear can become part of the fabric of society and make people its captives. Fear then paralyzes, divides people, fosters distrust, and clouds judgments. The Gospel promises freedom from living in debilitating fear. Through Word and Sacrament the Holy Spirit surrounds children, youth, and adults with God’s unfailing love. “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). In faith we may carry on our lives with the confidence that nothing—including terrorism—“will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39). Living from the security of faith in God, Christians in a fearful society may exhibit courage to evaluate soberly the threat of terrorism without ignoring it or becoming all-consumed by it.

The Gospel also frees “us from fear to see others as brothers and sisters for whom Christ died and lives.”²¹ Believing that God’s love in Christ Jesus extends to all, we are freed to attend to the interests and welfare of those who might be considered “enemies.”²² We are better enabled to know and feel the vulnerability of others around the world and to work for a just peace in light of our mutual vulnerability.

As people freed by the Gospel, we need to deepen our understanding of what drives an international terrorist network to carry out attacks such as those of September 11. Is the motivation envy, hate, and resentment toward a prosperous, powerful, and stable society? Is it the belief that the “West” continues to wage a centuries-long crusade against the Islamic world? Is it fear of the freedom of Western societies? Is it the belief that under the guise of freedom a morally corrupt culture is undermining a cherished way of

life? Is it because an extremist strain of Islam has captured the imagination of millions of Muslims who see themselves unjustly alienated by the “West”? Is it reaction to United States policy in the Middle East? Is it due to the mysterious presence of evil in the human heart?

To explore such questions is not to justify or explain away terrorist acts, much less to blame the victims for them, but to seek to understand by viewing the world from perspectives of other religions, peoples, and nations. A world with less hate and misunderstanding is a more secure one. Trying to understand may help us to check our own hatred and spirit of revenge, to see our own country’s part in the world’s tangled web of evil, and to approach our responsibilities as repentant and forgiven sinners.

Terrorism haunts our times, but so do hunger and poverty, corrupt and brutal political systems, harsh discrimination and social inequalities, civil wars, environmental degradation, and epidemic diseases. These are sources of insecurity and hopelessness for millions, and they belong to a world that “is increasingly interconnected.”²³ To neglect or be indifferent to these realities while countering terrorism is both morally wrong and shortsighted.

Earthly peace in God’s creation “**is built on the recognition of the unity and goodness of created existence, the oneness of humanity, and the dignity of every person.**”²⁴ A simple yet profound condition for peace is the acknowledgement of the common humanity of all people as God’s beloved creatures. This belief too compels us to strengthen our compassionate understanding of peoples throughout the world and to broaden our moral horizon to embrace their suffering and well-being as our concern.

This concern takes form in the search for just peace in a global society. This search envisions “a culture of peace,” “an economy with justice,” and “a politics of cooperation.” The comprehensive naming of cultural, economic, and political “tasks” to keep, make, and build peace today in “For Peace in God’s World” points to the breadth of this search.²⁵ Enduring human security for all depends on building just peace.

Interfaith Encounters

History shows that religions, including Christianity, may be a source of both violent conflict and peacemaking. In a time often thought to be secular, religion has taken on new public significance: Two decades ago terrorists tended to frame their activity in political and ideological terms; in recent times an increasing number view their activity in religious categories.²⁶

Most notably, the network responsible for September 11 as well as other terrorist acts identifies itself as Muslim and claims to be acting to fulfill a supposed divine obligation.²⁷ Worldwide, millions of Christians will join with millions of Muslims in condemning the belief that God sanctions terrorist acts. Similarly, Christians will insist that for them the struggle with terrorism is not a religious war and do all that they can to make sure it does not become a war between Christians and Muslims. They will understand that it is their moral duty to reject blanket condemnations of Islam, all notions that blame all Muslims for specific terrorist acts, and all attitudes and actions that unjustly discriminate against Muslims on account of their religion. Christians will work with others to protect the religious freedom of Muslims.

“Peace is difference in unity. It requires both respect for the uniqueness of others – finite persons in particular communities – and acknowledgment of a common humanity.” “This vision calls us to engage differences, not to ignore or fear them. The hope for earthly peace challenges people to strengthen their own particular communities in ways that promote respect and appreciation for people in other communities, for all share a common humanity.”

