

HONORING
OUR
NEIGHBOR'S
FAITH

A LUTHERAN PERSPECTIVE
ON FAITH TRADITIONS
IN AMERICA

REVISED EDITION

 AUGSBURG FORTRESS

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INTRODUCTION

This resource invites us to honor our neighbor's faith. First, it acknowledges that people—especially in pluralistic America—have different beliefs and affirms that those beliefs are worthy of respect. Second, it recognizes that we have difficulty respecting what we do not understand. Indeed, we have seen all too often that disrespect, distrust, and fear of other religious traditions often stem from simple misunderstanding. This is an age-old problem, and Christians have been both perpetrators and victims of such misunderstanding. Early Christians were accused of cannibalism because of confusion regarding the Lord's supper. Present-day Muslims are all too commonly thought to support “holy war” against Christians. Even within Christian communities, perceptions of other denominations are often far from accurate.

In *Honoring Our Neighbor's Faith*, religious groups tell their own story: who they are, what they believe, and how they practice. In many cases, writers from within the traditions agreed to write the essays. In all cases, the chapters were sent to representatives of the groups for their review. We have tried to be fair toward their beliefs, attempting in our editing not to put our slant on their faith. The exception is in the discussion questions, where we encourage Lutherans and others who use this resource to examine the various beliefs in light of their own faith.

How do we deal with differences in beliefs? We honor our neighbor's faith and trust that it is as heartfelt as our own, but where do we go from there? If we are Lutheran, presumably we believe that the Lutheran understanding of God is the most faithful. How, then, do we approach the beliefs of other faith groups? Are they equally faithful, just different? Are they misguided but essentially okay? Are they flat-out wrong? Do we agree with those who say all religious traditions are equally valid understandings of the universal God, or do we agree with those who would insist that Christianity—or, more narrowly, our understanding of Christianity—is the only way to approach God?

These are difficult questions, and people answer them in many ways. Some Christians will not pray even with others whom they acknowledge to be Christian. Other Christians are willing to accept as valid the beliefs of those who have never claimed to be Christian. Still other Christians struggle to deal with groups that follow some Christian practices while also departing from some basic Christian teachings. But as tricky and sometimes wrenching as these questions are, we can be certain that satisfactory answers cannot be found by ignoring or misrepresenting what other faith traditions believe. We need to obtain accurate information and to examine that information respectfully. We must compare what we learn with our own beliefs, and that means we must have a solid understanding of what our own faith asks of us. This resource will help you clarify your own faith tradition and begin to make thoughtful comparisons with others'.

Faith Traditions Explored in This Resource

Hundreds of Christian denominations and dozens of non-Christian traditions have followers in the United States. We tried to choose groups that would represent a wide spectrum of beliefs and that readers are likely to come across because of the group's size or prominent public profile. Of course, you are encouraged to investigate other faiths.

Each essay is accompanied by a table that compares that faith tradition's and the ELCA's core teachings, type of worship, and governance. Following the table are statistics for the number of members and congregations. Readers should keep in mind that the statistics do not offer apples-to-apples comparisons between faith communities, because traditions and even individual congregations do not count members the same way. ELCA congregations, for example, count all who have been received as members of the congregation through baptism or affirmation of baptism. But some congregations carefully distinguish between “active” and “inactive” members

(those who do and do not worship or make a donation of record), while others are less rigorous about who is kept on membership rolls. In traditions such as the Assemblies of God, many people hesitate to become a member of a congregation until they no longer have any doubts about their relationship with God, and a person might worship regularly with a congregation for years without ever becoming a member. Other traditions, such as Jewish synagogues and Hindu temples, identify as members those who have paid annual (or, in some communities, lifetime) dues.

