

October 9, 2015

Dear members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada:

Grace and peace to you.

*'I was a stranger, and you welcomed me.'* (Matthew 25:25)

I am troubled by the recent tone of national debate regarding the right of Muslim women in Canada to choose to wear the niqab. At times the discourse, especially online, has been derogatory, prejudiced, and characterized by a suspicion or downright fear of the other in our midst. Such rhetoric has consequences.

Last week in Montreal a pregnant Muslim woman was knocked to the ground when two passers-by grabbed her by the hijab she was wearing. Some days later, a Toronto woman wearing a niqab was physically assaulted in front of her children. These are vivid and near-to-home examples of how easily hostile thoughts and words can morph into hostile acts, often directed at the most vulnerable. This demeans us all.

Behind these heated debates—and these veils—are individual human beings whose human dignity and human rights must be respected and protected. For Christians, human rights are grounded in the dignity accorded each human being by virtue of having been made in the image and likeness of their Creator.

Members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada affirm this in a variety of ways. Earlier this year our Church endorsed *Welcoming the Stranger*, a declaration of the Office of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees that includes a commitment that we “should treat the stranger to our community as we would like to be treated, and challenge intolerance.” When we affirm our baptism, our people vow “to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.”

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms names freedom of conscience and religion first among the “fundamental rights” of the people of this land. As Christians, we do not seek religious freedom that is denied to others. Rather, we support an inclusive society, open to all.

I call on the members of our church, our civic leaders, those currently seeking federal office, and all the citizens of this land to treat the strangers in our midst—and those whom we will welcome as refugees—as we would like to be treated, and to respect the dignity of every human being.

One way of challenging negative stereotypes of others from whom we differ is to get to know them personally, rather than to rely on caricatures that are sometimes generated by ulterior motives. I therefore also encourage everyone to seek out opportunities to meet for themselves their neighbours of other faiths and cultures, to do so in a spirit of openness and welcome, and in recognition of our common humanity.

This Thanksgiving, I invite all of our people to consider the richness of diversity which is Canada and to include prayers for those who suffer for their differences and for the whole human family with whom we share God's image and the fullness of God's creation.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, starting with a cross symbol and followed by the name 'Susan C. Johnson' in a cursive script.

The Rev. Susan C. Johnson  
National Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada