

Created in the Image of God: Affirming Our Shared Dignity

“God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them.”

—Genesis 1:27

*“What are humans that you are mindful of them[?] ...
You have crowned them with glory and honor.”*

—Hebrews 2:6-8

The Bible writes of one human family, honored and elevated through the image of God that each of us bears. As a Christian community, we are grieved to hear language about human beings that does not honor the deep love Christ holds for them or the *imago Dei* — the image of God — that each of them carries.

Drawing on ELCA social teaching, this resource is intended to equip communities to see all people through the lens of God’s love and grace and to recognize and respond when language fails to acknowledge all people’s God-given dignity.

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Shared Dignity: A Lutheran Perspective

ELCA social teaching is explicit about how we should view and treat others:

Concern for the well-being of others lies at the very heart of Christian faith (Matthew 22:36-40). Christians have a variety of social identifications through their nation of origin, race, ethnicity or political affiliation, but all Christians have a common identity as children of a loving creator who became vulnerable as Emmanuel, God with us. The One in whom there is no Jew or Greek (Galatians 3:28) teaches that we should treat all people in need as we would treat Christ among us (Matthew 25).

— ELCA social message “[Human Rights](#)” (2017)

Our social teaching also affirms that human dignity is inherent in each person; it cannot be granted, earned or taken away from any of us.

As Christ on the cross did not lose his dignity, but in fact revealed himself fully in vulnerability, every human who is being mistreated retains the image of God that confers dignity. A society should not deny a person's dignity for any reason. This is true even if that person has acted maliciously and treated others inhumanely. God's gift of dignity is immutable, indivisible and inseparable from our being.

—ELCA social message, “[Human Rights](#)” (2017)

One group of people who have frequently had their dignity denied is immigrants and those who have been forcibly displaced.

In 1998, the ELCA adopted a message on immigration that reiterated long-standing Lutheran commitments to both newcomers and just laws that serve the common good. Its core conviction was that ‘hospitality for the uprooted is a way to live out the biblical call to love the neighbor in response to God’s love in Jesus Christ.’ Two biblical references guided the message’s direction:

- ***‘The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God’*** (Leviticus 19:34)
- ***‘I was a stranger and you welcomed me’*** (Matthew 25:35).

In Jesus of Nazareth, the God who commands us to care for the vulnerable identifies with the human stranger — the person unknown and regarded with suspicion who stands on the receiving end of both welcome and hospitality and rejection and resentment.

—“[Toward Compassionate, Just, and Wise Immigration Reform](#),” ELCA social policy resolution (2009)

Because of these convictions, our faith compels us to speak up when our or our neighbors’ dignity is denied or disrespected¹⁵. This responsibility is laid out in excerpts from the social statement *Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All* (2025):

- “It is sin when civic or political power is used at the expense of others. One group’s self-interest cannot justify denying the humanity or dignity of others. The need for order does not justify subjugation, denial of power, marginalization, or tyranny” (Article 4).
- “A sense of God’s calling sharpens commitment to human dignity because we understand that all are created in God’s image. It awakens a sense of God’s biblical call for justice and peace” (Article 9).
- “This church has long affirmed that one means of discipleship involves civic participation as a prophetic presence. With Mary, the mother of Jesus, the church sings of God’s action to bring down the proud and lift up the lowly (Luke 1:51-53). The church hopes to follow Jesus, who boldly declared a calling to proclaim good news to the poor, release for the incarcerated, healing for the sick, and freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:18, Isaiah 42:7). The prophetic role envisions and points us toward a better future of well-being” (Article 16).
- “Such ministry may include exhorting civic leaders and institutions when they abuse those they are to serve or when they overreach their authority. This church says, with Martin Luther, that ‘to rebuke’ those in authority ‘through God’s Word spoken publicly, boldly and honestly’ is ‘not seditious’ but ‘a praiseworthy, noble, and ... particularly great service to God’” (Article 16).

? Question for reflection:

What other Scripture passages or church teaching come to mind when you think about honoring human dignity?

Recognizing Language That Dehumanizes

Dehumanizing language dishonors the dignity of human beings. It divides people into an “in-group” (us) and an “out-group” (them), often relying on crude generalizations or metaphors related to contamination or danger. Experts in violence and genocide — which is the most deliberate and systematic form of violence, aimed at eliminating an entire people or group — describe specific categories of dehumanizing language:

- Language that separates people into groups of “us” and “them,” assigning negative traits or motives to the group seen as “other.” The language is used to justify excursion or unequal treatment. (“Genetically superior/inferior”; “You can’t trust [X type of person]”; “They are corrupting our values.”)
- Language that treats people as less than human, equating them with animals, filth, contamination or disease. (“Animals,” “infestation,” “cancer,” “cesspool.”)
- Language that equates people with danger or disaster. (“An invasion,” “swarms of people,” “flooding our borders,” “They’re bringing crime and destruction.”)
- Language that assigns violence, criminality, corrupt values or other negative characteristics to a group of people just because of who they are or where they are from. (“Violent criminals”; “terrorists”; “People from [X country] don’t share our values.”)