In many situations today, religious differences are a source of enmity. Religion is used to incite people to violence. The Church faces new challenges in being a reconciling presence among the religions of the world. We need to learn from Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others, discovering the ways they strive for peace, correcting distorted images, and working for mutual understanding. We

rejoice where people of different religions work together to overcome hostility.²⁸

Our times bid us to intensify our efforts to work with humility and persistence for mutual understanding among all religions, especially among Christians, Muslims, and Jews. This challenge has many dimensions and is only at a beginning stage. It includes personal relationships in neighborhoods, schools, and work places; meetings among congregations, mosques, and synagogues; cooperation with common projects; and scholarly discussions of sacred texts, historical relationships, and living beliefs and practices. It calls for recognizing the great diversity within each religion and for understanding friendly and hostile encounters in multiple contexts.

Christians, Muslims, and Jews belong to particular communities that appeal to their own sacred texts and traditions as their authority in matters of life and belief. Fruitful and respectful dialogue will explore how each community draws on what is authoritative in its life to address how societies should order their life together. Some topics, for example, might be: On what bases does each community reject hatred for those who do not belong to their community? What beliefs and practices in each community foster tolerance and respect for others with different beliefs, and what beliefs and practices further pride as well as disdain for the other communities? How does each community make distinctions between justifiable and unjustifiable political violence? What beliefs in each community lead to a principled commitment to a legal order that guarantees religious freedom for all?²⁹

Christians, Muslims, and Jews should find agreement in denouncing the belief that terrorist acts are a divine obligation. They should also find agreement in recognizing that religious faith can and should be a powerful force for peace.

An Elusive, Prayerful Quest

The Holy Spirit calls us in the Church “to proclaim the Gospel of God’s final peace and to work for earthly peace.” In the Gospel we find consolation in our sorrow, freedom from

fear, and hope to carry on the “elusive quest to build earthly peace,”³⁰ even when terrorism and other evils haunt our times. May we in this quest turn to God in prayer, asking forgiveness for our sins, wisdom for discernment, and renewal for our spirits; and interceding for those who suffer from terrorism and war, for those who govern the nations, for those who would harm the innocent, for those who help the wounded, and for those who provide security for the endangered.

O God, it is your will to hold both heaven and earth in a single peace. Let the design of your great love shine on the waste of our wraths and sorrows, and give peace to your Church, peace among the nations, peace in our homes, and peace in our hearts; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.³¹

Endnotes

1. In response to the events of that day, many acted with courage, generosity, and healing. People around the world, including churches of the Lutheran Communion, expressed their shock, loss, fear, anger, grief, consolation, sympathy, and encouragement. For more on September 11, see H. Gaylon Barker, editor, with a Forward by Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson, *The Cross at Ground Zero: Lutheran Reflections and Sermons in Response to 9/11* (New York: Metropolitan New York Mission Institute, 2002). The selections give voice to the experiences of September 11 and show how the Gospel addresses them. The book also reminds us of the significant role Lutheran Disaster Response played and continues to play in responding to the events of that day. These events remind us in our church of the continuing need to improve our readiness to respond to terrorist acts and other human-caused disasters.
2. ELCA social statement “For Peace in God’s World” (1995), page 1. Messages are to be based on and consistent with ELCA social statements.
3. *Ibid.*, page 8. The sentences in bold in this and other

citations from the social statement appear in bold in the social statement.

4. "Helping the neighbor in need may require protecting innocent people from injustice and aggression." *Ibid.*, page 11.

5. *Ibid.*, page 7.

6. *Ibid.*, page 13.

7. Terrorism by non-state actors is the particular concern of this message. "For Peace in God's World" condemns state terrorism when, for example, it calls for promoting "respect for human rights" and when it states: "We expect governments to be accountable to law and people, provide for the participation of all and space for loyal opposition, protect individual and minority rights, and offer processes for conflicts to be resolved without war," pages 14, 19. This social statement, however, does not directly address non-state terrorism. In the history of the United States, African Americans were objects of terrorism for centuries. Christian White supremacist militia groups, violent anti-abortionists, and eco-terrorists are domestic examples of non-state terrorism. Terrorists often target symbols of power as well as civilians. They may be supported by states.