Unless otherwise noted, statistics used in this resource are from the *U.S. Religion Census 1952 to 2010*, sponsored by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (www.rcms2010.org/compare.php). Other websites offer additional resources for faith community leaders and information about the location, characteristics, and activities of congregations. See especially the following sites for updated information:

Faith Communities Today	www.faithcommunitiestoday.org
Hartford Institute for Religion Research	www.hirr.hartsem.edu
National Congregations Study (NCS)	www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/
Pew Research Center, Religion and Public Life	www.pewforum.org
US Congregational Life Survey (USCLS)	www.uscongregations.org/

Many Christian denominations in the United States belong to one or more of the following organizations, which support a variety of cooperative efforts:

National Association of Evangelicals	www.nae.net
National Council of Churches	www.nationalcouncilofchurches.us
World Council of Churches	www.oikoumene.org

The faith traditions discussed in this resource may be placed in four broad categories, but in some cases you will have to decide which category a given group belongs in. The first category is world religions unrelated to Christianity. This category is clear and comprises the ancient religions of Hinduism (or Vedanta) and Buddhism. The second category is non-Christian world religions with a “family” connection to Christianity. Again, no confusion here: Judaism is the source from which Christianity developed, and Islam is a later religion from the same roots. People will make different calls about which groups belong in the last two categories: Christian denominations and non-Christian denominations with Christian roots. Few observers would question that Episcopalians or Methodists are Christian. Other denominations, though, claim to be Christian, but some of their beliefs raise questions about that identification for some people. Read the essays, look at the tables of comparison, and try to make your own call.

How to Use This Resource

Honoring Our Neighbor's Faith has been designed primarily for adult study groups in Evangelical Lutheran Church in America congregations. Groups are encouraged to use this resource as best fits their circumstances. A group might read through each chapter (perhaps combining some of the shorter ones) and discuss it, beginning with the questions provided. Class members might wish to expand on these presentations by conducting their own research into the history, beliefs, and practices of various groups. Suggestions for further reading, along with website URLs, are provided in each chapter.

You will learn more about both other traditions and your own faith journey if you approach this book and supplementary materials with the goal of furthering your understanding rather than pinpointing beliefs you disagree with or identifying others’ “errors.” Questions such as the following can be used to guide your exploration and structure your conversation (or reflection if you are reading this book on your own).

The Facts

1. What beliefs or assumptions form the foundation of the denomination or tradition? Think especially about the following:
 - understanding of God
 - understanding of humanity and the human condition
 - origins and nature of a universal problem
 - solution offered for that problem
 - humanity's role in achieving that solution
 - how that solution affects human experience
 - teachings about an afterlife
 - implications of these ideas for daily life
2. What texts, stories, images, symbols, and practices are important in this tradition?
3. What vocabulary do I need to understand?

My Response

1. What surprises or intrigues me?
2. What ideas or practices seem difficult to me?
3. What questions do I have?

Implications

1. What values, beliefs, or practices from this tradition do I admire and wish more people would follow?
2. What elements could Lutherans not incorporate into their own faith and practice, and why?
3. What elements of this tradition are the same as or similar to those of Lutherans? Which ones could ELCA Lutherans comfortably adopt, and why?
4. How have my thoughts and feelings about my own relationship with God and religious values, beliefs, and practices changed as a result of my reflecting on another's?

Where possible, study groups could invite individuals from other traditions to come and speak to the class. Making a trip to worship with (or, if appropriate, simply to observe) the group under discussion could be the best way to get a feel for who they are. If you plan such a visit, contact the group ahead of time, find out if there are any restrictions on dress or behavior, and ask for any hints to help you get more out of your visit. A member of the faith community might serve as a host for your group. Consider inviting a class from that tradition to visit your church, establishing an opportunity for mutual exploration. A noteworthy resource for such visits is *How to Be a Perfect Stranger: The Essential Religious Etiquette Handbook*, 5th ed., Stuart M. Matlins and Arthur J. Magida, (SkyLight Paths, 2011).

We don't expect that all people will agree about who God is and how we should practice our beliefs, even among Christian denominations. We hope, though, that this resource provides accurate information about what others believe and why, that we can gain some insight from other faiths to help us in our own faith journeys, and that without dishonoring our own faith in any way, we can honor our neighbor's faith.

MORAVIAN CHURCH



The Moravian Church began when a Bohemian priest and scholar, John Hus, was burned at the stake at the Council of Constance in 1415.

The Moravian Church is not a large denomination. In spite of its small size, however, it is one of the few worldwide denominations. Moravians claim that fellowship in Jesus Christ can transcend all differences, including those of political systems and ethnicity.

From earliest times, the Moravian Church has sought Protestant cooperation. Leaders in Bohemia (now part of the Czech Republic) made contact with Martin Luther during the German Reformation. At that time, there were already 175,000 Moravians. As a result of that contact, when the Moravian Church, known as the *Unitas Fratrum* (Unity of Brethren), published its confession of faith, Luther wrote the preface. This spirit of cooperation continued in America. Moravian leaders in early Pennsylvania sought to encourage Protestant unity. More recently, American Moravians were charter members of both the World and National Councils of Churches.

A Worldwide Unity

The Moravian Church has maintained a worldwide organization, called the Unity, since the eighteenth century. Today's Unity embraces nineteen independent provinces and missions on every major continent except Australia. Each Unity province is an independent church, but a Unity Synod held every seven years provides overall coordination and direction for the church in the world.

The fastest-growing segment of the worldwide Moravian Church today is in Tanzania. The church is also present in South Africa, Suriname, Guyana, the West Indies, and Central America, as well as in Europe, the United Kingdom, and North America. Moravians also work among the native people of Alaska and Labrador.

Hus and Zinzendorf

The Moravian Church began when a Bohemian priest and scholar, John Hus, was burned at the stake at the Council of Constance, an ecumenical council recognized by the Roman Catholic Church and held in 1415. After efforts to purify the church failed, Hus's followers were forced to organize their own body in 1457.

The Unity prospered for a time. It soon faced persecution, however, and seemed dead—but it was reborn. A little band of refugees from Bohemia came to a devout, pietistic German Lutheran's estate in 1721. Count Nicolaus von Zinzendorf permitted them to settle on his lands. Under Zinzendorf's leadership, they worshiped as Lutherans in the parish church. Other religiously dissatisfied people and refugees joined the community. But strife arose, and this community seemed in danger of falling apart.

Count Zinzendorf abandoned his tasks at court and gave his full time to the community. He and the elders conducted a house-to-house visitation for prayer and study, which built toward a climax on August 13, 1727. The Brethren, gathered in the parish church, experienced an outpouring of God's Spirit of such vitality that the direction of the community was changed, and it became a solid base for spreading the gospel throughout the world.

From Europe the church spread to many parts of the world, seeking to take its message of Jesus to those left out by society, including indigenous peoples and people enslaved by others. Today the makeup of the Moravian Church is about 80 percent black people; about 10 percent white people; and the remaining members, indigenous peoples.

Church and Sacraments

The Moravian Church recognizes the sacraments of baptism and holy communion. The usual form of baptism is sprinkling, and the church administers the sacrament in the name of the triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). The sacrament carries with it the responsibility of parents, child, and congregation.

Baptism is a sign of God's love toward us even before we can understand it and a sign of our becoming part of the family of God through Christ. Baptized children may receive communion after some preparation; however, practice varies from congregation to congregation. At confirmation (for a person baptized as an infant) or baptism (for someone baptized as an adult), the person makes a confession of faith.

In the Moravian understanding of holy communion, the believer participates in the unique act of a covenant with Christ as Savior and with other believers in Christ. The Moravian service of holy communion is a service of praise and prayer (with hymns sung as the elements are distributed to all communicants), fellowship (with the right hand of fellowship extended at the beginning and close of the service), and covenant with Christ and each other.

The Love Feast

Moravian worship varies widely; freedom is intended. Liturgies, composed of prayers, scripture verses, and hymn stanzas, are provided for all occasions. The Moravian Easter Morning liturgy, sometimes called a Moravian confession of faith, draws heavily on Luther's Small Catechism. Another Moravian tradition is a series of services during Holy Week in which the entire Passion narrative of the Gospels is read, interspersed with hymns. These liturgical forms are not intended to restrict creative expression. A unique practice is the love feast, a simple meal shared in church. In such services, as in the service for holy communion, much of the message is conveyed in the words of the large number of hymns sung.

Christian Living

Moravians emphasize Christian living. They focus not so much on a list of don'ts as on encouragement to live a life centered on Jesus Christ. The faithful Moravian lives for Christ, rejoices in Christ, and shows a spirit of love for others.

The Moravian Church emphasizes a warm experience of personal salvation and mission work. It sought to function within the state churches of Europe and to secure their support in taking the gospel abroad. It also witnessed the divisiveness of contrary doctrine. As a result, though conservative where the major doctrines (the Trinity and so forth) are concerned, it has consistently refused to define the fine points, such as what happens to the elements in holy communion. Such definition is left to the individual Christian.

Broadly evangelical, the Moravians have insisted on the principle “In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, in all things love.” The chief characteristic of its doctrinal approach came from Zinzendorf, who said, “If I know Jesus, then I know all that I need to know about the Godhead.”

Shape and Future

The ministry of the Moravian Church is grouped into three orders: deacon, presbyter, and bishop. The bishop is not a governmental figure but is chosen as a spiritual leader and pastor to pastors.

The future of the Moravian Church lies in its continued witness for Christ around the world. Growth in North America in recent years has come mainly through immigration of Moravians from Central America and the Caribbean to the United States and Canada.

For Discussion

1. In 1999 Moravians and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America established a “full communion” relationship. Why did this make sense?
2. The Moravians are a worldwide church. How does this compare with your denomination?
3. What are the benefits and possible pitfalls of the principle “In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, in all things love”?

For Further Study

- *Count Zinzendorf and the Spirit of the Moravians* by Paul Wemmer (Xulon, 2013)
- *Jesus Still Lead On: An Introduction to Moravian Belief* by Craig D. Atwood (Moravian Church Interprovincial Board of Communication, 2004), available at www.moravian.org
- *A History of the Moravian Church* by J. E. Hutton (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013)
- Moravian Church website: www.moravian.org

Table of Comparison

	<i>Moravians</i>	<i>Lutherans</i>
Teachings	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Accept major statements of faith of the early church as well as major confessions of Lutheran and Reformed traditions, including the Barmen Declaration of 1934, as valid expressions. 2. Emphasize Christ as the revelation of God. 3. Affirm the inspiration of scripture, but much latitude here in interpretation. 4. Practice baptism and holy communion, but define them only in biblical terms. Each believer interprets those terms. 5. Believe in the necessity of individual regeneration and in salvation through Christ. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Accept the creeds, the Augsburg Confession, and Luther's Small Catechism as basic summaries of the faith. Recognize the remainder of the <i>Book of Concord</i> as a valid interpretation of the faith of the church. 2. Same. 3. Accept the Bible as the written witness to God's revelation of saving action through Jesus Christ. 4. Practice baptism and holy communion as means of God's grace. Affirm the real presence of Christ in communion. 5. Teach that the baptized Christian lives in the covenant of his or her baptism, dying to sin and rising again to faith in Christ.
Type of Worship	Semi-liturgical. Liturgies are available for every type of need but are not compulsory. Celebrate the love feast.	Liturgical, following the classical form of the Western church.
Governance	"Confederal," with wide latitude given to congregations.	Interdependent congregational, regional, national, and global expressions of the church are characterized by democratic decision making, strong ecumenical relationships, elected leadership, and an ordained ministry.
Statistics	Membership: 38,672 Congregations: 163	