This language is not harmless. It flattens and reduces a diverse group of people to negative characteristics, which can erode empathy and normalize inhumanity, overt discrimination and violence against entire groups of people. Such harmful and reductive terms impact not only immigrants to the United States but also U.S. citizens who may be profiled or stereotyped because of their race, ethnicity, heritage or language.

“The response to an infestation is typically to fortify our living spaces, ‘root out’ the unwelcome creatures, or, in the darkest corners of this metaphor’s implications, even ‘exterminate’ them. The chilling resonance of these metaphors with genocides and ethnic cleansings should send shivers down our collective spine. When political figures use these metaphors, they are not being colorful; they are activating parts of human and social psychology that tap into fear and disgust and justify extreme, inhumane actions.” — [Julie Sweetland](#), advisor at the frameworks institute

? Question for reflection:

Where have you heard dehumanizing language about immigrants in your community or another group of people?

Responding With Shared Dignity

How should we, as people of faith, respond when we hear language that dehumanizes people? We can follow Jesus' example by seeing and welcoming those whom society has cast out and by encouraging others to do the same.

One way to do so is to name dehumanizing language when you hear it, including terms that flatten human experience to stereotypes, generalizations and negative assumptions.

In conversation, we might interject with:

We can disagree about policy, but it hurts me to hear you refer to people with that language. I believe everyone, no matter where they're from or what they do, is a precious child of God / is made in the image of God. Can we agree to use that as our baseline?

One powerful way to combat dehumanizing rhetoric is by sharing personal stories. Too often, conversations about immigration happen without input from immigrants themselves — people who most personally experience the joys, hopes or pains stemming from immigration systems. Christians can confront dehumanizing language in conversation by inviting curiosity and empathy about immigrants' stories — including their own and those of their ancestors — and reminding others of nuance, complexity and breadth of experiences related to immigration:

***I see what you're saying. I wonder how a person at the border with their children would describe their own motivations/hopes.
That's one story. I know of many stories where that isn't the case.
For example ...***

Loving our neighbors in all their complexity means rejecting simplified narratives. People who migrate may experience violence or oppression, but we should avoid what Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes as the “single story” that defines them solely by the worst part of their lives. Immigrants are neither blameless saints nor dangerous others – immigrants are like all people, with individual experiences, hopes, fears and dreams.

A few years ago, I visited Mexico from the U.S. The political climate in the U.S. at the time was tense, and there were debates going on about immigration. And, as often happens in America, immigration became synonymous with Mexicans. There were endless stories of Mexicans as people who were fleeing the healthcare system, sneaking across the border, being arrested at the border, that sort of thing.

I remember walking around on my first day in Guadalajara, watching the people going to work, rolling up tortillas in the marketplace, smoking, laughing. I remember first feeling slight surprise. And then, I was overwhelmed with shame. I realized that I had been so immersed in the media coverage of Mexicans that they had become one thing in my mind, the abject immigrant. I had bought into the single story of Mexicans and I could not have been more ashamed of myself. ...

The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story. ...

The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar. ...

Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.

-Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story"

Over the next six and a half weeks, I found myself immersed daily in the love, beauty, resilience, and compassion of these women. ... In one small room, a world of possibilities unfolded: It transformed into a therapy space, a beauty salon, a hairstyling center, a Pilates studio, a medical center, a massage room, an interfaith temple, and an art studio all at once — without any tools or resources. ...

During limited times outside in the yard, I walked with many women, listening to their stories. Among us was a singer with almost a million followers, a talented violinist, a Pilates instructor, a visual arts teacher, a devoted mom, a loving grandmother, and a woman with a passion for arranging flowers. Someone's best friend. Someone's fiancée. Someone's wife. Someone's daughter. An aunt. A human rights activist. A human, like all of us, with a heart. And me, a very confused international doctoral student.

—Rümeysa Öztürk writes in Vanity Fair about her time in an ICE women's prison, highlighting fellow detainees' humanity and individuality.

Resources linked at the end of this document can offer additional support for holding hard conversations, sharing stories and upholding shared humanity.

? Question for reflection:

Where do you hear stories about immigration? Are there voices you may not be hearing?

? Question for reflection:

How does it feel to imagine these challenging conversations? What practice, support or other preparation would make you feel more confident in responding to dehumanizing language when you hear it?

For Christians, our identity in Christ as forgiven sinners undercuts polarization and urges love for every person as a creature of God who is not to be dominated and whose well-being we should try to improve. Our Christian identity encourages us to take seriously both our well-considered perspectives and the limitations of our knowledge, thoughtfulness, empathy, and goodwill. Our identity in Christ encourages a posture of prayer for those who disagree and careful listening to others whose well-considered perspectives may be quite different from our own.
—ELCA social statement Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All

Advocating for Shared Dignity

Sometimes elected officials use dehumanizing language in official communications, on social media or in remarks to reporters or at a town hall. This language from our elected leaders can make it seem acceptable and normal to talk about other human beings in this way, and it can set the stage for laws and policy that also do not recognize people's dignity. When we recognize and respond to this language, we can advocate for policies that honor the dignity of every person.

