



Council on Christian Unity
Ecumenical office of Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

Disciples Interfaith Toolkit



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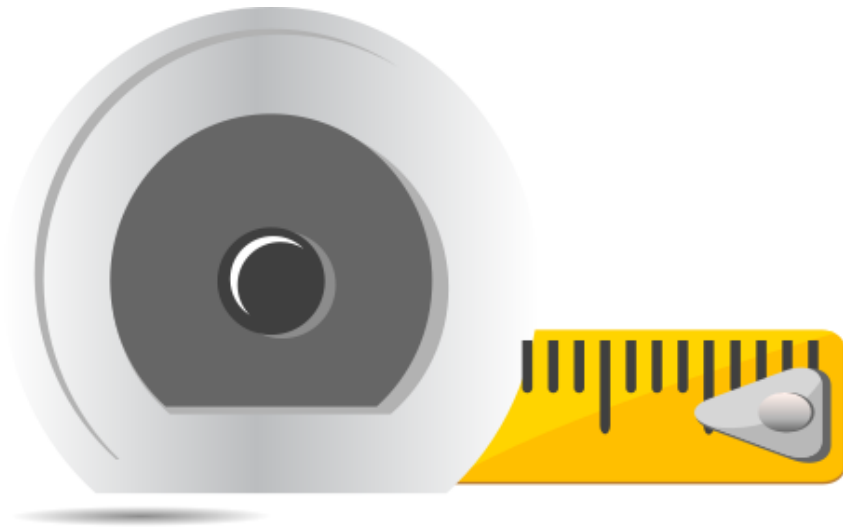
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SECTION 1

How to Get Started



Getting Started in Interfaith Relations



Finding Ourselves in Faithful Company

How have you become interested in interfaith relations? What drew your attention to the many religions of your neighbors?

There are many ways by which we become more engaged with our neighbors who follow religious traditions other than our own. Perhaps you have a new co-worker who is a Hindu. You may live in a dormitory with people of many different religious beliefs and practices. Perhaps, after several years of living on the same street, you have just learned that your neighbors are Muslims. You may have been invited to celebrate an occasion in the lives of Sikh friends. Maybe you have invited acquaintances of many different faiths to discuss an issue at your children's school.

Or, you might have decided that you just need to know more about people of other religions.

However you start, your interest is a gift — to your neighbors, and to yourself. In most cases, your desire to understand your neighbors and their faith traditions will be received with gratitude, and may well open the door to even deeper relationship. Your interest is also an invitation to yourself and others in your congregation, inviting you to new learning about your own faith.

Getting started in exploring other faiths or in building interfaith relationships may seem complicated or daunting. Like anything new, it will require you to learn new skills, and it will involve reaching out to people whose perspectives are different from yours. A little courage is needed, but the interest and curiosity you already have put you well on your way!

Begin a relationship

Beginning is as easy as picking up the phone or sending an email. Remember that taking the initiative is the only way to be sure that there is a possibility of developing your relationship — waiting for someone else to do it won't work! You may be surprised about how often your neighbor was thinking the same thing — but perhaps didn't quite know how to ask.

Be prepared to propose something specific. You may want to start by sharing a meal at your church, with a specific topic for discussion. You may choose to discuss a particular community concern that you feel is relevant for both you and your partner. You may invite your partner to a shared task in the neighborhood. A specific invitation will be easier to respond to than an open-ended request for "relationship."

Start with realistic and time-structured expectations. Place some timelines on your activity so that both you and your partners can renegotiate your activity without embarrassment. For example, rather than propose an "open ended" dialogue or book study, propose a certain number of sessions. That way, when you come to the end of what you initially proposed, you can feel good about having done what you set out to do (if you will bring your activity to an end), or make an intentional decision to continue with a next step.

Be ready to respond and adapt what you are proposing. Remember that, as a Christian, sometimes you will be perceived as a part of the "dominant" culture even if you don't experience yourself or your church in that way. Be sensitive to the implications of this dynamic — which can include a perceived power in the relationship — as you go about your activity. Taking the initiative will send an important message that you believe that relationships between people of faith, no matter the size or prominence of the community, are important to you and for society. Being ready to hear and respond to changes that may be proposed regarding what you might do, or how you might begin, allows you to step into more equal partnership.

Learn about your partner's traditions – and your own

Engaging people of other faith traditions almost always results in knowing or understanding your own tradition better, because it requires you to explain your traditions and perspectives in ways that you don't often have to do.

Just as your partners will bring some assumptions about who you are to the relationship, you will also bring assumptions about your partners — even if you're not aware of it! Be very careful to ask questions rather than presume the answers. Allow your partners to tell you what they believe, what they think, and what is important to them rather than assuming you

know. This will communicate respect and a genuine interest that will have a long-lasting impact on the relationship. Ask for the same opportunity to tell your story as well.

Share stories of faith

It's easy to think that in order to share our traditions, we must be trained theologians. Not true!

One of the easiest ways to learn about each other's faith traditions is to offer stories of faith as we experience it. This will allow you to share concrete examples of lived faith rather than abstract perspectives on a religious tradition. Keep it personal — in other words, use the "first person" as you describe your own faith, rather than trying to speak for the faith as a whole. That will help you resist generalizing about your own or another's tradition. Even those in your own church may find that they have a very different perspective from yours, and speaking for yourself will help others, who may see things differently, offer their own understanding and experience.

Sharing stories also helps "keep it real" — in other words, it will help you avoid the temptation to become too theoretical and remove your faith from your experience. This will help you avoid comparing an "idealized" version of your own faith to a "lived" experience of someone else's. This is critical for good dialogue.

Cooperate to address common concerns

Just as important as *dialogue* about your traditions is your commitment, as people of faith, to *work* together on issues and projects of shared concern. These two activities are not mutually exclusive, but rather are of mutual benefit. Whether you begin with dialogue or with shared activity will depend on the nature of your community, your specific interests, and the desire of your partners — there is no generic "right" way!

Even if you take the initiative to propose a common project with your partners of another religion, be sure that you make a final decision together, and that what you will work on together is mutually affirmed. Sometimes projects that seem easy at the outset will encounter bumps in the road as you continue — but if there has been a strong mutual commitment, you will have a much better chance of weathering whatever challenges you face.

Cooperative activity, especially those projects which address shared concerns, does more than accomplish good work. It serves as a witness to the wider community that people of faith, even those who are very different and who may disagree on a variety of issues, can take responsibility to come together for the health of the communities we share.

Explore what you have in common-and how you are different

One of the hardest things to do when developing an interfaith relationship is to successfully navigate the transition from the first stage of enthusiastic participation (and excitement about what you discover you have in common), to the second stage, in which you begin to realize that your differences are also real — and some of them will be deep! This is often the moment when people begin to worry about how to maintain a relationship that may at times include some tension.

The best approach is to find honest, safe and careful ways to discuss not only those things that you have in common but also those areas where you differ. Your partner knows you are different — and ignoring it will not change that! In fact, when partners are willing to acknowledge both the commonalities and the differences equally, they come to trust each other more. Minimizing or avoiding the differences will cause your partner to wonder how genuine your presentation of yourself and your beliefs is, and this will diminish trust over time.

So, don't be afraid to discuss your differences, using ground rules that will create a safe environment to share your perspectives either about faith or community concerns.

Act on what you are learning

It is important to note that relationships are of value even if there is no tangible, concrete "outcome" from them. Christians are compelled by faith to be in relationship to all those created by God, and there need not be any specific agenda for these relationships.

Acting on what you learn, however, can be important, and can take many forms. You may find that what you learn about your partner causes you to be more careful about, or sensitive to, certain kinds of language, either in worship or outside. You may discover a particular issue that is of real concern to your partner about which you had no previous knowledge, and about which you feel compelled to make a community witness. You may decide that your relationship is important and want to share the experience with other congregations in your neighborhood or denomination, and in that way make a witness to its value for others as well.

However you take action as a result of your partnership, remember that you will be providing an example for others — both those who already engage in interfaith relations and those who have not yet considered it.

Reflect on your experiences along the way

One of the most important things you can do as you embark on

a new relationship is evaluate what you are learning. What has surprised you? What has caused you concern? What is easier (or harder) than you expected? What more do you need to learn to take the next step? How will you deepen the relationship, and your knowledge? While it's important to do this with your own church family, also consider such evaluation with your partner. You may be surprised what you are both learning!

Over time, it is also critical that you evaluate your motivation for your interfaith activity. What guided you in the beginning may change over time, and if you are not alert to those shifts, you may find your relationship changing but not know why. Trust your partner enough to work through these changes with them.

Deal honestly with responses from other Christians

It is likely, as you embark on interfaith collaboration or dialogue, that you will encounter diverse reactions from the wider Christian community. Some will be inspired by your witness and may ask for help in getting started themselves. Others may respond less favorably, and might even challenge the validity of your activity based on their beliefs about people of other religions and about interfaith relations.

Be honest with Christian colleagues about why you feel it is important to engage in interfaith relations in the way that you are, and remain non-defensive about differing views. This subject is one about which Christians hold many different perspectives, and it is very important that we listen to each other carefully.

If you know that others disagree with your approach or your activities, don't avoid engaging them in a dialogue about interfaith relations! Discuss things like how a Christian should relate to people of other religions, the value of interfaith collaboration, the role of witness and conversion, or any other topic. Facing your disagreements may deepen your Christian relationship as both of explain your beliefs and convictions to each other. Stand firm in your convictions, but be open to what you can learn from Christians whose perspectives are very different from your own.

Strategies for Living Together as Friends

Twenty-six people spent a week together at the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research in Collegeville, MN, in each of two summers (1999 and 2000), exploring Living Faithfully in the United States Today. They were women and men of six religious traditions-Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, and Native American Americans of diverse ethnic backgrounds -African, European, Japanese, Mexican, Native, Palestinian, South and Southeast Asian. Many issues were discussed, and the following ideas for working together were developed.



A strategy for a common project

We talked about one very specific model for building mutually supporting interreligious communities, one that is goal oriented and focuses on undertaking a common project. In brief, it involves five steps.

- i. Initially; get the "lay of the land." What is the community like? Who lives there? How does its geographical location affect its life? Who are the leaders? Who controls community resources, and how does the community operate?
- ii. Define the urgent issues based on widely-held priorities, community sensitivities, long- and short-term needs, and select one or two issues to work on.
- iii. Develop a strategic plan that includes appropriate goals and steps for reaching them, procedures, communication methods and networks, milestones which will demonstrate progress, and other measures of success/failure.
- iv. Plunge in, work faithfully together on the proposed project, make the necessary compromises, and meet the challenges that arise. Be sure that those working together stay connected to share stories, frustrations, updates, encouragement.
- v. Complete and evaluate the project. What has changed? What are the resulting attitudes, realities? What has been accomplished? What remains to be done? Celebrate project completion and appropriate closure.

More general strategies

We also identified more general strategies that can be helpful in addressing divisive issues or problems that arise in the course of building supporting relationships among our religious traditions.

- A. Recognize that strategies to address issues should vary according to context. Some of us live in a small rural parish or temple, others in large urban areas. The issues will differ, as will the ways of addressing them.

- B. Recognize that there are many ways of experiencing another's religious tradition: tell stories, invite one another to services and rituals, discuss ideas and practices. Make room for the experiential as well as the intellectual.
- C. Focus on how a person of faith lives his/her life, rather than engaging in debates or arguments about the truths on which our lives are based.
- D. Media often ask a religious leader or an inter-religious organization, "What is your position on such and such an issue?" When this occurs, one might consider if it would be helpful to show a range of the views existing within a community on the issue, not all of which may be in harmony with one another. One might also consider if it is always necessary to seek (or to have) consensus on issues.
- E. Get to know one another as people—build relationships first. An initial focus on theological or philosophical issues may bring premature stalemate. It is better to enable personal relationships first. There is a need for institutional relationships, and for people to come out of their institutions and get to know each other as people. Personal relationship can be most useful in bringing religious leaders together to solve problems, or in generating a communitywide strategy.
- F. Maintain noble silence. Sometimes silence is the best policy, especially when there is a lot of anger around a particular issue or situation. However, we are not advising that anyone refrain from speaking out in the face of obvious injustice. We recognize that sometimes issues emerge in an inter-religious context that must be dealt with before any other progress can be made.
- G. Announce each other's events and observances as a concrete way of supporting each other.
- H. Respect each other, even if you have questions about one another's practices or beliefs. It is always right to discuss issues, and sometimes necessary to raise concerns. But do not encourage disrespectful remarks about another as a person because of her or his religious choices. Engaging in such personal attacks is hurtful and is a form of unfaithfulness.

- I. Attend to the inter-relations between religion and culture. Give significant and sufficient attention to a group's cultural practices and their inter-relation with religious observance. Pay attention to family ties within ethnic communities, and how this relates to their religious practice.
- J. In some cases it may be helpful to put community first, before religious practice—to recognize that we are part of the same community, though we may practice different religions. Especially in cases when the aim is to address a particular community problem, difference in religious belief, styles of prayer, ways of practice, or in positions on divisive issues are much less important than tending to the community in which we all live.
- K. We have noted that in all of our traditions institutional life can become very narrow in its focus on the particularity of our own tradition or branch of a tradition. Programs often focus on building up the life of a particular denomination, sect, or way within a tradition. To foster mutually supporting relationships among our religious traditions, it will be important to make engaging in a broader community an integral part of the programming of our institutions.
- L. Make a list of the most common incidents or events that encourage people to enter into inter-religious conversation - for instance, when a person of one culture or religion moves into a neighborhood where the majority is of another religion or culture; interfaith marriage; etc. Develop strategies for how you can respond.
- M. Tailor your approaches to inter-religious situations so that they are sensitive to the feelings and mores of the people you are trying to serve.
- N. Do not be afraid to develop supporting relationships of faith, and to share spiritual support with one another, across lines of religious tradition.

Guidelines for Interfaith Dialogue



It is Christian faith in the triune God—Creator of all humankind, Redeemer in Jesus Christ, revealing and renewing Spirit—which calls us Christians to human relationship with our many neighbors. Such relationship includes dialogue: witnessing to our deepest convictions and listening to those of our neighbors. It is Christian faith which sets us free to be open to the faiths of others, to risk, to trust, and to be vulnerable. In dialogue, conviction and openness are held in balance.

In a world in which Christians have many neighbors, dialogue is not only an activity of meetings and conferences. It is also a way of living out Christian faith in relationship and commitment to those neighbors with whom Christians share towns, cities, nations, and the earth as a whole. This in no way replaces or limits our Christian obligation to witness, as partners enter into dialogue with their respective commitments.

Neighbors may be partners in common social, economic, and political crises and quests; companions in intellectual and spiritual exploration; or, literally, the people next door. In some places, Christians and the church as an institution are in positions of power and influence, and their neighbors are without power. In other places it is the Christians who are powerless. There are also situations of tension and conflict where dialogue may not be possible or opportunities very limited. In many places people of different living faiths interact not only with each other but also with people of various ideologies. The emergence of new religious groups has brought new dimensions and tensions to interreligious relationships.

* Churches should seek ways in which Christian communities can enter into dialogue with their neighbors of different faiths and ideologies. They should also discover ways of responding to similar initiatives by their neighbors.

* Dialogues should normally be planned together. They may well focus on particular issues: theological or religious, political or social.

* Partners in dialogue should take stock of the religious, cultural and ideological diversity of their local situations. Only by being alert both to the particular areas of tension and discrimination and to the particular opportunities for conversation and cooperation in their own context will Christians and their neighbors be able to create the conditions for dialogue. They should be especially alert to infringements of the basic human rights of religious, cultural, or ideological minority groups.

* Partners in dialogue should be free to define themselves. One of the functions of dialogue is to allow participants to describe and witness to their faith in their own terms. Self-serving descriptions of other people's faith are one of the roots of prejudice, stereotyping, and condescension. It should be recognized by partners in dialogue that any religion or ideology claiming universality will also have its own interpretations of other religions and ideologies as part of its own self-understanding. Dialogue gives an opportunity for a mutual questioning of the understandings partners have about themselves and others.

* Dialogue should generate educational efforts in the community. In many cases Christians must take the initiative in education in order to restore the distorted image of neighbors that may already exist in their communities. Even where Christians do not live in close contact with people of various religious traditions, they should take seriously the responsibility to learn.

* Dialogue is most vital when its participants actually share their lives together. Where people of different faiths share common activities, intellectual interests, and spiritual quests, dialogue can be related to the whole of life and can become a style of living-in-relationship. The person who asks a neighbor of another faith to explain the meaning of a custom or festival has actually taken the first step in dialogue. Of course, dialogue between long-term neighbors may be frustrated by deeply ingrained suspicions, and men and women will have to reckon with the barriers between their present communities.

* Dialogue should be pursued by sharing in common enterprises in community. In the search for a just community of humankind, Christians and their neighbors will be able to help each other break out of cultural, educational, political, and social isolation in order to realize a more participatory society. It may well be that such common enterprises will generate interreligious committees.

* Partners in dialogue should be aware of their ideological commitments. Dialogue may begin as a kind of "internal dialogue," seeking to bring to explicit reflection and discussion issues in the encounter of the gospel with the ideological factors in various communities where Christians find themselves and with the ideological assumptions of Christians themselves.

* Partners in dialogue should be aware of cultural loyalties. Dialogue and sensitivity to neighbors need to be developed in the area of relating Christian faith to cultures. A culture should

not be romanticized nor made into a false absolute but it may often challenge and enrich the expression of the Christian faith.

* Dialogues will raise the question of sharing in celebrations, rituals, worship, and meditation. Human communities draw together, express, and renew themselves in ritual and worship. Dialogue presumes an attitude of respect for the ritual expressions of the neighbors' community. Dialogue, at times, includes extending and accepting invitations to visit each other as guests and observers in family and community rituals, ceremonies, and festivals. Working together in common activities or visiting homes and festivals will eventually raise the very difficult and important question of fuller sharing in common prayer, worship, or meditation. Whether or not any such activities are undertaken, dialogue partners will want to face squarely the issues raised, sensitive to one another's integrity and fully realizing the assumptions and implications of what is done or not done.

* Dialogue should be planned and undertaken ecumenically whenever possible. Churches should move forward in planning for dialogue in cooperation with one another.

Abridged from the World Council of Churches, *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*, used with permission.

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"The Church of Jesus Christ is the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all of humanity."

—*Book of Order*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), G-3.0200

"True witness follows Jesus Christ in respecting and affirming the uniqueness and freedom of others."

"The Spirit of God is constantly at work in ways that pass human understanding and in places that to us are least expected. In entering into a relationship of dialogue with others, therefore, Christians seek to discern the unsearchable riches of God and the way [God] deals with humanity."

"Witness cannot be a one-way process, but of necessity is two-way; in it Christians become aware of some of the deepest convictions of their neighbors. It is also the time in which, within a spirit of openness and trust, Christians are able to bear authentic witness, giving an account of their commitment to the Christ, who calls all persons to himself."

—*Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation*



Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World

Recommendations for Conduct

World Council of Churches
Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue
World Evangelical Alliance

Preamble

Mission belongs to the very being of the church. Proclaiming the word of God and witnessing to the world is essential for every Christian. At the same time, it is necessary to do so according to gospel principles, with full respect and love for all human beings.

Aware of the tensions between people and communities of different religious convictions and the varied interpretations of Christian witness, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID), the World Council of Churches (WCC) and, at the invitation of the WCC, the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), met during a period of 5 years to reflect and produce this document to serve as a set of recommendations for conduct on Christian witness around the world. This document does not intend to be a theological statement on mission but to address practical issues associated with Christian witness in a multi-religious world.

The purpose of this document is to encourage churches, church councils and mission agencies to reflect on their current practices and to use the recommendations in this document to prepare, where appropriate, their own guidelines for their witness and mission among those of different religions and among those who do not profess any particular religion. It is hoped that Christians across the world will study this document in the light of their own practices in witnessing to their faith in Christ, both by word and deed.

A basis for Christian witness

1. For Christians it is a privilege and joy to give an accounting for the hope that is within them and to do so with gentleness and respect (cf. 1 Peter 3:15).
2. Jesus Christ is the supreme witness (cf. John 18:37). Christian witness is always a sharing in his witness, which takes the form of proclamation of the kingdom, service to neighbour and the total gift of self even if that act of giving leads to the cross. Just as the Father sent the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit, so believers are sent in mission to witness in word and action to the love of the triune God.
3. The example and teaching of Jesus Christ and of the early church must be the guides for Christian mission. For two millennia Christians have sought to follow Christ's way by sharing the good news of God's kingdom (cf. Luke 4:16-20).
4. Christian witness in a pluralistic world includes engaging in dialogue with people of different religions and cultures (cf. Acts 17:22-28).

5. In some contexts, living and proclaiming the gospel is difficult, hindered or even prohibited, yet Christians are commissioned by Christ to continue faithfully in solidarity with one another in their witness to him (cf. Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:14-18; Luke 24:44-48; John 20:21; Acts 1:8).
6. If Christians engage in inappropriate methods of exercising mission by resorting to deception and coercive means, they betray the gospel and may cause suffering to others. Such departures call for repentance and remind us of our need for God's continuing grace (cf. Romans 3:23).
7. Christians affirm that while it is their responsibility to witness to Christ, conversion is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 16:7-9; Acts 10:44-47). They recognize that the Spirit blows where the Spirit wills in ways over which no human being has control (cf. John 3:8).

Principles

Christians are called to adhere to the following principles as they seek to fulfil Christ's commission in an appropriate manner, particularly within interreligious contexts.

1. **Acting in God's love.** Christians believe that God is the source of all love and, accordingly, in their witness they are called to live lives of love and to love their neighbour as themselves (cf. Matthew 22:34-40; John 14:15).
2. **Imitating Jesus Christ.** In all aspects of life, and especially in their witness, Christians are called to follow the example and teachings of Jesus Christ, sharing his love, giving glory and honour to God the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 20:21-23).
3. **Christian virtues.** Christians are called to conduct themselves with integrity, charity, compassion and humility, and to overcome all arrogance, condescension and disparagement (cf. Galatians 5:22).
4. **Acts of service and justice.** Christians are called to act justly and to love tenderly (cf. Micah 6:8). They are further called to serve others and in so doing to recognize Christ in the least of their sisters and brothers (cf. Matthew 25:45). Acts of service, such as providing education, health care, relief services and acts of justice and advocacy are an integral part of witnessing to the gospel. The exploitation of situations of poverty and need has no place in Christian outreach. Christians should denounce and refrain from offering all forms of allurements, including financial incentives and rewards, in their acts of service.
5. **Discernment in ministries of healing.** As an integral part of their witness to the gospel, Christians exercise ministries of healing. They are called to exercise

discernment as they carry out these ministries, fully respecting human dignity and ensuring that the vulnerability of people and their need for healing are not exploited.

6. **Rejection of violence.** Christians are called to reject all forms of violence, even psychological or social, including the abuse of power in their witness. They also reject violence, unjust discrimination or repression by any religious or secular authority, including the violation or destruction of places of worship, sacred symbols or texts.
7. **Freedom of religion and belief.** Religious freedom including the right to publicly profess, practice, propagate and change one's religion flows from the very dignity of the human person which is grounded in the creation of all human beings in the image and likeness of God (cf. Genesis 1:26). Thus, all human beings have equal rights and responsibilities. Where any religion is instrumentalized for political ends, or where religious persecution occurs, Christians are called to engage in a prophetic witness denouncing such actions.
8. **Mutual respect and solidarity.** Christians are called to commit themselves to work with all people in mutual respect, promoting together justice, peace and the common good. Interreligious cooperation is an essential dimension of such commitment.
9. **Respect for all people.** Christians recognize that the gospel both challenges and enriches cultures. Even when the gospel challenges certain aspects of cultures, Christians are called to respect all people. Christians are also called to discern elements in their own cultures that are challenged by the gospel.
10. **Renouncing false witness.** Christians are to speak sincerely and respectfully; they are to listen in order to learn about and understand others' beliefs and practices, and are encouraged to acknowledge and appreciate what is true and good in them. Any comment or critical approach should be made in a spirit of mutual respect, making sure not to bear false witness concerning other religions.
11. **Ensuring personal discernment.** Christians are to acknowledge that changing one's religion is a decisive step that must be accompanied by sufficient time for adequate reflection and preparation, through a process ensuring full personal freedom.
12. **Building interreligious relationships.** Christians should continue to build relationships of respect and trust with people of different religions so as to facilitate deeper mutual understanding, reconciliation and cooperation for the common good.

Recommendations

The Third Consultation organized by the World Council of Churches and the PCID of the Holy See in collaboration with World Evangelical Alliance with participation from the largest Christian families of faith (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Evangelical and Pentecostal), having acted in a spirit of ecumenical cooperation to prepare this document for consideration by churches, national and regional confessional bodies and mission organizations, and especially those working in interreligious contexts, recommends that these bodies:

1. ***study*** the issues set out in this document and where appropriate formulate guidelines for conduct regarding Christian witness applicable to their particular contexts. Where possible this should be done ecumenically, and in consultation with representatives of other religions.
2. ***build*** relationships of respect and trust with people of all religions, in particular at institutional levels between churches and other religious communities, engaging in on-going interreligious dialogue as part of their Christian commitment. In certain contexts, where years of tension and conflict have created deep suspicions and breaches of trust between and among communities, interreligious dialogue can provide new opportunities for resolving conflicts, restoring justice, healing of memories, reconciliation and peace-building.
3. ***encourage*** Christians to strengthen their own religious identity and faith while deepening their knowledge and understanding of different religions, and to do so also taking into account the perspectives of the adherents of those religions. Christians should avoid misrepresenting the beliefs and practices of people of different religions.
4. ***cooperate*** with other religious communities engaging in interreligious advocacy towards justice and the common good and, wherever possible, standing together in solidarity with people who are in situations of conflict.
5. ***call*** on their governments to ensure that freedom of religion is properly and comprehensively respected, recognizing that in many countries religious institutions and persons are inhibited from exercising their mission.
6. ***pray*** for their neighbours and their well-being, recognizing that prayer is integral to who we are and what we do, as well as to Christ's mission.

Appendix: Background to the document

1. In today's world there is increasing collaboration among Christians and between Christians and followers of different religions. The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) of the Holy See and the World Council of Churches' Programme on Interreligious Dialogue and Co-operation (WCC-IRDC) have a history of such collaboration. Examples of themes on which the PCID/WCC-IRDC have collaborated in the past are: Interreligious Marriage (1994-1997), Interreligious Prayer (1997-1998) and African Religiosity (2000-2004). This document is a result of their work together.
2. There are increasing interreligious tensions in the world today, including violence and the loss of human life. Politics, economics and other factors play a role in these tensions. Christians too are sometimes involved in these conflicts, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, either as those who are persecuted or as those participating in violence. In response to this the PCID and WCC-IRDC decided to address the issues involved in a joint process towards producing shared recommendations for conduct on Christian witness. The WCC-IRDC invited the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) to participate in this process, and they have gladly done so.
3. Initially two consultations were held: the first, in Lariano, Italy, in May 2006, was entitled "Assessing the Reality" where representatives of different religions shared their views and experiences on the question of conversion. A statement from the consultation reads in part: "We affirm that, while everyone has a right to invite others to an understanding of their faith, it should not be exercised by violating others' rights and religious sensibilities. Freedom of religion enjoins upon all of us the equally non-negotiable responsibility to respect faiths other than our own, and never to denigrate, vilify or misrepresent them for the purpose of affirming superiority of our faith."
4. The second, an inter-Christian consultation, was held in Toulouse, France, in August 2007, to reflect on these same issues. Questions on Family and Community, Respect for Others, Economy, Marketing and Competition, and Violence and Politics were thoroughly discussed. The pastoral and missionary issues around these topics became the background for theological reflection and for the principles developed in this document. Each issue is important in its own right and deserves more attention that can be given in these recommendations.
5. The participants of the third (inter-Christian) consultation met in Bangkok, Thailand, from 25-28, January, 2011 and finalized this document.

Frequently Encountered Challenges in Interfaith Relationships

Often, once you begin a relationship with people of other faith traditions, unexpected issues, obstacles or questions arise. These can appear suddenly or slowly, and may manifest themselves in subtle changes of behavior or increased awkwardness, or may be clearly communicated. Such issues or obstacles can have their origin in the dynamics of the relationship, or in the reactions and responses of your own community or the community you are engaging. Here are some guidelines to help you on your way.

Relational Issues

Can we do something besides compare our religions?

A series of programs in which a scholar or religious leader of each tradition explains the tradition's view of a topic, such as death, or revelation, or medical ethics, can become stale or limiting for many participants. It becomes clear that our different doctrines and belief systems have similarities and differences, and yet the interesting comparisons seem distant, or even distancing, and your relationship-building seems in danger of becoming only an abstract exercise.

When religious ideas are considered with too little attention to their embodiment in life, or with too little time for participants to form human relationships, relationships can threaten to stall. Engaging in inter-religious relations is not an abstract exercise in which we stand apart from and forensically "examine" the other as if we were involved in a dissection. To engage in interfaith relations is to *encounter and engage* the people who embody another tradition, and another way of relating to the holy. It is to become vulnerable and to search humbly to see among them the God who we know created and loves all people.

While doctrines or belief systems can appear to be at odds with each other, as if allowing no channel for reconciliation, *people* in relationship to one another often find a path. Though also a matter of scholarly and professional vocation, interfaith relationships are first and foremost about people of faith relating to people of faith – not about beliefs relating to beliefs. *"It's all about relationship..."*

Is there a right way to "engage" in inter-religious relations?

There are countless ways to engage in interfaith relationships. And yet vigorous discussions, even arguments, often arise among those working to build relationships, in an attempt to identify the best way forward. It is tempting to claim the value of one option over another, but this is often a mistake. The best way to engage for you and your congregation is better determined by giving careful attention to your specific setting and its history, your partner religious community, and the commitments of the people involved.

Which is better: dialogue or collaboration?

Engagement often takes one or both of two forms: joining together in cooperative activity in the community, and intentional dialogue between communities of faith. Some who have convened long-standing dialogue groups may see interfaith cooperative activity as important but “superficial,” because the “real” understanding only comes when you risk enough to discuss important issues. Others believe that dialogue should only be conducted as a tool to help us work together as partners in our communities. They see the differences and difficulties that often emerge in dialogue as unhelpful distractions to collaborative community efforts in which there is often little or no impediment to partnership.

Both dialogue and collaborative projects are important, and both contribute not only to understanding but also to healthy community. Both also have limitations.

It is true that groups with very different religious commitments or ideological disagreements frequently can find common cause in public policy or community development efforts. Collaborative efforts in such cases can soften long-standing avoidance of one another, and lower real or imagined barriers. Too much focus on the religious or ideological differences between us can, over time, limit our imagination about what is good for the health of our separate communities, and possible in terms of relationship between us. Many describe their ability to weather political or religious crises to be a result of long-standing collaborative working relationships.

But time and again we also experience that collaborative efforts alone can mask or avoid very serious differences that can fester if unattended. A lack of engagement in dialogue about such matters will perpetuate misperceptions and caricatures. Sometimes it is actually the absence of deeper understanding between our religious traditions that causes apparently strong working relationships to falter. Partners suddenly discover they don’t know as much about each other as they thought they did, and what were believed to be strong bonds suddenly feel more fragile than imagined.

We got started in this interfaith relationship to deal with a particular crisis. What do we do now?

Crises (such as the events of September 11, 2001, an incident of violence or vandalism in a neighborhood, or a disagreement about how to provide for the needs of a religious minority group in the local high school) often open the way to inter-religious relationships. But while crises often precipitate interfaith engagement, they are not usually the best settings in which to develop interfaith relationships. In the context of a local, national, or international crisis the pressure is very high, what is at stake can feel daunting, and all communities are usually less willing to take sustained risks. If possible, seek to build relationships *before* a crisis. If you can do this, you will have relationships and a history together to rely on in a difficult time.

Many issues and concerns will be in your mind as you consider an interfaith relationship. What’s important is that you choose a starting activity that makes sense to you and your partner based on mutual interest or shared concerns. Where you start is only the beginning! See “Strategies for living together as friends” in this toolkit for suggestions.

How is it best to manage serious differences once interfaith dialogue has begun?

Any relationship of length and depth will at some point experience tension and disagreement. This often happens when groups of differing religious tradition that have engaged in collaborative activity together decide it is time to enter into more formal, intentional dialogue for deeper understanding. Suddenly people who have seemed comfortable and familiar colleagues become dialogue partners with whom you encounter significant and sometimes uncomfortable difference. As with any relationship, a dialogue relationship requires time to mature and for commitment to deepen. There are some important, tried-and-true “basics” to keep in mind:

First, before you begin, remind yourself of your motivations for entering into relationship. Most of us will find more than one impulse. Sometimes it is because you seek religious understanding. Sometimes there are community tensions which require a process of reconciliation. At other times it may simply be that common activities have given all of you the desire to go deeper in relationship. Being aware of what drew you to the relationship in the first place will make you a better dialogue participant because you will know what motivates you and you will be, even without trying, a more transparent partner.

Second, know that your specific identity as a Christian is important both to you and to your partner. It is tempting, when a relationship has developed enough to expose difference or disagreement, for partners to want to minimize or even eliminate these differences for the sake of a comfortable conversation.

Many Christians who begin to develop interfaith relationships have an appropriate anxiety about proselytizing, and want to avoid heavy-handed, manipulative testimony to the faith. Often this is the case because Christians are acutely aware of some of the harmful ways “Jesus” and the message of the gospel has been used to convert through coercion. This same instinct, however, sometimes leads us to want to disguise our particularity – that is, our understanding of who Jesus is and our own faith and beliefs – and eliminate them from interfaith dialogue altogether. While that impulse is understandable, it often confuses our dialogue partners. It is not uncommon for a partner of another faith tradition to ask, long into the dialogue, why their Christian partner has not mentioned Jesus! Our partners of other religious traditions bring their distinctive witness into the conversation with full integrity, and expect that we will do the same.

Our partners are not helped to understand the God of love that Christians know incarnate in Jesus if we never speak of him, and are not helped to understand the Christianity we embrace if we focus only on those things about which we have no difference or disagreement as people of faith. Also, if your dialogue partners feel you are keeping things from them, this will undermine their ability to trust you – even if what you withhold is done with good intention.

Third, assume that your dialogue partner is as capable as you are to think clearly and carefully. This is critical for those moments when differences or disagreements surface. If your partners believe you respect their ability to state positions and perspectives with care and maturity, navigating the waters of disagreement will be much easier. If, on the other hand, you respond to disagreement with an attitude, even implicit, that communicates “you wouldn’t be saying that if

you were more educated, mature, or rational,” the dialogue will end before it begins, and the relationship will be difficult to maintain.

There is a *very* fine line between, on the one hand, presenting information you feel will clarify your perspective and enhance the dialogue, and, on the other hand, implicitly communicating an assumption that your disagreements are a result of your partner’s ignorance or lack of education. Any important relationship experiences serious disagreement over time, and it will not be healthy if your partner does not feel able to state disagreement without being told, explicitly or implicitly, that they would see it like you do if they simply had better or more sophisticated information. That posture communicates disrespect, and will make the partner less willing to take risks of honesty. It creates, over time, anger and resentment that blocks relationship. As relational partners, you come with different background and experiences, which inform your perspectives. Inundating people with “information” does not guarantee a change in perspective or elimination of disagreement, but will nearly *always* guarantee feelings of disrespect and distrust.

Fourth, resist comparing another’s “worst” to your “best.” This principle is critical in inter-religious relationships. All of our traditions present both historical and current examples of mistakes, flawed leadership, and inconsistency. It is very tempting, especially when you encounter disagreement, to place another tradition’s failings under a microscope and compare them unfavorably to the ideal rendition of your own tradition – sometimes only found in theology books! It is a human but not helpful impulse in any dialogue context.

Fifth, listen. It is so easy for dialogue participants to spend the time during which another is speaking to formulate their own answers to the question, or a response or “rebuttal” to the speaker. Through poor listening it is easy to miss many opportunities to hear and begin to appreciate connections that may make disagreements and differences easier to understand. In some cases, good listening can even reveal what appeared to be a difference as no more than a misunderstanding. And in those inevitable instances where differences and disagreements will remain no matter how long you dialogue, deep listening can enable insights to help both of you learn to live with it.

Finally, keep an open mind. No matter how hard we try, each of us comes to a relationship with some preconceived notions. This is normal. Try hard to be open to what the partner has to say. And try hard to avoid the assumption that you know the answer – or that you already know what you feel about something – before you begin the conversation. Sometimes Christians fear that if they “change” through the course of a relationship they will suddenly find their Christian commitment compromised. Erosion of one’s own religious commitments is not a byproduct of healthy dialogue! When we seek honest relationship and understanding, it is very often the case that we come to a deeper understanding of ourselves and a stronger commitment to our own faith. Deep commitment to one’s own tradition and strong appreciation of another’s are not mutually exclusive.

Though my congregation has maintained relationships with people of other faiths for some time, world events and our different perspectives on them can put a strain on even the strongest ties. How do we manage this?

Such strains are frequently encountered right now in the context of Jewish-Christian relationships and three-way conversations among Jews, Christians and Muslims. In these relationships, the ongoing crisis in the Middle East is inescapable and can be extremely difficult. It is often the case that everyone feels they have the best perspective on the situation and its solutions, and that the partner does not adequately understand the situation. Partnerships which once felt strong may suddenly appear quite fragile in the context of a crisis about which all parties feel very strongly. The Middle East situation can also create confusion for many Christians, who become uncertain about how best to maintain relationship with multiple communities, and in the face of what sometimes feels like conflicting expectations.

In addition, the reality of immigration and multi-cultural churches now brings together in one congregation people from very different backgrounds, who think about interfaith relationships in very different ways. Their history and earlier experiences with people of other faith traditions can lead some Christians to very different conclusions about dialogue or even collaborative activity. It is critical to listen carefully to each other so as not to recreate marginalization by implying that the perspectives of those newer to the congregation and to its inter-religious engagements are irrelevant or even just “wrong” because they are different. A widening or changing range of perspectives on the part of one partner community in an inter-religious relationship may necessitate changes in what is being done.

While such differences can be very creative, sometimes they are so painful that dialogue feels impossible. There is no generic “fix” to the difficulties presented by our different backgrounds and the convictions we carry as a result. It is important for dialogue partners who experience tension for the first time to know that such tensions have arisen before, will arise again, and that the relationships most often survive them.

It is vital that you know your specific context, because it, and the relationships you have developed, are the best indicators of how to proceed in times of serious relational strain. Some dialogues – or even collaborative projects – choose to take a “break” to give people room to breathe. This is exactly the right response for some settings; and exactly wrong for others. In some relationships there may be a tendency to seek an excuse for the relationship to “fade away,” and the best path may in fact be to continue the discussion through the difficulty so as not to make a termination of the relationship easy.

In *all* cases, however, maintaining some kind of communication is critical. When one faith community does something that hurts or angers the other, the party labeled as the “offender” or “offensive” will often feel anxious and avoid reaching out for fear of rejection. While understandable, this is often the wrong impulse. It is critical that both partners make the decision about the future of their relationship, dialogue or collaborative activity *together*. This common agreement itself can serve as a “bridge” to keep the relationship alive even if the pattern of relating changes for a while.

Are there some relationships we should cultivate more intentionally than others?

Thirty years ago, for most Christians in the United States the phrase “interfaith relations,” if it meant anything at all, was often synonymous with congregational exchanges, and cooperative activity with the Jewish community. Very important work in local, regional and national settings has been done to establish and maintain Christian-Jewish relationships and collaborative projects.

The events of September 11, 2001, and other factors, have lent urgency to the development of Muslim-Christian relationships in those communities where there were previously few or none. But Jews and Muslims are far from our only neighbors of other faith traditions! Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Baha’is and many others live alongside Christians in neighborhoods, schools, and places of work and leisure. It is important to know the wide range of our neighbors – not only those about whom we hear the most, or those we think we understand the best.

Who are your neighbors? With which communities has your congregation not yet extended an invitation to relationship? What are the issues in your local setting that would benefit from your increased interaction? What changes in demographics or new developments in your town need attention? Be intentional about cultivating inter-faith relationships that are related to your own place and situation. Often the simplest things are the most effective. Taking the initiative to invite another community into relationship can lead to a better quality of life where you live, and to new partnerships in seeking justice and more effective service projects.

Use the established commitments of your congregation to guide you. Members of your church may have inter-religious relationships that can provide a natural opportunity for discussion or collaboration. Remember to consider your own goals, and ask about your partner’s expectations. Be sure you are both clear about hopes and expectations. Then, shape your common goals together. Build in time for reflection about the future, and don’t let your activity become too dependent on, or identified with, just one or two people over a long period of time. The broader the leadership and commitment, the easier it will be for the relationship to be sustained, especially through periods of leadership transition.

What should we be studying?

In addition to action and dialogue with partners of other religious traditions, and asking them to tell you about their life and faith, it can be important to do more study of their tradition on your own. But it is critical that you study your own biblical, theological and spiritual perspectives on interfaith relations – as an individual, as a congregation, and with other Christians. If you have never discussed what is appropriate in relating to people of other religions, or have made assumptions about what your congregation believes without deeper exploration, you may find yourself in conflict that you are not prepared for. Or you may discover a lack of understanding of why you, as a Christian, are building inter-religious relationships. Take the time to discuss these matters as a regular aspect of your own biblical and theological study.



Internal Christian Issues

What is the difference between interfaith and ecumenical relations – and is one more important than the other?

Ecumenical Relationships

Building ecumenical and interfaith relationships are both aspects of the Christian vocation, but the goals are very different. Our witness and work to make visible the unity of the church is predicated on our common life in, and confession of, Jesus Christ. We know we have already been given God's gift of unity, though we experience some division in the way we as Christians live our lives and have not yet been able to make that unity fully visible. Churches around the world express theological commitments in different ways, understand the role of doctrine differently, have divergent perspectives on the church's presence and mission in the world, order the life of the church and its leadership differently, and indeed have very diverse understandings even about what constitutes unity! But we seek and nurture ecumenical relationships as part of our commitment to live out the full visible unity of the church in whatever ways possible for us, guided by Jesus' prayer in John 17:21 "that they may all be one."

Interfaith Relationships

The word "ecumenical" itself is derived from the Greek word "oikumene," which can be translated "the whole inhabited earth." When seeking relationship with brothers and sisters from other faith traditions, however, we are not seeking to realize the unity of the church. We begin these relationships out of our belief that God created all things, that all human beings are formed in the "image" of God and that, therefore, in all peoples God's image can be seen. We understand that humanity was made to be in community. In our interfaith relationships we seek neither unity in belief nor in institution, but rather the gift of loving human community that is also God's gift, and God's will for us all.

The very person of Christ, however, teaches us a great deal about God's love, and makes clear that our call and mandate is to live showing love for our neighbor as a reflection of God's love for us. Jesus constantly crossed boundaries to relate to people whom society considered "off limits," "unclean," or just plain wrong in belief or practice. He lived, and invites us into, a life and practice of continually seeking reconciliation and relationship. If we follow him, we are also called to reconciliation and relationship; together we must build strong bridges of understanding.

How should we respond to other Christians who may disagree with our interfaith activity or relationships?

Sometimes the most difficult moments are not disagreements with our interfaith partners but with those closer to our own family – other Christians! Because Christians can disagree about how we should be in relationship to people of other faiths, you may at some time encounter a challenge to your activity from another congregation, or from a church leader in your community.

In those instances, use the same dialogue principles you would employ in interfaith dialogue. Be receptive to conversation, state your perspective clearly, listen to theirs, and be open to learning what you might from them. Careful conversation doesn't mean you will change their convictions, or your own – it simply allows you to present your own perspective in a way that is respectful of others, and that invites further dialogue at a future time.

When I talk to other Christians, and when I read parts of the Bible, I see evidence that points to Christ as the only way to salvation, as well as a mandate for Christians to “make disciples of all the nations.” Does this mean that our goal in any interfaith relationship should ultimately be conversion?

This is one of the thorniest issues for many Christians today, and a great deal of scholarship has been produced on the subject. It is a very complex topic about which theologians and church leaders have disagreed for centuries, and members of our congregations are not of one mind on the subject either! A few tips may help in talking and thinking about this question:

First, don't “proof-text.” Said another way, don't let just one or two verses from the Bible shape your entire belief about these questions, or serve as “proof” of a perspective you've already formed. While passages such as John 14:5-6, Matthew 28:18-20, 1 John 5:11-12, and Acts 4:10-12 can lead you to one view on what should be our attitude toward other faiths (and therefore guide our relationships to people who follow them), other passages give a different perspective – for example, Matthew 8:5-13, Luke 9:49-50; and some Hebrew scripture texts: Genesis 9:8-17 and Isaiah 19:19-25. Remember to look at texts like the creation stories of Genesis, in which we see that God makes all people in God's image, and the first verses of Psalm 24, which proclaims the whole world to be God's, and that God is to be found in all of it. Some Christians even see opposing views on the question in John 14:2 and in verses 3-7. In other words, it is important to consider the full range of Biblical teaching on this subject.

Second, the question raised especially in Matthew 28 (often known as the “Great Commission”) – that we should make disciples of all nations – does not give Christians a blueprint for what that should look like. John 17:21, often shortened to read “that they may all be one,” actually finishes by saying “...that the world might believe that you sent me.” Most Christians read in that verse, coupled with Matthew 28, a mandate for Christians to spread the word of the gospel throughout the world. Indeed, sharing the story of the Gospel is a part of discipleship, and Christians throughout the history of the church have found many different ways to do this.

For some Christian communities, living consistent and public lives of faith seems the best witness to the gospel; whether others come to Christianity is in the power of the Holy Spirit and not the job of the Christian to control or dictate. For these Christians, it has felt important to distinguish between *offering witness to one's faith* on the one hand, and *building relationships for the purpose of conversion* on the other.

Other Christians believe that it is in fact the task of all who are baptized to proclaim the gospel to all we meet, and to actively invite and urge others to embrace Christian faith, but that only *God*

will know whether the people we encounter will hear our proclamation in such a way that will result in Christian belief.

In some eras of the church's life, however, the evangelical mandate has taken the clear and often deadly form of forced conversions – both across the globe and right here in North America.

Third, talk with each other within your own church family about these questions. All of the views and history mentioned above will be in people's minds, even if unspoken, as you consider beginning an interfaith partnership. What do you believe the Bible says regarding the proclamation of the gospel? What is your understanding of salvation and how a person receives it?

Fourth, when you feel it is appropriate, find ways to talk to your partners from other religious traditions about this also. The fact that you are not talking about it does not mean that they are not thinking about it! People of other faith traditions in the United States are very aware of the history of the church both in North America and around the world, and will probably want to know your perspectives. Don't *start* with this conversation – but be prepared to have it at some time.

Because the church in North America carries a great deal of history related to forced, or coerced, conversion of indigenous peoples, we are aware of the damage and even destruction that proselytism has inflicted on communities. Is it possible to reconcile the Biblical texts that send us to “make disciples to all the nations” with a history filled with mistakes which have been damaging for some people?

It is true that the history of the church's understanding – and implementation – of “the Great Commission” found in Matthew 28 has been intertwined in many cases with oppression and injustice, and complicit in sometimes deadly mistakes. For some Christians, this history has rendered the biblical mandate to make disciples of all the nations almost irredeemable. It is critical that we not discount the theological perspective of people in those communities for whom history has taken too devastating a toll to allow any legitimate reading of this biblical text. We live our faith in concrete settings and sometimes experience produces lasting, and devastating, impact.

It is also true, however, that there have been many, many settings in which Christians have lived and taught the faith, and offered a witness to the gospel in such a way as to produce healthy, vibrant partnerships resulting in a voluntary growth of new church communities. In those settings Christians made a witness to God's with respect for the lives and religious and cultural traditions of the communities where they found themselves, producing good results. Many Christians who came to the faith through missionary activity speak, yes, of the mistakes, but also, and more profoundly, of the blessings of the church.

Both experiences of being on the receiving end of Christian witness are legitimate; neither negates the other. It is a part of the complexity of the church community, and to try to impose one perspective by discounting the other can be dishonest and disrespectful. Members of local

congregations should become aware of the many different ways the church through the ages has proclaimed the faith and the impact of those activities on the world, religious traditions, and the communities it encountered.

Although our society seems suddenly much more conscious of the presence of people of other religious traditions, my congregation has had an open posture to interfaith relations for a long time. What more is there for us to learn, and why should we engage in study?

Many congregations in the United States have engaged in one aspect or another of interfaith relationships and activity for a very long time. For some, this engagement has meant joint participation in community social services or witness on important social issues. For others, it has taken the form of “congregational exchanges” and dialogue that bring neighbors of different religions together to know one another’s religious traditions and commitments. For those congregations, a discussion of the theological bases for engaging in interreligious relations may feel like “old news.” Four elements, however, are worth considering.

First, every year many congregations receive new members, some of whom may come from Christian settings that are very different from the majority. New members may have had no previous religious experience at all. It is important not to assume that all new members will understand why your congregation engages in interfaith relationships. If not ever addressed, it will be easy for them to assume a rationale for your congregation’s commitments – and some of those assumptions may not be accurate.

Most denominations in the United States are very diverse, comprised of communities with widely varying perspectives on Christian faith and what the church’s posture toward other religions should be. Our personal history is a deep part of each of us and informs how we respond to our congregation’s activities and commitments. We are even sometimes unaware of our feelings until an activity triggers a response. So, even if you have had the conversation before, others may not have – and new ideas may emerge for all!

Second, even longtime members should be urged to ask the deeper questions on a regular basis. Perhaps *especially* those congregations which have long histories of interfaith activity can lose sight of the theological and biblical underpinnings for their activity and relationships over many years. Our relationships will be stronger with regular conversation about why we do what we do, and how our activity relates to God’s word in scripture and our Christian discipleship.

Third, our societal context is always changing. Once it was assumed that the only place to encounter religious diversity was outside the United States, or in large cities. Now such pluralism is to be found in almost every setting in our country. In addition, local, national and world events constantly bring a changing perspective to urgent social and religious issues. What was a “front burner” issue when your congregation first began its relationships and dialogues may be very different from what you – and the world – face today.

Finally, few families remain untouched in some way by interfaith relationships, either through a member who is married to a person of another faith, or through children, siblings or other

relatives who follow the path of another religious tradition. In contexts where issues of our Christian faith and its relationship to neighbors of other traditions are discussed openly and with respect, those members for whom this is a living, daily reality will have somewhere to share their experiences, their questions, their doubts, and their celebrations.

Don't assume that members of your congregation will feel permission to be open about their family experiences of interfaith relationship if serious theological and biblical questions related to these questions are never discussed. It is surprising how often people say they feel unsafe in broaching this subject for fear of being misunderstood, or somehow being labeled as "wrong" and becoming alienated from their own community of faith.

SECTION 2

Basic Resources



DISCIPLES OF CHRIST AND INTERRELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT

A Report from the Council on Christian Unity



Theological Introduction

1. As members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), we affirm and confess our belief in one God revealed in Jesus Christ as Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer of all. We affirm that God loves all of creation and that all people are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). We acknowledge that through God's love, all people are related to one another as children of God and understand this common humanity and relationship to be gifts from God to the human race. Thus we accept God's mandate to engage in relationships with creation that give life and encourage life to flourish.

2. As members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), we also recognize that we have been sent into the world to testify in word and deed to the love of God we know through Jesus Christ our Lord (John 17:18). We celebrate our distinctive identity as Disciples of Christ and openly seek opportunities to share the good news of God's covenant of love in Jesus Christ with the world. Yet we must confess that we have not always embodied this love in our relationships with people of other religious traditions. We have at times allowed a woeful lack of understanding and respect for other faiths to result in fear, distrust, and the dehumanization of our brothers and sisters in other religious traditions. We have mistakenly let factors of history, race, socio-economic location and politics shape our conceptions of other religions and have too quickly accepted misguided and harmful stereotypes.

3. While the Church has always lived in a religiously pluralistic world, the rich diversity of different faiths is more apparent to us now than ever before. We Disciples often find ourselves face-to-face with neighbors and co-workers, relatives, strangers, and friends who belong to different religious traditions. Relationships with such folk offer us unique opportunities to witness, love, and serve "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Moreover, because we believe in a God who creates and interacts with the entire cosmos, we seek through relationships with people of other faiths to learn more about the God we know through Jesus Christ.

4. As members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) called to life-giving relationship with all of creation, we see

interreligious relationships as one of God's special callings in our time. We feel called to engage intentionally, along with other Christians, in interfaith work, learning practical ways to encounter people of diverse faiths in order to learn from them, to live in community with them, to develop mutual respect, and to discover areas of commonality. Because of God's creative relationship to us all, we see these religious others as intrinsically connected to our own religious life. As Disciples, we affirm that God calls us to be in intentional relationship and conversation with our neighbors in other faith traditions.

5. This document is an attempt to reflect upon who we are as Disciples of Christ, why we might engage in interfaith dialogue and work, the nature of interreligious relationships, and what gifts we have that uniquely prepare us for constructive and consequential interreligious engagement.

Our Identity as Disciples of Christ

6. Interreligious engagement can take many forms, ranging from the personal and practical conversations of real individuals living together, to co-operative social ventures, to the joint study of sacred scriptures and deliberate theological dialogues, to shared experiences of worship and prayer. In each of these various types of encounter, however, a strong sense of one's own identity and an ability to convey that identity in a coherent fashion are critically important.

7. Therefore we remind ourselves of our Christian identity, the very heart of who are as Disciples, by citing the brief statement on ecclesiology by the Disciples Commission on Theology that was accepted by the General Assembly in 1997.

The Church is that community called into being by the Gospel, which is God's covenant of love in Jesus Christ, and given its life through the power of God's Spirit in order to praise and serve the living God. All those who accept this calling—of whatever race, nationality, or culture—are joined together as one people commissioned by God to witness by word and deed to God's love for the world. They signify their corporate identity by:

- **their common confession of faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God,**
- **their incorporation into the body of Christ through baptism,**
- **their thankful celebration of Christ's saving work and abiding presence through the Lord's Supper,**
- **their common commitment to direct their lives in accord with the will of God as made known through the testimony of Scripture,**
- **and their shared experience of the Holy Spirit who empowers them for ministry as disciples and ambassadors of Christ to and for the world.**

This community, through its life of unity in diversity as well as its witness in word and deed, exists to glorify God, proclaiming from generation to generation and to the ends of the earth God's good news in Jesus Christ, participating in God's work of reconciliation, liberation, and redemption for all people, and thus living as a sign of God's coming reign.

8. We understand authentic interreligious engagement to be an "encounter of loyalties" which bears the most fruit when we are forthrightly Christian and our partners from different faiths are candid representatives of their own religious traditions. Only in a context where partners are open, honest and willing to humbly express their deepest convictions and practices can trust and friendships develop. Indeed, it is precisely the profundity of our differing beliefs and customs that offers the greatest hope for mutual challenge, shared learning, and spiritual growth. We reject the notion that interfaith encounter can only take place if we suspend our deepest Christian convictions. Rather we see our religious particularities as gifts from God that we share with members in other traditions.

Given Who We Are, Why Should We Engage in Interfaith Relationships?

9. In light of this statement of theological identity, it is clear that **the Disciples are called by the Gospel of Jesus Christ to witness in word and deed to the living God for the benefit of the world.** It is the world toward which the witness of the Church is directed as a witness that intends to help and upbuild the world.

10. Further, it is obvious to Disciples that this contemporary world in which we live, and which the Gospel tells us God loves with an everlasting love, is fractured by oppression, violence, war, hatred and crippling fear. It is also a world of diverse religious traditions with diverse understandings of the roots of violence and oppression and it is a world overwhelmed by nation-states that seem locked into

rivalries and enmities that threaten the human future. In short, it is a world in which misunderstandings, lies, and falsehoods provoke fear and much violence.

11. We confess that we Disciples are ourselves sinners in the midst of this violent turmoil in the world, and we have often perpetuated is understanding, told lies about strangers and enemies, and believed falsehoods about people from other cultures and in other religious traditions.

12. Even so, we believe that the Disciples of Christ, under the summons of the Gospel, have a strict obligation to be a community of witness to God in the midst of just this sort of violence-prone contemporary world. Such witnessing should never be ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and must incessantly seek to share that Gospel with the world. However, we also believe **such witnessing means conversing with, listening to, learning from, and living peacefully with those in the world who do not confess Jesus as Lord.** Indeed, we recognize that God's love is sometimes better witnessed to through listening and sharing than through what have often been ontological declarations.

13. We find further theological incentive for interreligious engagement through our belief that all people share a common humanity, that is, all are created *imago dei*, in God's image and have been already profoundly reconciled to God and to others, including the creation, in Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18ff.; Colossians 3:15ff.). Every person embodies something of the divine image and therefore may possess some ray of truth, some aspect of the Mystery of God we know to be revealed in Jesus Christ. Even while we know God through Jesus Christ, we affirm that all human understanding of truth is inherently limited and conditioned. The reality of God, in contrast, is intrinsically unlimited. God will always be greater than any human can comprehend or any religion can convey. We affirm that it is morally, ethically, and spiritually wrong for any person, group, or religion to claim exclusive access to God, God's love, grace, or salvation. When Christians and others have made such claims to exclusivity, much suffering and degradation has often been the result.

14. As Disciples we recognize that Scripture offers other examples of ethical and pastoral incentives for interreligious relationships. For example, in the Old Testament the stories of Abraham, Jethro, Ruth, and others, suggest that we have a certain responsibility to welcome and treat kindly those from outside our religious community. The virtue of hospitality to strangers is continued and amplified in the New Testament in the letter to the Hebrews, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it," (Hebrews 13:2) and in Jesus' example in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

15. Furthermore, Jesus suggests that the whole of the law and the prophets are summarized in the commandment to love God and to love one's neighbors (Matthew 22:36-40). This then becomes the first and guiding commandment for Christians. Loving others surely entails respecting them, listening to them, and treating them as we would want them

treat us (Matthew 7:12). Loving means not only the authentic sharing of our truth, but a deep listening to theirs. In this light, we remind ourselves of the Scriptural injunctions that loving one's neighbors takes priority over proclaiming right doctrine or performing formal worship: before going to Church, *first* work things out with your estranged brother or sister (Matthew 5:23-24); don't let the observance of Sabbath duties prohibit you from doing good to your neighbor (Matthew 12:12).

16. We recognize that Scripture speaks with many voices and that certain passages have been used to discount and divide people in different faiths from one another. Yet we feel called to be peacemakers in the world and to find ways to strengthen human life in community. We trust that God is at work in creation and that, through Christ, all people will be reconciled to God and to one another. Through encounters with people of other religions we hope to find new understanding and to discover fuller and more meaningful ways to live in reconciled communities together. **We believe, therefore, that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is summoned into dialogue with persons in other religious traditions in all ways feasible and practical at all manifestations of the Church.**

Interfaith Relationships and the Christian Mission of Witness

17. We Disciples affirm that our defining mission, as summoned by the gospel of Jesus Christ, is to witness to the living God for the benefit of the world. It is important to realize that the activities of witness are complex and multi-dimensional. Clearly one such witness imperative is that given by the risen Jesus: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew. 28:19). It might appear, therefore, that witnessing that does not succeed in making persons disciples of Jesus is a failed witness. Understood this way, then, the only proper witness activity that is appropriate toward 'non-Christians' is that which aims at their conversion to becoming disciples of Jesus.

18. We certainly want to affirm that witnessing that aims to proclaim the saving ultimacy of God's grace in Jesus Christ through the Spirit is an essential dimension of the Church's mission of witness. Having clearly affirmed that dimension, however, we believe that the Church's witness also includes activities that are still imperatives but may not require that those to whom we witness become Christians. For example, we are called to love strangers and enemies and 'non-Christians' in such a way that **we seek their good**. They may finally decide that their true good involves accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior. But our loving them does not require that, and therefore we could never coerce them to accept Christ. Further, the love of the Christian for others is a love that cares about who the other is, how she understands herself, and how she thinks and acts religiously in her own tradition. This kind

of love for the other is upbuilding, is patient, seeks to create conversation and mutual understanding, and yearns to live with others in peace.

19. Hence we Disciples believe there is much work to be done in love—work which is essential to our mission of witness—in conversing with and engaging others that **does not have to** eventuate in their conversion to Christ. But neither do we believe that the possibility of becoming a disciple of Jesus must be renounced or prohibited from the conversation. Surely were such a conversion to take place it would only be through the work of the Spirit; Christians refuse to think the Spirit is under their control.

20. With this understanding of the complexities of witnessing which comprise the Church's witness to the living God, we affirm that we can and should be willing to faithfully embrace the inevitable tensions that such dialogues and encounters with others will occasion. It would be absurd to enter such dialogue by renouncing the gift of grace in Jesus Christ. It would also be absurd to wield that grace as a weapon of coercion. When we encounter and dialogue with others we are not expected to shed our cherished Christian beliefs, but neither are we called to ignore or condemn the others with their cherished beliefs.

21. Therefore, as Disciples of Christ we understand interreligious dialogue itself as a mutual quest for a deeper understanding of truth and thus to involve mutual sharing, mutual witnessing, and a mutual call to healthier ways of life. When Christians are able to balance their witnessing with a sincere receptivity to the witnessing of others, then both the evangelizing mission of the Church and the mutual uncovering of truth are accomplished. **We look forward to the renewal of our faith in encounters with our brothers and sisters in other faith traditions.**

22. We also affirm that dialogue and interreligious encounter involve an opening up in more than intellectual terms to the concerns of the other. We understand interfaith dialogue as a way of living out our Christian witness. In Jesus Christ, God's self communication to the world is not imposed on humanity—we are invited to listen, to learn, and to respond. Scripture reveals a God who not only speaks to the world, but also loves, listens, waits, challenges, and surprises. Thus we understand our calling to include a lifestyle of commitment to the core issues of our neighbors. We recognize that we can better provide aid to a needy world when we act together with partners from other religious traditions. Moreover, we understand that working side-by-side with our partners for global well-being and peace can have a transformative impact upon both partners and can open our eyes to the integrity and vitality in each of our respective religious ways.

23. We Disciples thus recognize that an honest and open dialogue between persons of different faiths involves some risk. Indeed, in any relationship in which our hearts and minds are open to another, we risk being hurt or losing certainty. We confess that at times we have avoided authentic interreligious engagement out of fear that our foundational beliefs might be challenged.

24. Yet the seriousness of our faith in God emboldens us to take such risks and leads us to anticipate what new insights or endeavors God has in store. With risk comes opportunity, and we place our trust in the Holy Spirit to guide us as we ask new questions, are open to transformation, seek both to encourage and critique, and hear how God has worked in the lives of others.

Disciples Gifts for Engaging in Interfaith Relations

25. Even while we enter interfaith relations as members of the universal Church of Jesus Christ, we seek to identify and celebrate those elements of our particular history and tradition as Disciples of Christ that uniquely prepare us for interfaith connection. Along these lines we highlight several **gifts** we have to offer to the universal Church and to our dialogue partners in other religious traditions.

26. We Disciples bring **the gift of understanding ourselves as a “people of the table.”** As a community of Christians who celebrate the centrality of the Lord’s Supper, we experience the table of Christ as an open and welcoming table. For us, the table is a meeting place where the inclusive love of God encountered in Jesus Christ gathers together those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord, nurtures them, and seeks to create a sense of community among them and with the larger world. Yet the table is not our own. We encounter God’s unmerited grace **as guests** at the table, and as such, we cannot put limits upon God’s grace in different contexts.

27. As Disciples, we affirm that the table is where we discover one of our clearest visions into the nature of God. At the table we experience God’s acceptance of us as people of worth and therefore we are empowered to see the worth of others. We rejoice that at the table we meet a God who builds bridges across the barriers that divide humanity. At the table we meet a Jesus whose lifestyle of servanthood and love provide for us a model of inclusion, compassion, and respect for all our neighbors. In remembering the death and resurrection of Christ, we prepare ourselves for a new life of reconciliation with God and all God’s creatures. At the table we feel the Spirit of God empowering liberation and deliverance in our daily lives.

28. Historically we Disciples see the openness of the table as a symbol of protest against closed institutional systems and cultures that bred exclusion and division. Thus, **today we find in the open and welcoming table of Christ a compelling motivation for interfaith relations.**

29. We Disciples also bring **the gift of understanding ourselves as a “people of the book,” a people who maintain a deep appreciation for the Bible as another place where the nature of the Divine is revealed.** As a part of the Protestant tradition historically emphasizing *sola scriptura*, (Scripture alone) our founders encouraged a sincere and profound engagement with

the Bible and an attempt to discern its essential messages and themes. Nevertheless, Alexander Campbell emphasized the importance of understanding the social and cultural contexts found in the biblical narratives. He saw the Bible as a human testimony to divine revelation. Since then, Disciples have been comfortable with notions of the historical conditioning of Scripture and revelation. We believe this heritage prepares us to appreciate religious developments outside of Scripture. With new questions in mind, we search the Scriptures for guidance on new ways to mature in our faith and in our love and service to others.

30. While a number of important themes run through the biblical texts, we Disciples believe that the universality of God’s unconditional love enacted salvifically in Christ for all people is the grand theme of Scripture. We understand further themes such as redemption, justice, deliverance, grace, liberation, compassion, humility, and reconciliation in light of the primacy of God’s unconditional and universal love. Thus in this broad theme we see ample reason to encourage the cultivation of interfaith relations. Indeed, **our conviction is that we appropriate God’s love and further biblical themes only as they are lived out in relationships with our neighbors.**

31. We Disciples bring to interfaith encounters the **gift** of our intense appreciation for learning. Historically we understood our particular mission as including proclamation and education—we founded both churches *and* institutions of higher learning. We consider ourselves students of God’s truth and have thus always valued a “reasoned faith.” We have resisted being boxed in by so-called infallible doctrines and have chosen rather to search for truth through a deep study of Scripture and by being open to and engaging in relationships with those around us.

32. Along these lines we bring the **gift** of vigorous, intelligent conversation within our own tradition, in which we have struggled to understand who God is and what God has striven to reveal to us about human destiny and the destiny of the world. Indeed, it is internal to faith that it incessantly seeks understanding and this empowers inquiry and dialogue. Disciples affirm that the God whom we seek to understand is a God who calls us in faith to seek to understand our brothers and sisters in traditions that often appear strange and opaque to us in our ignorance and fear. We gladly and earnestly engage in interreligious dialogue in the hope that the witness of other traditions might enrich our understanding and deepen our Christian discipleship. **As students of God’s truth, we believe that there is much we can learn about ourselves, our neighbors, and how God works in the world from the encounter and engagement with people in other faiths.**

33. We Disciples bring the **gift** of two centuries of earnest pursuit of Christian unity in the midst of Christian communities divided by suspicion and discord. We are familiar with discord but we remain undaunted and hopeful. While we do not expect interfaith dialogue with other religious traditions to necessarily eventuate in a common theological confession, we do expect the Holy Spirit of truth to

cast a broad light on a path to mutual understanding and to peace.

34. Further, we bring the **gift** of intense interfaith dialogue over several decades with our Jewish brothers and sisters. Through such dialogue we have been empowered to critique and rethink historic Christian attitudes and practices toward Jews. The dialogue has sharpened our grasp of the many beliefs we share with Jews and has led us as well to appreciate our significant differences. Both the shared beliefs and the differences have been discussed in a context of reconciliation and peace.

35. Finally, we Disciples bring the **gift** of our unflinching belief in God as the Ultimate Companion of all creatures who seeks their redemption in a tumultuous and often violent world. We believe in a God who cares deeply about truth and peace. God's definitive words to the world are words of forgiveness, rather than the threat of ultimate annihilation and punishment. We believe that the cross and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew in search of Jews and Gentiles, reveals God's search to ultimately redeem all creatures. We hope that all our conversing and witnessing might be to the glory of God. **We trust that God's glory will surprise us with new discernments of the Spirit and with the gift of new friends.**

36. Each of these gifts highlights a certain aspect of our Disciples identity. Explained in this way, we understand the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to have a historical and theological trajectory toward interaction with people of other faiths. We believe that we cannot achieve our desire for deep Christian spirituality, true community, and a passion for justice without the help of our brothers and sisters in other religious traditions.

37. It is precisely in light of these wonderful gifts of the Disciples tradition that we unequivocally affirm that to be faithful to God's call in today's religiously pluralistic world summons Disciples intentionally and whole-heartedly to engage in interfaith relations and work.



A STUDY GUIDE

to accompany the report
“DISCIPLES OF CHRIST AND INTERRELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT”

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Introduction

Do you remember the first time you set out on a trip to some place you had never been before? Maybe it was your first trip to a part of the country you had never visited or your first time overseas. Maybe it was your first time hiking in the mountains or camping at the beach. Because the place where you were going was unknown to you, you may have felt somewhat nervous, as well as excited. You would have wanted to be prepared for the new experiences that lay ahead. You might have had questions about what kind of clothing you would need and what kind of equipment you should bring along.

There is a real sense in which the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada has set out on just such a journey and now finds itself in a place it has never been before. Only instead of leaving home and visiting a new country, the very countries we live in have changed. Just look around. The hills and dales of our nations are no longer adorned solely with the steeples and crosses of Christian churches, but now are ornamented with the arches and domes of many temples, synagogues, gurdwaras and

mosques. These architectural additions are signs of what one scholar has called “a new religious America.” Almost without our knowing, Disciples in the United States and Canada find themselves living in some of the most religiously diverse nations on the planet.¹

Fortunately, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has known what it is to live in a new and changing religious environment. On the early American frontier, our founders grappled with religious diversity and forged a deep sense of what it meant to follow Christ in a new setting. As time has gone by, we have continued to celebrate that which we hold most dear, while at the same time being flexible and gracious with those who differ from us. Recall the old maxim that Disciples have often used as their motto, “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.” Certainly we have not always lived up to this standard, but in our better moments we do. There is something in the Disciples’ spirit that blends the cherishing of our convictions with honoring the freedom of others and an aspiration to always exhibit compassionate goodwill.

Much like those early Disciples, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is seeking out ways to be faithful to Christ in a new environment. In October 2002 the Council on Christian Unity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Council for Ecumenism of the United Church of Christ called together a special Consultation on Interreligious Dialogue and Relations focusing on “Why engage in interfaith dialogue” and “What are the special gifts that we can bring to such work?” A series of subsequent meetings resulted in the report entitled “Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement.” At the 2005 General Assembly in Portland, OR, this report was commended to all manifestations of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) for teaching and study.

We might consider the report “Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement” as a kind of travel checklist of sorts. Instead of reminding us to “bring warm socks” or “don’t forget your passport,” it reminds Disciples of who we are and what theological resources we have to help us interact with our neighbors in other religious traditions in life-giving ways. More than this, it suggests that, because of our unique history and tradition, Disciples may be more uniquely prepared for this journey than we have imagined.

¹ See Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 2-3. Eck suggests that while most Americans are aware that they live in a *multi-cultural* society with large populations of Asians, Hispanics, Africans, etc., we are only beginning to realize how *multi-religious* it is as well. She points out that there are now more Muslims in the United States than members of Presbyterian Church USA and just as many Jews as Muslims, about six million each. There are approximately four million Buddhists and one million Hindus.

Purpose of this Study

The primary purpose of this Study Guide is to help Disciples examine the report “Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement” and to think through some of the issues it raises. The report itself is a reflection upon who we are as Disciples of Christ, why we might engage in interfaith dialogue and work, the nature of interreligious relationships, and what gifts we have that uniquely prepare us for constructive interreligious engagement. That is a lot to cover in one report! This Study Guide is meant to help Disciples unpack this report and to consider for ourselves how we might best live as Disciples of Christ in relationship with our neighbors of other faiths.

However, please note that there are two things the report “Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement” is NOT. First, it is not a comprehensive treatment of all the themes and issues surrounding interfaith relations. A quick trip to any theological library will reveal that whole books, even whole book series, are dedicated to the wide variety of topics related to interreligious concerns. Clearly, there are some topics that are not covered in the report. Should either the report or this Study Guide raise questions for you that are not addressed, we encourage you to explore the recommended resources listed at the end of this Study Guide or any of the other many good books on these subjects.

Second, “Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement” is not a *defense* of interreligious engagement. That is, it does not begin by refuting arguments against interfaith engagement or by interpreting those passages in Scripture that have been used to contest constructive engagement. While a defense of interreligious engagement may have its benefits, it often leads to other more fundamental theological debates concerning issues like the meaning and authority of Scripture, appropriate methods of Biblical interpretation, the nature and meaning of Christ, or the meaning of salvation. Almost always, such debates result in much proof-texting and division. The goal of the report is not to “weigh in” on a debate, but to articulate a theological rationale for interfaith engagement. It gives the positive reasons for engaging one’s neighbors in other faith traditions rather than refuting arguments against it.

A Note on Method

This Study Guide is designed for small groups of Disciples laity or pastors. It comes in two parts, which may be used separately or together. However both parts are meant to accompany the report “Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement,” which should be read ahead of time. The report is included as an appendix to this Study Guide.

Part One consists of six study sessions designed to elicit immediate discussion of the report itself. These study sessions are divided into sections that parallel the sections of the report. Groups should begin each session with prayer and by reading the given Bible

Reference. These passages from Scripture are meant to give the group's discussion a theological orientation. However, these sessions are not meant to be bible studies so much as a way to study of the report "Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement." Groups should move quickly to a discussion of the reflection questions in each session. While suggestions for how much time to spend on each set of questions are included in each session, these suggestions are rough guides only. Please feel free to adjust the time allocation as needed.

These sessions are also intended to help groups explore where and how interreligious engagement is taking place. During this study you are encouraged to keep a record of situations in the world and in your community where interreligious dialogue is happening and where it needs to happen. Clip stories from your newspaper or from magazines. Print out articles you may find online. At the end of each session, the group will share these stories before concluding with prayer.

Part Two is a small paper entitled "Key Questions for Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement." These Key Questions address issues that are related to the report or which may arise after reading the report, but which the report does not specifically address. This small paper is offered as a way to probe more deeply into some of the issues. Groups may wish to explore the Key Questions in the sixth (or even in a seventh or eighth) study session. Alternatively, groups may use them as an additional resource to refer to while working through the sessions in Part One of the Study Guide. Like Part One, Part Two is designed to assist groups in understanding the "Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement" report.

A Final Note: Ideally, each member of the study would have access to this entire Study Guide. Group leaders may wish to give out the link to the Study Guide to participants so that they may print off the Study Guide for themselves. However, if this option is not available and printing resources are limited, group leaders should distribute the appendix report "Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement" to the participants and save the reflection questions from Part One for themselves in order to lead the group discussion. Part Two may be made available as deemed necessary by the goals of the group.

PART ONE

SESSION ONE: Theological Introduction

[** In preparation for this session, please reread the “Theological Introduction” of the report “Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement” in the appendix.]

1. Begin with Prayer.
2. Read Bible Reference: Genesis 1:26-27 (2 minutes)
3. Discuss Reflection Questions:

Awareness of Neighbors – Building community and cultivating relationships are central to Christian faith. People who belong to different religious traditions increasingly surround Christians in North America. This reality provides a new opportunity for relationships and invites us to understand our connection with others in a fresh way. (20 minutes)

1. Describe the religious situation in your local community. How many different religious groups are there in your town?
2. Has your church or any church of which you know done something to relate to its neighbors in other faith traditions?
3. What interactions have you personally had with someone of another faith?
4. Do you have more contact with people of other faiths now than you did 10 – 20 years ago?

God and Community – As Disciples of Christ, we believe that God loves all creation, that all people are created in God’s image and that all people are therefore rightly understood as children of God. (30 minutes)

1. How does understanding God as the creator of all humankind affect your faith?
2. What does this imply for our relationships with or attitudes about our neighbors in other religious traditions?
3. What misguided and harmful stereotypes of other faith traditions have you encountered?
4. How can interreligious engagement overcome stereotypes?
5. What can other faith traditions teach us about the God whom we know in Jesus Christ?

6. Are there other statements in the theological introduction that you would like to discuss?
4. Did you find news of interreligious dialogue going on somewhere in the world this week? Did you find news of the need for interreligious dialogue somewhere in the world this week? (8 minutes)
5. Close with prayer.

SESSION TWO: Our Identity As Disciples of Christ

[** In preparation for this session, please reread “Who Are We as Disciples of Christ” in the report “Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement” in the appendix.]

1. Begin with Prayer.
2. Read Bible Reference: Isaiah 65:24-25; Luke 13:18-21 (2 minutes)
3. Discuss Reflection Questions:

Statement on Ecclesiology – Read over the statement on ecclesiology (paragraph 6 in the report) that comes from the Disciples Commission on Theology. (15 minutes)

1. What questions do you have about it?
2. How might interreligious engagement and relationships contribute to Christians’ participating in “God’s work of reconciliation, liberation and redemption for all people?”
3. What does it mean to live as a sign of God’s coming reign? (Bible references)

Disciples of Christ – Though this section is entitled “Our Identity as Disciples of Christ, the cited statement from the Disciples Commission on Theology is about the Church universal. It is really a statement about our identity as Christians. (25 minutes)

1. How would you briefly describe your identity as a Disciple of Christ?
2. In interreligious situations, why would it be important to articulate our broader Christian identity?
3. How would you express your deepest faith convictions?

4. How might interactions with people of other religious faiths encourage you to learn more about your Christian faith?
5. How can an open encounter with someone from another religious tradition actually strengthen your Christian identity?

Types of Interreligious Engagement – Relationships between people of different faiths can take a number of forms. (10 minutes)

1. What are some of the ways Christians have related to others?
 2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of certain types of relationships?
4. The term “engagement” seems to rule out the practice of mutual indifference, where people in different religious traditions just leave each other alone. In what areas of life in your city or state have people of different religious traditions worked together? In what areas should people of different religious traditions work together? (8 minutes)

5. Close with prayer.

SESSIONS THREE: Given Who We Are, Why Should We Engage in Interfaith Relationships?

And

SESSION FOUR: Interfaith Relationships and the Christian Mission of Witness

These two sections of the report address many of the same issues and should be read together. Because they cover a lot of ground, they are divided into two sessions. Leaders may decide how to divide the two sessions.

[** In preparation for these sessions, please reread “Given Who We Are, Why Should We Engage in Interfaith Relations” and “Interfaith Relationships and the Christian Mission of Witness” in the report “Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement” in the appendix.]

1. Begin each session with Prayer.
2. Read Bible Reference: Luke 10: 25-37; Hebrews 13:2 (2 minutes)
3. Discuss Reflection Questions:

Christian Witness – The report speaks about witness in many ways. (25 minutes)

1. List and discuss how Christian witness is described here.
2. What are some examples of Christian witness in your area? How do others receive that witness?
3. How does witness relate to mission, evangelism or dialogue?
4. How does the Christian mandate to love others and to be peacemakers inform our understanding of witness? What is it that Christians are witnesses of (what is the content of Christian witness)?
5. How is interreligious engagement a way of living out a Christian witness?

Confession – We Christians are also sinners who should confess that we have not always been loving to our neighbors. The report acknowledges that we have too easily accepted harmful stereotypes about other religions and that we have avoided engaging our neighbors in other faiths out of fear and mistrust. (30 minutes)

1. What are some of the harmful stereotypes you have heard about people in other religions? What are some of the harmful stereotypes you have heard about Christians?
2. How do misguided stereotypes arise?
3. What are some of the ways in human history where fear and distrust between religious people have led to violence? How might we increase peace and understanding between religious groups?
4. To what else do Christians need to confess?

Truth and Understanding – The report suggests two things about our ability as humans to grasp truth. First, because all humans are created in God's image, all may embody some ray of truth, some aspect of the God we know through Jesus Christ. Second, all human understanding is inherently limited and conditioned. The report concludes, therefore, that no religious community can claim that they completely understand the fullness of the mystery of God or that they alone have access to God. (35 minutes)

1. Do you agree or disagree with the conclusion that no religious community can claim that they completely understand the fullness of the mystery of God or that they alone have access to God?
2. Do you know of people in other religious traditions who, in their actions or words or practices reflect something of God? Discuss an example with the group.
3. What are some things that Christianity might learn from other religious people?
4. What have you personally learned from another religion?
5. How do language, culture, geography, time or human finiteness shape our knowledge and understanding?

6. In what ways is our understanding limited? Think of an example of how religious claims to exclusivity have resulted in suffering and degradation.

Humility, Hospitality and Love – Christians are called to be hospitable to strangers and to love their neighbors. (20 minutes)

1. Read Hebrews 13:2. Talk about how hospitality is modeled in the Bible.
 2. When has a stranger been hospitable to you?
 3. Take a few moments and write down a definition of love. Share examples when people finish.
 4. What role does humility play in love?
 5. What role does love play in encouraging Christians to balance their convictions with openness to others' faith? Give some practical examples.
4. Did you find news of interreligious dialogue going on somewhere in the world this week? Did you find news of the need for interreligious dialogue somewhere in the world this week? (8 minutes)
5. Close with prayer.

SESSION FIVE: Disciples Gifts for Engaging in Interfaith Relations

This section highlights certain elements of the Disciples of Christ history and tradition that help prepare them to engage in constructive and meaningful relationships with their neighbors in other faiths.

[** In preparation for this session, please reread "Disciples Gifts for Engaging in Interfaith Relations" in the report "Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement" in the appendix.]

1. Begin with Prayer.
2. Discuss Reflection Questions:

Disciples Gifts (20 minutes)

1. List the gifts lifted up in the report and discuss each one to be sure that group members understand what each gift is.
 2. Which of these gifts from the Disciples tradition means the most to your own religious identity as a Disciple of Christ member?
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3. What other gifts do Disciples have? Does your local church community (or do you personally) have experiences that uniquely prepare you for relationships with others?

The Open and Welcoming Table – Disciples affirm that it is Christ who presides at the Lord’s Supper. We come to the table as guests who encounter God’s unconditional love and grace there. (25 minutes)

1. Called to be like Christ to the world, how do we love others unconditionally?
2. How do we extend grace without restricting it to those who think, act and worship like us?
3. Discuss with the group a memorable communion service you’ve participated in. What made it special?
4. Recall some occasion when you have felt powerfully or generously included. How might that experience model a generous spirit for us?

Disciples Vision – The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a church that seeks to demonstrate deep Christian spirituality, true community and a passion for justice. (10 minutes)

1. How does engaging with our neighbors in other religious traditions help us live out these three parts of our vision?
 2. Further, how might our neighbors actually enhance these components by deepening our Christian spirituality, enriching our community and strengthening our passion for justice?
-
4. Did you find news of interreligious dialogue going on somewhere in the world this week? Did you find news of the need for interreligious dialogue somewhere in the world this week? (5 minutes)
-
5. Close with prayer.

Session Six: How do we get started? (1 hour)

During this session, participants should review what they have learned during the previous five sessions. It may be helpful to read Part Two of this Study Guide, the small paper “Key Questions for Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement.” From their review, they can plan and implement an interfaith engagement with people in their community. Invite people from other religious groups in the community to come for discussion and a “get-to-know-you” event.

A final note – If your congregation begins some type of interreligious activity with people in your community, please inform the Council of Christian Unity (rwelsh@ccu.disciples.org) of your plans. We would like to follow the activities generated by this study.

PART TWO

“KEY QUESTIONS for DISCIPLES OF CHRIST AND INTERRELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT”

At the 2005 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Portland, OR, a report entitled “Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement” was commended to all manifestations of the church for teaching and study. This report maintains that cultivating interreligious relationships is “one of God’s special callings in our time” for members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The report finds strong biblical incentive for getting to know our neighbors in other faiths and suggests that the church’s mission, witness, self-understanding and spirituality are all deeply connected to our relationships with these others.

1. First of all, what exactly *is* Interreligious Engagement?

Lots of people are talking about interreligious issues right now. Different people using the same term often mean different things by it and a whole range of words are being employed for essentially the same practice. Is “engagement” different than dialogue? Does it mean official, high level discussion between religious leaders or does it include simply chatting with someone of a different faith in the grocery line? Is working at a local school with other parents who are Muslim or Jewish a type of “engagement”? Does reading a book about another religion count? When the report talks about “interreligious engagement,” what does it mean?

As Disciples we resist confining ourselves to a narrow definition of terms. We oppose legalism and have always valued freedom of interpretation. The report suggests that “interreligious engagement can take many forms, ranging from the personal and practical conversations of real individuals living together, to co-operative social ventures, to the joint study of sacred scriptures and deliberate theological dialogues, to shared experiences of worship and prayer” (paragraph 6). Certainly a variety of experiences with our neighbors in other faiths can be meaningful and important. Rather than

proscribing types of activities through which we can engage our neighbors, it might be more helpful to think of interreligious engagement less as *activity* and more as a *way of life*, a way of life comprised of encounters with our neighbors that are *relational*, *intentional* and *religiously honest and open*.

Activity or Way of Life? The report states, “We understand interfaith dialogue as a way of living out our Christian witness” (paragraph 22). The difference between interreligious engagement as an activity and interreligious engagement as a lifestyle is not a hard and fast distinction. Clearly the way we live our lives is in some sense gauged by the activities with which we fill them. Nevertheless, to think of interreligious engagement as one activity among the many other activities of life means it has to compete for its relative importance. It has been said that interreligious engagement is a bit like motherhood—nearly everyone is in favor of it. Yet what we laud in our rhetoric, we often give little priority in our practice. To think of the lifestyle of love and service to which we are called is more helpful. The report suggests that our calling as Christians includes “a lifestyle of commitment to the core issues of our neighbors” (paragraph 22). We can only really attend these core issues when we are in relationship with these neighbors. It is to a lifestyle of openness and honesty that we are called.

Relational Encounters. Often when people think about the encounter between Christianity and other religions they immediately imagine a host of comparative religious questions—is God one or many?; is it earthly life then heaven or reincarnation?, etc. Strictly speaking, however, interreligious encounters do not happen between religions; they happen between religious people. The theological systems or traditions of Christianity and Hinduism do not engage one another; Christians and Hindus do. It is important to remember that when we think about interreligious engagement, we are most concerned with the *relationships* with our neighbors. There are a myriad of opportunities through which Disciples can engage their neighbors. Whether we choose to tackle environmental pollution in our area with the Buddhists down the street, study scripture in partnership with local Jews or pray for world peace alongside of our Muslim neighbors, a key component in each of these encounters is the *relationships* between religious peoples that are established and nurtured. As Christians we recognize God as the parent of all humanity and affirm that all people are children of God. Authentic interreligious engagements are a way of cultivating friendships with our brothers and sisters in other religious traditions. While there is certainly much of value in studying or comparing the history and beliefs of other religious traditions, authentic engagements seek to foster the sibling relationships we have with fellow children of God. Such relationships are an indispensable part of living in community.

Intentional Encounters. Many Christians have an open and friendly attitude towards people of other faiths. Were a neighbor from another tradition to approach them, they would be happy to have a conversation, maybe even begin a project together. Yet we all know that for relationships to develop, effort is required. All the well meant good will in the world is, in practice, no different than indifference if no one takes the initiative to start a conversation. To engage your religious neighbors, impetus is involved.

Interreligious engagement entails active participation. It is not so different from the call Christians feel to work for peace or establish justice in the world. Hence we affirm that “to be faithful to God’s call in today’s religiously pluralistic world summons Disciples intentionally and whole-heartedly to engage in interfaith relations and work” (paragraph 37).

Religiously Honest and Open Encounters. To have conversations with people of other faith traditions is not uncommon in a multireligious society like ours. Think about the people of other faiths who you know...a co-worker, a neighbor down the street, a doctor, the parents of your child’s friend. Many of us have conversations with people of other faiths almost daily. What is more uncommon is for us to talk about what we believe. Clearly not every encounter with our religious neighbors need involve a deep theological discussion. However when questions arise, we ought to be open to them. Some Christians have felt that it is necessary to avoid talking about their beliefs in order to keep their relationships peaceful. Yet this attitude does little more than keep the relationships superficial. As religious people, both we Christians and our neighbors in other traditions cherish our convictions. To be humbly open and honest about those convictions is the best way to create trust.

We might think about interreligious engagement as an “encounter of loyalties” which “bears the most fruit when we are forthrightly Christian and our partners from different faiths are candid representatives of their own religious traditions” (paragraph 8). You may find that speaking about your convictions help you explore the richness of your faith in a deeper way. Christians are not called to downplay or suspend their beliefs. Almost all participants in interreligious dialogues testify that such experiences result in a deeper understanding of and loyalty to their own religious tradition. It is a worthy experience to try to see the world through the eyes of another. This does not imply reducing your commitment to Christianity, but it is a way of generating understanding, trust and respect between neighbors.

2. What term should I use, “interreligious” or “interfaith”?

Scholars of religion have wrestled with this question for some time now. The difficulty lies in the fact that there is no commonly definition of either “religion” or “faith” that is acceptable to all groups. A basic principle in interreligious relations has been that each partner has the right to define themselves. Simply put, Christians get to say what it means to be Christian and Buddhists get to say what it means to be Buddhist. Others can only describe how it appears from the outside. In the West religion has often been thought of as a response to or belief in God, yet there are some groups whose worldviews focus on liberation rather than deity. Social scientists have attempted to deal with the issue of transcendence by suggesting that all religions have a set of certain dimensions, like myth, doctrine, ritual, ethics, and social institution. Yet some secular ideologies, like Soviet Marxism, also possess these dimensions. Arriving at a common definition of faith

is no easier. Nevertheless, we need some way of describing the enterprise through which we engage one another. The common practice among scholars has been to use the terms “interreligious” and “interfaith” interchangeably, while recognizing the shortcomings of language. The report “Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement” follows this custom. Both “interreligious” and “interfaith” are preferable to the earlier practice of describing other traditions as “non-Christian,” which negatively defines theirs by what they are not.

3. What is the difference between “ecumenical” relations and “interfaith” relations? Why has the report “Disciples and Interreligious Engagement” come out of work sponsored by the Council on Christian Unity?

The relationships that Disciples have with other Christians and with people of other faiths are mutually influential and intrinsically linked. They should not be confused, however, for they originate in different theological bases. Ecumenical relations are based on the unity of the Church that God has established in Christ. These relationships have a Christological foundation; we are “one” with other Christians through a common confession of faith in Christ. Look again at the statement on ecclesiology in the report (paragraph 7). Ecumenical relations are based in the unity of the community called into being by God in Jesus Christ whose mission is to witness to God’s love for the world. Interfaith relations on the other hand are based on the unity of all humanity created in God’s image (paragraph 13). These relationships have a broader theological foundation; we are “one” with people of other faiths through our common, created humanity.

While our ecumenical and interfaith relationships should not be collapsed, there are strong reasons to hold them together. First, the very basis of our unity with other Christians, Jesus Christ, prompts Christians into relationships of witness, service and dialogue with others. Christians affirm that God’s reconciliation with the world through Christ has broken down the walls of alienation separating people from one another and from God. Christ’s vulnerability and humility model new possibilities for relationship between Christians and their neighbors in other traditions. Our interfaith relationships can be seen as an outgrowth of the common Christian confession of Christ. Second, the very word “ecumenical” comes from the Greek *oikoumene*, which means the “whole inhabited earth.” Much of the work that Christians do together in the name of peace and justice, against the powers of death and on behalf of those who suffer is rightly done with our neighbors in other religious traditions. To address the welfare of the earth in isolation from the other inhabitants of it simply will not do. Finally, as many commentators have remarked, to speak of Disciples-Muslim or Lutheran-Jewish relations makes little sense. Disciples in particular testify that the unity Christians have in Christ should be stronger than the things that separate them from one another. It is only appropriate then that Christians enter into relationships with their neighbors in other traditions together.

As Christians have become more aware of the inherent connection between our intra- and inter-faith relationships, many ecumenical groups have sought to include an interfaith component. Members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are active participants in local, regional, national and international ecumenical bodies that work together as Christians to establish better relationships with persons in other faiths. It is significant that when the Council on Christian Unity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) called together the Consultation on Interreligious Dialogue and Relations in 2002, it did so in partnership with the Council of Ecumenism of the United Church of Christ. Though the report “Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement” is meant as a study document chiefly for Disciples, it was written with input from various Christian partners.

4. Speaking of other Christians, shouldn't we get our own house in order first? Dialogue with other faiths may be important, but we Christians cannot even agree with each other about what we believe. How are we supposed to communicate Christianity to others?

This is a commonly heard reason that some well-meaning Christians give for putting off engaging their interfaith neighbors. On one hand it is understandable, given that the divisions within Christianity have so damaged the credibility of our witness across the globe. However, this concern seems based in an inadequate understanding of Christian unity. As Disciples, we have long affirmed that there is a fundamental difference between the *unity* of the Church and *uniformity* of belief. The *unity* of the Church is already established in Christ. Our ecumenical goal as Christians is to make this unity more visible in our shared life together. This shared life together is *not* contingent upon complete agreement in matters of faith, doctrine or Christian practice. Rather, we celebrate diversity in the body of Christ as well as diversity in creation. It is unlikely that all Christians will ever think, pray and live their faith in same way while we are on this earth. If they did, the Church would be impoverished, for it would certainly lose much of its richness. If uniformity among Christians is the prerequisite for engaging in interreligious relationships, we might never begin! Fortunately, from the outset we Disciples have resisted using creeds as tests of Christian fellowship. We recognize that the Church need not always agree in order to give witness to the love of God. In fact, the way we handle our passionate disagreements can communicate much about who Christians are.

Closely related to this concern is another (albeit less spoken) reason that some of us use to put off engaging our neighbors. Amidst the busyness of our family and vocational obligations, we sometimes neglect our own spiritual lives. How could we possibly begin a conversation with people of other faith traditions in which we have to represent Christianity, when we don't even have Christianity, our own faith, all figured out yet? This worry too is understandable, even if misguided. We certainly *do not* have to be professional theologians in order to establish relationships with our neighbors, to work

with them for peace and justice or even speak about Christian faith. Even specialists should have room for growth in understanding. Remember that all of us see as “if in a mirror, dimly” (1 Cor. 13:12). The fact that some Christians believe that they *do* have Christianity all figured out should be worrying, not the reverse. Intrinsically Christian faith itself incessantly seeks understanding, even while the God we know in Jesus Christ always exceeds human comprehension. Indeed, the very restlessness of Christian faith draws us into dialogue with our neighbors.

While interfaith relations should not be seen as a substitute for other Christian spiritual disciplines like study, worship and prayer, it is the case that people who have been involved in interreligious conversations overwhelmingly report that these encounters lead them to deeper loyalty to and understanding of their own religion. Interreligious conversations often provoke ecumenical ones, leading Christians to reconsider elements of their tradition in new ways. “As students of God’s truth, we believe that there is much we can learn about ourselves, our neighbors, and how God works in the world from the encounter and engagement with people in other faiths” (paragraph 32).

5. Does the fact that it may lead to new understanding, even spiritual development, justify interfaith engagement?

No, it does not. There are many advantages which Christians may hope, even expect, to result from intentional interfaith conversation and work. The renewal of faith is one. Nevertheless, to engage our neighbor because we might gain something from the encounter is an unacceptably egocentric posture. To view our neighbors as instruments for our own good makes them a means for our own gratification. The central reason we engage our neighbors of other faiths is that God calls us to such relationships. As Disciples we affirm that we are called by the gospel to witness in word and deed to the love of God for the benefit of the world. We are summoned to love our neighbors, not for the benefit of ourselves, but for their benefit and because they are our brothers and sisters created by the one God. We are called to a lifestyle of service, of providing hospitality to strangers and to be peacemakers in the world. To justify relationship building with our neighbors in other faiths by the expected outcome of that engagement exploits our neighbors and compromises the integrity of the relationship.

Just as it is wrong to engage our neighbors primarily for the benefits such relationships might bring us, so too is it mistaken to engage them for the expected benefits it will bring them. Our prime motivation is our summons to witness and love. Neither of these demand a particular response by the neighbor. Our neighbors may “finally decide that their true good involves accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior. But our loving them does not require that, and therefore we could never coerce them to accept Christ” (paragraph 18). We are called to love our neighbors as God has loved us. This love is not the neurotic love of a monarch who decides ahead of time what is “good” for the other and then imposes it. Rather God’s love is modeled in the servanthood of the self-giving,

kenotic Christ whose openness and vulnerability leave us free to respond in relationship without demanding a particular response.

6. Wait, isn't part of our mission to convert others? What does the Bible say?

The Bible is not univocal about the status of other religions, nor about the content and parameters of Christian witness. As Disciples we affirm that the activities of witness "are complex and multi-dimensional" (paragraph 17). By reading only particular passages (such as Matthew 28: 18-19, John 14: 5-6, Acts 4:11-12, 1 Corinthians 3:11, 1 John 5:12), one can extract a negative understanding of other religions from the Bible and the understanding that Christians witness necessitates others becoming disciples of Jesus. By focusing on other passages (such as Luke 9: 49-50, Psalm 24:1-2, Amos 9:7, Genesis 9: 8-17, Isaiah 19:19-25, Matthew 8: 10-12, Micah 6:8), one may gain a positive understanding of others and a view that Christian witness does not necessitate that they become Christian. Simply put, there is no straightforward, one-sided vision of the nature of Christian witness. It is helpful to remember that the Bible is more like a library of sixty-six books than a single volume. To limit what a library says on a particular topic to isolated verses taken from one book is misguided. Rather, we are called to "a sincere and profound engagement with the Bible" and to "attempt to discern its essential messages and themes" (paragraph 29). As people with deep reverence for the Bible, we recognize that it presents different visions of mission and we are summoned to study and discernment.

7. Despite the fact that the Bible allows multiple interpretations, doesn't *my* interpretation about the value of other traditions dictate the relationship I will have? In other words, does the Gospel compel us to decide what we think of other religious traditions before we enter conversation with the people who follow them?

Anyone with a passing exposure to the writings on interfaith relations in recent years has probably heard of different Christian perspectives on other religions. The most well known and commonly used classification system is that which divides Christian responses into categories of "exclusivism," "inclusivism" and "pluralism." Roughly speaking, "exclusivism" affirms that Christianity is the one true religion, that salvation is only in Jesus Christ and that all other religions are misguided human attempts at self-salvation. "Inclusivism" maintains that God is at work in other religions besides Christianity, but that whatever truth or salvation is found there is fulfilled, superseded, and realized completely only in Christianity. "Pluralism" contends that salvation can be found in many of the world's great religious traditions. Some scholars have critiqued this paradigm and offered other categories to describe the various Christian theologies of religions. Whatever categories one uses, the argument has been that Christians need to

have a position about the value of other traditions because that position dictates how Christians understand the nature and purpose of interreligious dialogue.

No doubt there is merit in considering the salvific value of other religions. The key question, however, is not whether other traditions have value, but whether we *need* to know, or even if we *can* know, what that value is before we enter into conversation with adherents of those traditions. First, we should remember that the Bible does not especially address other religions or the issue of dialogue with members of other traditions; it describes the history and faith of Jews and Christians. The scriptures make clear that idolatry is unsuitable for the faithful. However allegations of idolatry are primarily leveled against Jews and Christians; idolatry is an internal critique rather than an external one. The problem of idolatry for the Hebrew prophets was not the concern that other people worshiped other gods, but that Israel might do so. The Christian gospel does not demand that we make a priori evaluations of other religions, with the possible exception of Judaism which, theologically, we must deem positively. The Christian claim that God is revealed in Christ is predicated on the revelatory character of Judaism. To live a life a discipleship to Jesus does not oblige us to immediately accept or reject the claims of other religions. Nor does it mandate a judgment of those traditions before conversation begins.

Given that Christians are not required to evaluate the religious traditions of their neighbors before getting to know them, it is questionable whether or not they should make such evaluations. Christian theologies of religion attempt to explain the meaning and status of other religions based on the teachings of Christianity. They are intrinsically intra-Christian conversations about the religious lives of people who are not Christian. Whether one is an exclusivist or a pluralist, a priori judgments about others are rooted in the assumption that Christians ultimately know more about the religious lives of their neighbors than they do themselves (i.e. whether or not their tradition does or does not lead to salvation). To decide in advance the value of other traditions distorts and uses those traditions to answer endemically Christian questions, like how a good God could condemn (or save) humans who are not a part of the Christian community. Clearly Christians should use their theological resources to try to understand the existence of religious plurality. Yet these resources *should not* be used to excuse ourselves from our obligation to listen and to learn from others. We are called to be open to the world which God loves and in which God is active and so to actively listen to and engage our neighbors of other faiths.

8. Christianity has always existed in a world with other religions. Why is interreligious engagement called a "special calling in our time" (paragraph 4)? Does it have to do with the events of September 11, 2001?

It is true that Christianity has always existed in a religiously plural world. Indeed, Christianity's very birth and infancy occurred within the matrix of Judaism and the philosophical/mystery-religious setting of the Roman world. However Christians have not always been as aware of other religions as they are today. The unprecedented surge of migrants, refugees and displaced persons in recent decades, along with the advent of certain communication and transportation technologies, has intensified religious diversity in many places in the world and has brought to consciousness an increased awareness of the presence of other religions.

It is also true that the tragedies of September 11, 2001 and other areas of violence in the world have highlighted the importance of deep interreligious understanding and cooperative work for peace. We recognize that we are often woefully ignorant of the beliefs, practices and traditions that shape the religious lives of our neighbors and acknowledge that such ignorance often has resulted in fear, distrust, violence, hatred and the dehumanization of our neighbors in other faiths. In one sense, then, it is true that recent events have underscored the urgent need, even the "special calling," to cultivate deeper levels of understanding between ourselves and our neighbors in other religious traditions.

In another sense, though, world events do not determine our calling as Christians; they merely draw attention to certain aspects of it. The Christian motivation for interreligious engagement is not a fear-based response to violence, but a love-based desire for relationship with our neighbors. Some people have understood interreligious engagement as if it were an emergency ambulance service. When religious violence crops up, calls for dialogue immediately appear. Then when tensions decline, interest in interfaith engagement also wanes. Our rationale for interreligious engagement stems not from short-lived, anxiety-fueled reactions to world events, but from the lifestyle of discipleship, witness, service and love to which we are called.

9. Who should I engage?

From a theological point of view, we are called to relationship with the world. Our openness to our neighbors is not determined by their merit, but by the way God has loved us in Christ. God loves us unconditionally; we respond to that love by being unconditionally open to our neighbors in other religious traditions. We reject the notion that we should restrict our relationships to those groups with whom we think we have most in common or of whose ethical lives we most approve. It may be the case that our openness or desire for relationship is not always reciprocated. There likely will be times when interreligious cooperation and conversation become difficult or break down, when our intentions are misunderstood or manipulated. Such occasions are to be expected given our human fallen condition. Even so, our fallenness does not mitigate our calling to discipleship, openness and love.

10. Okay, so how to I get started?

Fortunately, much interreligious engagement is already happening. Here are a few suggestions for how to get started.

(1) A first step is to find out what sort of interfaith projects, initiatives or groups are already active in your local area or state. Many Disciples regularly attend interfaith councils and participate in interfaith action designed to address peace and social justice concerns. Interfaith organization and projects provide easy ways to get to know the people of other faith traditions in your area.

(2) Education in your congregation is another important endeavor that can serve as a precursor and compliment to actual engagement. Study the report “Disciples and Interreligious Engagement.” Many other Christian denominations, as well as the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches, have statements and suggestions for interreligious engagement.

(3) Bookmark and frequently check the Council on Christian Unity website <http://www.disciples.org/ccu/> to find resources and links for interfaith study, dialogue, worship, projects and prayer.

(4) The Disciples of Christ have active participants on the National Council of Churches Interfaith Commission, which is available to lead workshops, make presentations, help start interfaith dialogues and projects and assist in responding to difficult interfaith situations.

(5) Introduce yourself to your local neighbors in other traditions. As you get to know them, make their joys and sorrows a part of your own through your newsletters and in your prayers. Recognize their holy days and, when appropriate, thank them for the witness they bring to you.

Recommended Resources

The availability of new interfaith resources is increasingly exponentially. The best way to access new resources for interfaith study, dialogue, worship, projects and prayer is to check those listed on the websites of:

- Council on Christian Unity [<http://www.disciples.org/ccu/>]
- National Council of Christian Churches' Interfaith Relations Commission [<http://nccusa.org/interfaith/ifrhome.htm>]
- World Council of Churches Interfaith and Dialogue Team [<http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/index-e.html>]

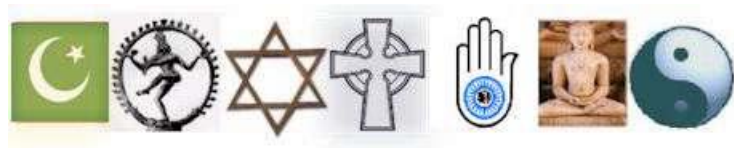
Three Good Resources to Start:

1. For Interfaith Prayer Resources, see All in Good Faith: A Resource Book for Multi-faith Prayer, edited by Jean Potter and Marcus Braybrooke (published in 1997 by The World Congress on Faiths; ISBN 0-905468-01-5).

The book has 3 parts: (1) one dealing with how different religions understand the nature of prayer, (2) a nice anthology of prayers from different religions on particular topics (i.e. compassion, justice, peace, tolerance, virtues, the world, times of trouble, etc.), and (3) a third section with 9 different interfaith services.

2. For a study of study of the Bible and Interfaith, see Wesley Ariarajah's The Bible and People of Other Faiths (published in 1985 by World Council of Churches; ISBN 2-8254-0840-9).

3. For a issues related to interfaith dialogue such as Interfaith Prayer, Marriage, Women, Conflict and Mission, see Wesley Ariarajah's Not Without My Neighbor: Issues in Interfaith Relations (published in 1999 by the World Council of Churches; ISBN 2-8254-1308-9).



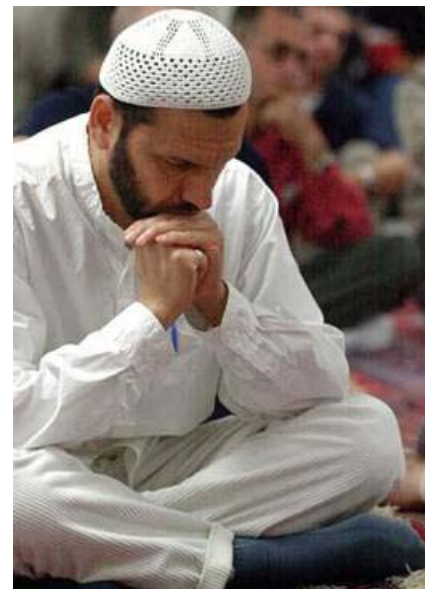
Inter-religious relationships are one of God's special callings in our time. While the Church has always lived in a religiously pluralistic world, the rich diversity of different faiths is more apparent now than ever before.

Christians often find themselves face-to-face with neighbors and co-workers, relatives, strangers, and friends who belong to different religious traditions. This presents us with unique opportunities to witness, love, and serve "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). By learning practical ways to encounter people of diverse faiths, we discover opportunities to learn from them, to live in community with them, to develop mutual respect, and to discover areas of commonality.

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Getting to Know *Neighbors* of Other Faiths



A Theological Rationale for Interfaith Relationships

God and Human Community

As Christians, we affirm that God loves all of creation and that all people are created in God's image (Genesis 1:27). Through God's love, all people are related to one another as children of God. This common humanity and relatedness are gifts from God to the human race. Relating to people of other faiths strengthens community and encourages human flourishing.

Hospitality to the Stranger

Scripture offers many examples of ethical and pastoral incentives for interreligious relationships. The stories of Abraham and Sarah, Jethro, Ruth, and others, remind us to welcome and treat kindly those from outside our own religious communities. The virtue of hospitality to strangers is amplified in Jesus' ministry as he befriends the Samaritan woman and shows in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) that caring for those outside of one's own community is important. In the letter to the Hebrews we read, 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.' (Hebrews 13:2)

Loving God and Neighbor

Indeed, Jesus goes beyond hospitality to suggest that the whole of the law and the prophets are summarized in the commandment to love God and to love one's neighbors (Matthew 22:36-40). Loving others means respecting them, listening to them, and treating them as we would want them treat us (Matthew 7:12). Loving means not only the authentic sharing of truth as we see it, but a deep listening to others. Loving one's neighbors take priority over proclaiming right doctrine or performing formal worship, it becomes the first and guiding commandment for Christians. (See Matthew 5:23-24 and 12:12).



Reconciliation with God

Christians affirm that all people have been already reconciled to God and to others in Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18ff.; Colossians 3:15ff.). Every person embodies something of the divine image and therefore may possess some ray of truth, some aspect of the Mystery of God we know to be revealed in Jesus Christ. Christians know God through Jesus Christ, but understand that all human understanding of truth is inherently limited and conditioned. The reality of God, in contrast, is intrinsically unlimited. God will always be greater than any human can comprehend or any religion can convey.

Christian Witness and Reconciliation with Others

Christians have been sent into the world to testify in word and deed to the God we know through Jesus Christ (John 17:18). Yet Christians have not always embodied God's love in their relationships with people of other religious traditions. A lack of understanding and respect for other faiths has often resulted in fear, distrust, and the dehumanization of people in other religious traditions. Christian witness to God's love seeks to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the world. That means conversing with, listening to, learning from, and living peacefully with those in the world who do not confess Jesus as Lord. Listening and sharing sometimes shows God's love better than declarations of beliefs.



Peacemakers

As Christians, we are called to be peacemakers in the world. We look for ways to strengthen human life in community. But since Scripture speaks in many voices, it has sometimes been used to discount and divide people of different faiths from one another. Through encounters with people of other religions, Christians hope to find new understanding and to discover fuller and more meaningful ways to live in reconciled communities together.

Person and work of Christ

Through Jesus Christ humanity is invited to speak and respond to God. In Scripture, God not only speaks but listens, not only challenges, but waits. In the death and resurrection of Christ, God brings about the possibility for new relationships between God and humanity and between different human persons and communities. The work of Christ is to break down the walls of separation and alienation between peoples with each other and with God. New possibilities for relationship began in the vulnerability, risk, and faith of Jesus. A new reality is now available now for believers in Christ to make ourselves vulnerable and to take risks in our relationships with people of other faiths.

Spirit of God and Human Hope

Christians affirm that the Holy Spirit, who hovered over the waters when the earth was void and without form (Genesis 1:2), can bring order out of chaos and can reshape warped societies. Relationships with people of other religious traditions are shaped by the Holy Spirit who, like the wind, 'blows where it chooses' (John 3:8). While we do not always understand the Spirit's purposes, we need never be without hope, for we nor the rest of creation are ever without the Spirit of God.

Introduction to World Religions:

Building Bridges of Understanding



In 2002 the California Council of Churches made a decision to respond to the episodes of violence and mistaken identity that followed 9/11. Their chosen response was a curriculum study guide on six of the world's religions, which was funded by The California Endowment, Presbyterian Church (USA) Peacemaking Program, United Methodist Church Peace and Justice Program, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Reconciliation Fund and Southern California Ecumenical Council.

Building Bridges of Understanding focuses on six major faith traditions found in California, and was designed primarily for use by the Council of Churches member congregations. Although the Council has for years produced study guides for their member congregations on many topics of broad public concern, never had they considered such an academic and potentially "inter-faith" educational initiative.

INTRODUCTION TO BUDDHISM

Buddhism arises out of the experiences of a man named Siddhartha Gautama who was born to a king or chieftain in India in the sixth century BCE. He is said to have left his home and family, renouncing his birthright, wife and infant son, to become a wandering ascetic in search of ultimate truth. According to legend, his search was motivated by encounters with suffering, disease, old age and death. Gautama set out to seek the answer to why we suffer in this human life. Through the insight he gained from his search and through deep meditation, he became known as the Buddha, or “Enlightened One.”

BELIEFS

The teachings of the Buddha, which were not written down until nearly three centuries after his death, center on the nature of suffering and how to end it. Although written long after the Buddha lived, there is a great deal of certainty that the basic teachings, the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, were his original teachings. Buddhism is often called a “middle path, steering a middle course between asceticism and hedonism”. One formally becomes a Buddhist by “taking refuge” in the three “jewels”: the Buddha, the Enlightened One; the Dharma, or teaching; and the Sangha, or community. As he lay dying, the Buddha exhorted his followers to diligently work out their own salvation, characterizing this path as one of individual emancipation and then of others.

The Four Noble Truths explain the reality of suffering: 1) all of humanity experiences suffering in many forms including the physical, mental and existential (i.e., birth, aging, disease, death, separating from loved ones, meeting up with people one doesn’t like); 2) suffering originates in a desire for or grasping after experiences, pleasure, continued existence, and even annihilation; 3) we can escape suffering by following a path designed to end these attachments; and 4) the path the Buddha taught to escape suffering is the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path is divided into three groupings: cultivating insight, cultivating morality, and cultivating the mind through meditation. The first two steps – *right views* and *right intention* – reflect the cultivation of insight and wisdom. The next three steps – *right speech*, *right action* and *right career* – reflect the cultivation of morality, and the last three – *right effort*, *right mindfulness* and *right concentration* – reflect the cultivation of the mind. As a result of this approach – one of diagnosing humanity’s ailment and providing the cure – adherents often speak of Buddhism more as a philosophy of life than as a religion in the traditional sense.

Although the Buddha incorporated the doctrines of *karma*, *reincarnation* and the existence of some of the deities of Hinduism, he rejected other elements of the religion. He rejected specifically the rituals described in the *Vedas*, as well as the caste system, challenging the very basis of Hindu society.

However, the most revolutionary aspect of the Buddha’s teaching was in his rejection of Hindu ideas pertaining to the Self and Brahman. Hinduism teaches that the Self (not the personality) is the permanent, unchanging life force that is the source of ultimate knowledge for the individual. Brahman is the permanent, unchanging transcendent Supreme Reality in the universe which lies beyond the cosmos, and is its source. Humanity’s goal is to be released from the cycle of birth and death and for the Self to merge with Brahman.

Buddhism, in contrast, teaches that everything in the material and mental realms, including what we call our “self”, is constantly in flux and impermanent. Our suffering therefore arises out of our grasping to hold onto that which is impermanent – an impossible task. We constantly desire things we do not possess, or worry about losing the things we do possess. As the Eightfold Path teaches, meditation is the primary practice that overcomes this human delusion by calming the mind and revealing the nature of things as they truly are. As one gains this insight, the ultimate breakthrough occurs which is called *Nirvana* – the transcendence of all grasping, attachment rooted in desire, greed, hatred, and delusion.

Because these practices are time-consuming and can require a great deal of instruction and guidance, early Buddhism was and Theravada Buddhism (in South and Southeast Asia) still is more of a monastic religion than one of the masses. In these areas, the Sangha (community of monks and nuns) is more expected to attain the goals set forth by the Buddha than the lay community. Western Buddhists, Pure Land and Mahâyâna Buddhists engage in various practices with a broad range of beliefs about death, enlightenment and living out the Eightfold Path.

SACRED BOOKS/SCRIPTURE

Buddhism’s sacred writings are composed in many languages and are vast in number. Originating in what has become Theravada Buddhism, the Pâli canon is the oldest surviving collection. The earliest compositions in this canon are called *suttas* (*sûtras* in Sanskrit), and are usually based upon the words of the Buddha, but some are from his disciples. The canon was written down in the first century BCE in Sri Lanka, and included a later section added to the *suttas* analyzing the teachings in the earlier compositions.

The Pâli canon is divided into “baskets” (*pitakas*). Rules for monks and nuns are found in the Vinaya Pitaka; the Sutta Pitaka contains the teaching of the Buddha; and the commentaries discuss the *suttas* analytically in the Abhidhamma Pitaka.

Other authoritative and influential texts came from the Mahâyâna and Vajrayâna Buddhist traditions. Known as *sûtras* from the Sanskrit, and believed to be the Buddha’s own words, the first Mahâyâna *sûtras* appeared in the first century BCE, and continued to be written until the

eight century CE. Some of the most prominent include the Wisdom Sūtras, with longer and shorter versions such as the Diamond and Heart Sūtras, the Lotus Sūtras and the Pure Land Sūtras. The Vajrayāna tradition appeared with new texts dating from the sixth century CE that were known as *tantras* (systems) and esoteric ritual texts.

PRACTICES, RITUALS and FESTIVALS

Although meditation is the principal practice of most Buddhists, it is not universal. The Pure Land School of Buddhism, for example, emphasizes faith as well as the recitation of a formula that will gain practitioners rebirth into the Western Paradise or Pure Land (a temporary extraterrestrial realm with no suffering leading to enlightenment).

Major Buddhist festivals and celebrations include: **Wesak** (Sri Lanka), or **Visakha Puja** (Thailand). A celebration of the birth, death and enlightenment of the Buddha. Observed on the day of the full moon in the fifth lunar month.

Asalha Puja. Held on the full moon day in seventh lunar month, this celebration commemorates the first sermon the Buddha gave to his original five disciples.

The Lantern Festival. This festival commemorates the proof that the Buddhist sūtras were genuine because they did not catch fire when burned like the scriptures of the Taoists did. Chinese and other Asians celebrate on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month. Lamps are lit to symbolize the light of Buddhism.

Obon or All Soul's Day. This ceremony, which occurs on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month (July or August) serves to honor and remember ancestors. It is based on the story of the Buddha's awakened disciple (Maudgalyāyana) and his rescue of his mother in hell. Lanterns are usually placed on small boats and set adrift on a body of water. Obon festivals at Japanese Buddhist temples are now a popular event of the entire community in many parts of the U.S.

New Year's Day. Chinese, Vietnamese and some Korean Buddhist communities celebrate this day according to the Chinese lunar calendar, which situates it around February. Sri Lankans, Thais, Laotians, Burmese and Cambodians celebrate the New Year according to a different calendar which places the day on the 13th or 14th of April. It is considered a good day to perform acts of merit.

BRANCHES OF BUDDHISM and WOMEN'S ROLES IN BUDDHISM

It is clear that women were among the Buddha's early followers and supporters. Their roles in the tradition vary according to the branch with which they are associated.

Buddhism is identified today according to three traditions often referred to as "vehicles" (yāna).

Theravāda (the teaching of the elders) practices, the dominant form of Buddhism in South Asia (Sri Lanka) and Southeast Asia (Myanmar [Burma], Thailand, Cambodia and

Laos), focus on monastic life. Lay Buddhists earn "merit" toward future enlightenment through giving gifts of food and other necessities to support monks. Nuns do exist, but are not formally ordained. They are known as "precept holders", and are independent or attached to monasteries.

Mahāyāna (the Greater Vehicle) Buddhism appeared around the first century BCE. The concept of the Bodhisattva (one who, rather than pursuing one's own Nirvana, continues to work for the salvation of all beings) originated in this branch of Buddhism. The emphasis here is on saving others rather than oneself, and more importance is placed on the practice of compassion. Full ordination of women is practiced. In Japan, where Zen Buddhism is one of the main schools along with Pure Land and Nichinan branches, nuns enjoy a higher status and better education, and may become Zen *roshis* (priests). Females Zen priests are relatively common in United States Zen communities.

Vajrayāna (the Diamond Vehicle) Buddhism appeared around 500 CE in India with the introduction of books known as *tantras*. It later spread to Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia, China and Japan. It emphasizes ritual and mystical means to enlightenment. Vajrayāna devotees attain enlightenment through the use of *mantras* (sacred language), *mudras* (hand gestures) and *mandalas* (symbolic models of the cosmos). Novice ordination of women has been generally practiced until recently when full ordination began to be introduced. 🙏

BUDDHISM – Did You Know?

- A wheel with eight spokes, the Dharma Wheel, most often represents Buddhism, signifying the Eightfold Path.
- There are over 300 million Buddhists in the world, and numbers range from 500,000 to 5 million in the United States.
- One third of California's 200 Buddhist Centers are clustered in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Berkeley.
- Buddhism disappeared from its birthplace in India by the end of the 13th century due to repeated waves of various foreign invasions, leading ultimately to the conquest of India by groups unified under Islam.



Photographs by Jerry Berndt, courtesy of the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture.

INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIANITY

Christianity is a worldwide faith comprised of many branches with a common source. This common source is within the birth, life, teachings, acts, death and resurrection of Jesus, whom Christians call the Christ (Messiah).

Jesus was born in Roman-occupied Palestine about 2,000 years ago. He was a Jew living in a Jewish land later renamed Palestine by the Romans after the destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 C.E. Jesus began teaching and healing in a ministry that lasted about three years, with a message of justice and love, and of turning toward God. He taught that the Kingdom of God was one in which there would be no barriers between humans: no Jews or Greeks, no male or female, no slaves or free. Because the Romans feared that as his following grew he might lead a revolt against them, the Romans arrested and crucified Jesus. At that time, various sects within Judaism competed for believers. Jewish leaders who disagreed with Jesus' approach probably cooperated with the Romans in bringing charges against Jesus. After his death, his Christian followers claimed that he had been resurrected from the dead and had appeared to some of them.

Though the earliest Christians were Jews, the apostle Paul, and other followers began to spread the teachings of Jesus to the non-Jewish population of the Greco-Roman world. The small band of followers was sufficiently inspired by their spiritual experience that Christianity quickly created many communities of faith in the Mediterranean world, and eventually the entire world. Christianity spread throughout the Hellenistic world and to India in the first three centuries, and from the fourth to seventh centuries throughout continental Europe, south in Africa into Ethiopia and Nubia. In the seventh century it was planted in China, and in the tenth century Russia became Christian.

Today one third of the world's people call themselves Christian, the largest of the world's religions. Christianity is characterized by extraordinary diversity and is now growing most rapidly in Africa and Latin America, where we find the majority of the world's Christians.

BELIEFS

Christianity's chief proclamation is that Jesus is the Messiah first foretold in Judaism. He is seen as God's son who was sent to redeem humankind from its sinful condition. Jesus' teachings were based upon love, not law. Humans can be redeemed by faith in Jesus Christ, loving one another and living a life exemplifying the gifts of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and faithfulness.

Jesus is at once fully divine and fully human. In his divinity, he is one in essence with God the Father, the God of the Jewish people. God is almighty and the creator of heaven and earth.

When Jesus ascended to heaven after his resurrection, he left the Holy Spirit to be with his followers. The Holy Spirit is said to be co-equal with Jesus and God the Father, sharing the divine essence. This triune relationship within the Godhead is called the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). Just as in other faith traditions, great diversity exists in what is deemed central to the Christian gospel. There are Christians who hold a more traditional belief that at some point Jesus will return to judge

all humankind. Those who are redeemed will live eternally in heaven, and those who are not will be condemned to hell. Many Christians today have reinterpreted those traditional views of judgement, heaven and hell, placing the emphasis on Christ's life-giving redemptive work.

SACRED BOOKS/ SCRIPTURE

The earliest Christians were Jews; the Hebrew Scriptures were their sacred writings. Modern Christians still so regard them, calling them the Old Testament or First Testament, including them in the Christian Bible.

The scriptures were known in the days of the early church both in the Hebrew language, in a shorter canon of writings, and in the Greek language, in a version called the Septuagint, used by Jews in the Hellenistic world. The Septuagint included an additional group of writings, produced not long before Christ or around his lifetime, which have become known as the Apocrypha. Christians mostly used the Septuagint version. When Western Christians translated the Bible into Latin, (a version called the Vulgate, which is still the authoritative version of the Bible for Catholics) they included the Apocrypha. Today Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and other non-Protestants still include most of the Apocrypha in their sacred scriptures, and the Orthodox churches include somewhat fewer writings from the Apocrypha. At the time of the 16th century Reformation, however, Protestants made a sharp distinction between the authoritative writings in a shorter Hebrew canon and the Apocrypha, which they saw as useful but not canonical, not part of the sacred scriptures.

For the first four centuries of the Christian church's life, a New Testament canon of Christian writings came to be generally accepted and was added to the Hebrew scriptures to form the Christian Bible. The New Testament consists of 27 books: four Gospels ("good news" - accounts of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and teachings), one historical book called the Acts of the Apostles; one "apocalyptic" writing called Revelation; and 21 letters to churches, more than half attributed to the apostle Paul. There are no writings by Jesus himself.

PRACTICES and CELEBRATIONS

The vast majority of Christians celebrate two rituals or sacraments: baptism with water (the rite marking entry into the religious community), and the Lord's Supper/Holy Communion/Eucharist (consuming bread and wine, which are understood in various ways to represent the presence of Jesus Christ), as a rite of communion with God and with all believers.

With the exception of Seventh Day Adventists, Christians hold their weekly principal worship services on Sunday, which is the day of Christ's resurrection.

The dates of the principal Christian holidays, with the exception of Advent and Christmas, are determined by a lunar calendar, so their dates vary from year to year. Orthodox Christians use a different calendar, so they observe these lunar holidays on different dates than those of Protestants and Roman Catholics.

Advent. Beginning on the Sunday nearest November 30, this is a four-week period of spiritual preparation for the advent (coming birth) of Jesus Christ.

Christmas. Celebration of the birth of Jesus on December 25. Orthodox Christians celebrate Jesus' birth on January 7.

Lent. Beginning with Ash Wednesday for Roman Catholics and Protestants, this is a 40-day period of penitence in February or March in preparation for Easter.

Good Friday (Holy Friday for Orthodox Christians). This is a commemoration of the day Jesus died by crucifixion, and it occurs two days before Easter. Many Christians attend religious services on this afternoon at about the time he is thought to have hung on the cross and died.

Easter Sunday. A celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. Based on a lunar calendar, its date varies year to year.