8. Quoted in Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pages 38, 17. The first description comes from terrorism expert Brian M. Jenkins and the second from Carlo Pisacane, a 19th century Italian political rebel.

9. See "Deciding About War," in "For Peace in God's World," pages 11-13. In describing international law, the social statement states on page 17: "While states have the right of self-defense and may resist aggression, they are otherwise to abstain from the threat or use of military force." Although the just war tradition was developed in relation to conflicts between governing authorities, it has a broader application. "From the posture of the just/unjust war tradition, the aim of all politics is peace. Any political activity that involves coercion should be held accountable to just/unjust war principles," page 12.

10. *Ibid.*, page 11. The conditions for a just war were first articulated by Augustine in the 5th century, further developed by Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century, affirmed in principle by the Lutheran church in "The Augsburg Confession" (Article XVI), and written into international law by such secular jurists as Hugo Grotius (17th century).

11. "In accordance with the Lutheran tradition, we affirm that governments may legitimately employ such measures as law and its enforcement, police protection, provisions for the common defense, and resistance to aggression" ("The Augsburg Confession," Article XVI). "For Peace in God's World," page 10. Also see Romans 13:1-7.

12. *Ibid.*, page 7.

13. The Church as a disturbing presence "resists idols that lead to false security, injustice, and war," and denounces beliefs and actions that "find ultimate security in weapons and warfare" and "ordain the inherent right of one people, race, or civilization to rule over others," page 5.

14. See the ELCA social statement "Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture" (1993), especially page 7.

15. See the ELCA message on "Immigration" (1997). For current information on the legal situation of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, visit the Web site of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (www.lirs.org).

16. United Nations Security Resolution 1373 (2001). With this UN Security Council resolution, nations agreed to develop legislation that prohibits terrorist acts, financial support for them, and recruitment by terrorist groups; freeze financial assets for terrorist groups; develop effective border controls and controls on travel documents; and intensify the exchange of information about terrorist groups and potential terrorist acts. Nations that lack resources to comply depend on wealthier nations for assistance. Even with recent divisions within the Security Council, a great deal of cooperation among nations on these vital provisions continues.

17. For an example of this view expressed by the Lutheran World Federation at its Tenth Assembly in Winnipeg, Canada, July 21-31, 2003, see "Public statement of concern on

unilateralism in the international policies of the United States of America." It can be found online at www.lwf-assembly.org/PDFs/LWF-Resolutions_and_Statements.pdf, page 8.

18. "For Peace in God's World," page 10.

19. *Ibid.*, page 12.

20. *Ibid.* For ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson's statements opposing the war in Iraq, see www.elca.org/bishop/messages

21. "For Peace in God's World," page 14.

22. "We call for an imaginative attention to the interests and welfare of other nations, especially of those that are viewed as 'enemies' or that are considered unimportant for our nation's interests." *Ibid.*, page 10.

23. *Ibid.*, page 8. The social statement describes dynamics and effects of global integration.

24. *Ibid.*, page 7.

25. See "Tasks" in "For Peace in God's World," pages 13-21. See also the ELCA social statement, "Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All" (1999), especially pages 4-7.

26. See Hoffman: "For others, however, the religious motive is overriding; and indeed, the religious imperative for terrorism is the most important defining characteristic of terrorist activity today." He notes "the dramatic proliferation of terrorist groups motivated by a religious imperative," pages 201, 87. Hoffman describes the terrorism that emerges from various religious traditions on pages 87-129.

27. For the text of "Declaration of Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders," produced by Osama bin Laden and others, and a discussion of it, see John Kelsay, "Interpreting Islamic tradition: Bin Laden's reasons," *Christian Century* (February 27-March 6, 2002), pages 26-29.

28. "For Peace in God's World," pages 7, 10.

29. These questions are adapted from those presented by the Christian ethicist Don Shriver at an interfaith (Christians, Muslims, Jews) meeting in July and October 2002 at the United

States Institute of Peace. See the Institute's "Building Interreligious Trust in a Climate of Fear" (Special Report 99, February 2003), pages 5-6.

30. "For Peace in God's World," page 21.

31. *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), page 42.



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