Reach out to ELCA's Witness in Society office at washingtonoffice@elca.org for advice and support for federal policy and advocacy. Below you can find Witness in Society resources and suggestions/ templates for different ways you can make your voice heard by your elected officials.

What You Can Do	How to Do It	Impact
Write to the office of your federal elected officials (two senators, one congressional representative)	Respond through an ELCA Action Alert link OR find an email address or form on your elected officials' websites	Staffers track these emails and report to the elected official.
Call the office of your federal elected officials	Look up the phone number on your elected official's website. Call ready to leave a succinct voicemail or to share your concerns directly with the staffer answering the phone.	Staffers track these calls and report to the elected official. Offices receive fewer phone calls than emails, which can make calls more impactful.
Schedule a meeting with the office of your federal elected officials	Meetings may be held in your representatives' in-district office(s) (check their website for the address) or in Washington, D.C. Meetings may also be held virtually. Meetings are usually with congressional staff, though you can request a meeting with the member of Congress themselves. See resources below for more details.	Meetings are the best way to get face time with policymakers and their staff. Review resources below on how to schedule these and what stories/requests to bring.

Meet or contact your state/local officials (state senators, state representatives, mayors, city council members, etc.)	Find contact information on your state officials' pages. Contact ELCA state public policy offices (SPPOs) or synods, if relevant for your state.	As with federal officials, state officials' staff track and report communication from constituents.
Write to your local newspaper or other publication	Review the newspaper's requirements for a letter to the editor (see "Writing a Letter to the Editor," below). Some newspapers may accept an opinion piece, though these take more effort to draft and pitch.	Getting your letter or opinion piece published can counter negative messages with a positive one that has a broad reach.

[This AMMPARO guide](#) provides guidance on how to communicate effectively with elected leaders. Among its points:

- **Establish shared values and appeal to shared humanity:** "As a Christian and Lutheran, my commitment to serving my community is rooted in God's love and call to serve our neighbors ..."
- **Include the community:** "We need to ensure we build communities where people from different incomes, beliefs, and backgrounds can live and work in dignity ..."
- **Focus on lived experiences:** "My family fled repression, eventually coming to the United States because of the religious freedom, opportunity, and liberty this land offered ..."
- **Focus on solutions:** "We need immigration reform that not only enforces the law and keeps communities safe but that also improves access to legal status, ensuring that immigrants and refugees can raise their families, attend worship, and work in dignity ..."
- **Call together a broad-based coalition:** "People of faith in this congregation, local businesses, schools, we all thrive when we work together."
- **Provide a call to action with specifics:** "We urge our elected representatives to come together to work for immigration reform and just policies ..."

Other ELCA Advocacy Resources:

- [ELCA Advocacy page](#)
- ["ELCA Advocacy Starter Kit Session 1 Guide: What Is Faith-Based Advocacy?"](#)
- ["ELCA Advocacy Starter Kit Session 2 Guide: How Do I Approach Policy Makers?"](#)
- [A guide to conducting in-district meetings with congressional offices in your state](#)
- ["Writing a Letter to the Editor"](#)
- ["ELCA Federal Policy Priorities for the 119th Congress"](#)
- [ELCA Advocacy locations map and list](#)

“When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the native-born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”

—Leviticus 19:33-34 72

Resources

References and Further Reading

- [“Towards Compassionate, Just, and Wise Immigration Reform”](#) (ELCA social message, 2009)
- [“Human Rights”](#) (ELCA social message, 2017)
- [“Words Create Worlds Reflection Guide”](#) (ELCA AMMPARO)
- [“Graceful Conversations”](#) (ELCA Lutheran Advocacy–Minnesota)
- [Statement on imago Dei](#) (ELCA Pacifica Synod)
- [Statement on the need to speak the truth](#) (ELCA Conference of Bishops 2024)
- [“How Metaphors Catalyze and Crystalize Anti-immigrant Sentiment and Policy”](#) (Julie Sweetland, FrameWorks)
- [“The Danger of a Single Story”](#) (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, TED Talk)
- [“‘Even God Cannot Hear Us Here’: What I Witnessed Inside an ICE Women’s Prison”](#) (Rümeysa Öztürk, *Vanity Fair*)
- [“A Letter From Bishops of the ELCA to the Church”](#) (2025)
- [“Bible Study: Faith in Action”](#) (ELCA)
- [FrameWorks Institute](#)
- [“Depolarizing Within”](#) (Braver Angels e-course)
- [“The LAPP Technique”](#) (Braver Angels)