Ascension Day. Occurring 40 days after Easter, this is a commemoration of Jesus' ascent into heaven to sit at the right hand of God the Father.

Pentecost Sunday. This celebration marks the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus' followers after his ascension. It occurs on the seventh Sunday after Easter.

MAIN SUBGROUPS

While this entire overview is meant to explain what is common to Christianity, many branches exist within the Christian community that are identified by specific interpretations, practices and additional revered texts. These include the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Scientists. Excellent general information on these denominations can be obtained from *America's Religions: An Educator's Guide to Beliefs and Practices*, available from Teacher Ideas Press (1-800-237-6124, or www.lu.com/tip)

(Eastern) Orthodox. Originating in the Middle East, North Africa and later Eastern Europe, this traditional form of Christianity is organized along national lines (Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, etc.). It sees itself as the one true, visible church (a belief also held by Roman Catholicism). Developing in the early centuries, the Orthodox church participated in the first seven ecumenical councils assembled to discuss matters of belief and practice within the entire Christian community. A schism with the Roman church developed in 1054 over several complex issues, although chief among them was the Roman Pope's claim to be head of the entire Christian church.

Roman Catholic. Beginning in Rome, claiming Peter, the disciple of Jesus, as the first Bishop of Rome, this largest branch of Christianity accepts the authority of the later Roman popes as Peter's successors. Roman Catholics share with Orthodox and Protestant Christians the basic Christian beliefs, but differ on matters of authority and governance. The Pope is revered as Christ's representative on earth, and it is believed that when he speaks *ex cathedra* (by virtue of his office) on a matter of faith or moral teaching he cannot err (papal infallibility). Among the specific practices which distinguish Roman Catholicism are that it generally requires all its priests/ministers to remain celibate, ordains no women into the priesthood, and forbids divorce under any circumstance, although annulments (declarations that no marriage ever existed) have become widespread in recent years.

Protestant. The most recent major branch of Christianity began in western Europe in the sixteenth century as a protest against perceived abuses of Roman Catholicism. It has many subdivisions, including Anglicans, Methodists, Lutherans,

Presbyterians, Baptists. Protestants share the basic Christian beliefs of Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians, but are distinguished by such classically Protestant beliefs as:

- Salvation is received by the grace of God alone and is not dependent on human effort.
- The Bible is the sole authority for faith – not tradition or rituals.
- God is sovereign and decides who will be saved.
- All believers can have direct access to God without the mediation of priests. Though governance varies, lay people have a strong role in governance of their churches. A new Pentecostal movement has arisen within Protestantism in the 20th century which emphasizes the immediate experience of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

ROLES OF WOMEN

Women have been a part of the Christian community from its beginning. In fact, it was women who reported Jesus' resurrection to his other followers. It seems that Jesus dealt more openly with women than was customary at the time, and his teachings, although not explicitly rejecting hierarchical family structures, suggest a spiritual equality between men and women, which was reflected in the life of the earliest Christian community.

The great example of womanhood throughout medieval Christianity was the Virgin Mary, the mother of God, an intercessor with Christ and God the Father. Women throughout Christian history have played important roles in the spiritual life of the faith.

Christian feminism since the 19th century has opened ordination as ministers to women in several Protestant denominations, Episcopalians finally approving the practice in 1976. Congregationalists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ, most Lutherans, and American (Northern) Baptists all ordain women, while Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians and most Southern Baptists (as well as some other Protestants) do not. 🏠

CHRISTIANITY – Did you know?

- While some evangelical and fundamentalist Christians use the term "Christian" to define themselves after their "born again" experience, the term Christian applies to anyone who accepts some form of the religion in any of its Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant or other expressions.
- Orthodox Christians who use "icons" in their worship, see them as symbolic representations meant to inspire their devotion to Christ, Mary and the saints. They do not worship the icons themselves.
- Of Christians living in California, 56.1%, are Roman Catholic.
- Although Roman Catholics venerate Mary as the most important of the saints, and pray to God through her, she is not considered divine herself.
- The most common symbol for Christianity is the Cross upon which Christ was crucified.

INTRODUCTION TO HINDUISM

Hinduism is widely regarded as the oldest living religion. It has no single founder, but is the result of the religious experience gathered over several thousand years by countless men and women in their search for the meaning and purpose of life. The roots of Hinduism that weave together Aryan, Dravidian and ancient tribal cultures native to India can be traced back to before 3000 BCE.

BELIEFS and SYMBOLS

The central belief of Hinduism is that God can be experienced as a reality in our life here and now. God is the infinite, eternal essence of all that is. In reality that divine Being alone exists, and the purpose of life is to draw close to God and to experience God's reality directly within ourselves. Human beings, in order to feel close to God, like to approach the Divinity in a personal way. Historically in Hinduism, many forms of God have been worshiped, but they are always seen as the various facets of the One, called Brahman.

SACRED BOOKS/SCRIPTURE

The ancient sages' experiences were originally handed down orally from teacher to student and not actually written down until comparatively recent times. The teachings discovered by these sages in their introspection are called the *Vedas*. They are a vast compilation containing instructions for worship and hymns, as well as deep philosophy. They consist of more than 50 separate works. Hindus understand the *Vedas* as "heard" Divine Revelation, and not of human origin, although human beings were the means through which the Divine wisdom was revealed. The last part of the *Vedas*, called the *Upanishads*, teach that oneness with the supreme Reality (Brahman) is the ultimate goal of human beings, and that salvation or liberation is achieved through life experience.

In modern times, it is mostly the concluding portion, the philosophy, which is given importance. This is called the *Vedanta* or end (anta) of the *Vedas*.

The religious literature of Hinduism also contains a vast body of auxiliary scriptures that act like commentaries on the *Vedas*. Examples include the *Smritis*, or writings about Hindu law, and the two epics: the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* (which includes the *Bhagavad Gita*). These scriptures contain spiritual instructions as well as histories of dynasties, and also stories of the lives of saints and sages, both men and women, describing their experiences of God and of spiritual truths.

KARMA and REINCARNATION

Karma is the moral law of cause and effect that maintains that our present situation is the result of our past actions. The law of karma implies that human beings create their own future destiny (individually and

collectively) by accepting responsibility and accountability for their thoughts and actions now.

In order to account for the vast differences in the condition and experience of people in this life, in order to try to explain why some are born to apparently undeserved misery and suffering, while others are born to happiness, it is proposed that this is the fruit of the actions of a previous life. This is the theory of reincarnation. As one grows morally and spiritually, and as one becomes more devoted to God, the fruits of these actions, and therefore reincarnation, will not affect us so much. Thus gradually one attains freedom from the need to reincarnate.

YOGA

To attain this freedom ("*moksha*") one practices one or more of the four main spiritual paths, collectively termed *yoga*. These four paths are meant for the four main personality types found among human beings. Those who are mainly of an intellectual and philosophical bent of mind can use the path of *jnana yoga*. In this path one analyzes all facets of one's experience, trying to reach the reality of God by renouncing what is unreal and untrue, and earnestly striving to find the real, the true, the eternal. Those people who are of a more emotional nature may follow the path of *bhakti yoga*. In this path one worships God with devotion and love, offering one's whole being in His service, making him the beloved of their hearts. For those of active temperament, there is the path of *karma yoga*, which emphasizes total selflessness and an active dedication to the welfare of all beings. Then there is the path of mental control and psychology, known as *raja yoga*. After the requisite disciplines of mental and physical purification have been undergone, one strives through mental control and meditation to still the restlessness of the mind. *Raja yoga* is the path out of which western physical yoga practice emerges. Most people, being of mixed temperaments, like to undertake a combination of several of these yogas. It is always recommended that those who want to undertake these spiritual practices avail themselves of the guidance of an experienced person who can point out the difficulties along the way and give proper guidance.

GOALS and STAGES OF LIFE

Hinduism recognizes that all the various goals of human beings can be divided into four broad categories: 1) the fulfillment of legitimate desires, 2) the attainment of success in this world, 3) the yearning for righteousness and morality, and 4) the attainment of the spiritual goal of salvation or enlightenment. These goals are part of a holistic view of human experience and all can be practiced together. The practice of righteousness, however, must pervade them all. It is the foundation on which they all stand.

To enable people to pursue these four goals, Hinduism recognizes four stages of a person's life. The first stage is that of the student, where one learns to lead a disciplined, pure life, devoted to the acquisition of knowledge, to prepare one for bearing the responsibilities associated with the next stage. Stage two is the householder whose labor supports all the other stages. In this stage, along with the responsibility of taking care of his own family as well as his larger family, namely the whole society, the householder can pursue the first three goals of life. When, however, his children have grown up and have children of their own, then the householder should prepare himself to turn his mind away from involvement with mundane things, and direct it to the fourth goal of life, spiritual realization. To do this he enters the third stage of life: He and his wife withdraw to a retreat to begin a life of contemplation and meditation. When, after many years, they have both become established in this new life and accustomed to it, then they separately enter the monastic life (*sannyasa*), stage four, devoting their whole time to the practice of *yoga* for the realization of God. In this way, in their final years on earth they will be engrossed in the search for spiritual fulfillment and joy.

DEITIES and INCARNATIONS OF GOD

All the manifestations of power in this universe can be resolved into three: 1) creation, 2) preservation, and 3) destruction. Brahman, or God, is the only reality. So one should be able to perceive God in all three manifestations of power. This is described in a personal way by associating creation, preservation, and destruction each with a particular aspect of the Godhead. The creative power is called *Brahma*. The sustaining power is called *Vishnu*, and the destructive power is called *Shiva*. Each of these, however, as well as all the other deities to be mentioned below, is actually the totality of God, personalized and limited as it were, but not limited in actuality. As an example of this, *Shiva* is often pictured as the *Nataraja*, the king of dancers, whose dance brings worlds into being and also dissolves them, all in one graceful movement.

The totality of the Divine power can also be associated with the idea of motherhood, involving birth and nourishment, forgiveness, help and protection. God as the Divine Mother, or *Shakti*, is worshiped as the ultimate refuge in all situations of life. All beings are Her children.

From time to time, as righteousness declines and irreligion prevails, a human being is born who contains within himself such a superabundance of beneficent power for the uplift of humanity, that people begin to worship him as a veritable embodiment of divinity, as an incarnation of God. Krishna and Râma are two such incarnations in the history of Hinduism. In these days, also Sri Ramakrishna, the great nineteenth century mystic is thought of in a similar light.

RITUALS and CELEBRATIONS

The central Hindu ritual is meditation. It is a process of calming and concentrating the mind. In an utterly calm and concentrated mind, the Divine reality of God is

directly perceived. The process of meditation can take many forms, but the general tendency in Hinduism is for the worshiper to adopt an aspect of the Divinity that appeals to him or her, and to visualize it in their heart as living and radiant, and to concentrate on it with the help of certain words which are symbols of the divinity. A qualified teacher or guide is highly recommended for the successful practice of meditation.

Other rituals include worship of God by offering of perfume, flowers, incense, light, and food, as well as other items. God is here treated as an honored guest who is thought to have just arrived in the home. Worship is also done in temples, but that is secondary in importance to what is done in the home. Other religious rites include pilgrimages to holy shrines, and festivals associated with different aspects of Divinity, as well as rituals associated with the life-cycle: birth, first taking of solid food, adulthood, marriage, etc. Thousands of these festivals are celebrated throughout India, but the most widely celebrated worldwide are listed below:

Dassehra (Dusserah) The festival that lasts "ten days."

This may be the most popular festival, celebrated for ten days in September/October. The Goddess Durgâ is worshipped during the first nine days of the festival, and the 10th day is a celebration of the victory of Râma, the hero of the Râmâyana, over the demon king of Srî Lanka, Râvana.

Dîpâvali (Dîwâlî). This is the festival of lamps, and honors the Goddess Lakshmî, the goddess of wealth and good fortune. The festival lasts five days in September/October or October/November. It also commemorates Râma's victory over Râvana and his return to the city of Ayodhyâ.

Srî Râmakrishna Jayanti. This celebration, which occurs in February, marks the birthday of Srî Ramakrishna, the great nineteenth-century mystic.

Shivarâtri (Night of Shiva). This celebration in February/March marks the time when Shiva manifests himself in the form of the flaming linga, or phallus, showering his devotees with his grace. Hindus of all castes and classes celebrate it across India.

Holi. This two-day spring festival, celebrated in February/March, marks the end of winter, and is one of the most popular Hindu festivals.

Râma-navamî. This is a celebration of the birth of Râma, and comes in March/April.

Srî-Krishna-Jayantî. Celebrated in July/August or August/September, this day commemorates the birthday of Krishna.

WOMEN'S ROLES IN HINDUISM

From the most ancient times, women have played a prominent role in the development of the Hindu religion. In the Vedic period the ceremonies could not be performed unless both husband and wife were actively present. Throughout Indian history down to the present day, a galaxy of women saints and sages played a prominent role, as spiritual teachers and as leaders in every walk of life, even at times as prime ministers and leaders of armies. ☞

INTRODUCTION TO ISLAM

Islam, which means “peace, security and wholeness through total submission to God’s will”, is the name of the religion that began around 610 CE with a series of divine revelations given to the Prophet Muhammad, which became known as the Qur’an (Al-Qur’an al-Karim, Kalam-Allah – the speech of God). Islam received its greatest momentum, however, from the Hijrah (HEEJ-rah) in 622 CE when Muhammad fled Mecca to Medina, where the Muslim community was established. For this reason, 622 CE is the year 0 in the Muslim calendar.

Muhammad was born in Mecca in 570 CE, and as a young man became known as *Al-Amin*, meaning honest and trustworthy. At the age of 25 years he married Khadijah, a well-respected business woman 15 years his senior. When he was 40 years old, and while he sat meditating in a cave, he was called by God through the angel Jibril (Gabriel) to receive the divine revelation.

After thirteen years of persecution in Mecca, Muhammad migrated to Medina, and sent missions to all the surrounding empires. The Muslim community was established in the entire Arabian Peninsula within 10 years. Following the Prophet’s death in 632 CE (10 on the Muslim calendar), the *Ummah*, or Muslim community, was first led by four Caliphs, and then by a succession of dynastic rulers. The spread of Islam and the expansion of Muslim rule changed the world map and world history. From 711 until 1492 CE, the time of the dark and Middle Ages in Europe, Muslim caliphates ruled most of the known world from Spain to Asia and Africa. Over this time, Islamic civilization provided an integration and preservation of ancient knowledge that might otherwise have been lost forever, and led world civilization in this era, known as the Golden Age.

Although the historical conflict between Islam and the West that began with the Inquisition and Crusades resulted in the disintegration of this Islamic empire, Islam continued to spread, gaining adherents. Today, Muslims are estimated to total over 1 billion worldwide.

BELIEFS and PRACTICES

Muslims are strict monotheists whose basic creed is simply “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his Prophet.” Allah is the Arabic word for God. Muslims accept the same God as Jews and Christians, and also revere the same Biblical prophets, including Abraham, Noah, Moses, and Jesus, who they consider the word of God and a prophet, but not the divine son of God. Therefore, they declare Muhammad to be the “seal of the Prophets,” or the final prophet of God.

The six articles of faith for Muslims, found in the Qur’an and the *Sunnah* (sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad) are:

1. Belief in One God, who is the Unique, Infinite, Transcendent Creator and Sustainer of all that exists.
2. Belief in the eternal afterlife, which includes the end of the world, resurrection and judgment before God for one’s life, leading one to paradise or hell.

3. Belief in the unseen, be they scientific realities such as electricity, or angels, who are creatures of God and are constantly in service to Him.

4. Belief in the Books, or Revelations of God. Muslims believe God sent his message to different prophets at different times. They include the scrolls of Abraham, the Torah to Moses, the Psalms to David, and the Gospel of Jesus recorded in the New Testament, all culminating in the Qur’an which is understood by Muslims to correct human errors in the previous texts produced by translations and loss of material.

5. Belief in human messengers/prophets of God. Muslims believe that God chose certain human beings to be His messengers and to deliver his guidance by exemplifying it in their lives, and that Muhammad was God’s final Messenger.

6. Belief in the Omnipotence of God. Muslims believe that all that happens – good and evil – happens under the decree and plan of God.

The Muslim way of life is based upon the Five Pillars of Islam. The Sunnah dictates the Pillars and other practices. The Pillars are:

1. **Shahadah**, or the statement of faith: “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His messenger.” A person becomes a Muslim by accepting and making this proclamation of faith.

2. **Salat**, or the five daily prayers that all post-pubescent male and female followers are expected to make (pre-dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset and evening).

3. **Sawm**, or fasting during the month of Ramadan. This fast includes abstaining from food, drink, and sex during the daylight hours.

4. **Zakat**, or sharing the wealth. All adults who are able are expected to make charitable donations roughly equivalent to 2.5 % of their savings.

5. **Hajj**, or the Pilgrimage to Mecca. All Muslims who are physically and financially able are expected to make a journey to this holiest of Muslim cities at least once in their lifetime. The Pilgrimage is usually made during the first 10 days of the last month of the Muslim calendar.

Muslims do not eat pork or pork products, and meat must be slaughtered according to Islamic law, similar to the Kosher requirements in Jewish law. They are also required to abstain from alcohol or other intoxicating substances. Circumcision of male children is also required.

SACRED BOOKS/SCRIPTURE

The sole scripture of Islam is called the Qur’an (less accurately spelled Koran). The Hebrew Bible and New Testament of Christianity are respected, but are seen as precursors of the Qur’an, which affirms, confirms and completes their message. Hence, the Qur’an is understood as correcting the mistakes of human error. The Qur’an is considered the literal word of God, revealed to Muhammad. The revelations were memorized and dictated by Muhammad to his disciples, who either memorized them, or in some cases, wrote them down. Zaid ibn Thabit collected all of the revelations a few years later into what is now the Qur’an. The Qur’an is written in Arabic and consists of 114 chapters or *surahs*.

The second source to which Muslims look for direction is the *Sunnah*, or sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad. A narration on the *Sunnah*, called the *Hadith*, is also an important text. The most authentic source of Islam is the Qur'an. Both the Qur'an and Hadith are subject to religious evaluations on the parameters of their transmission and content. For example, Prophet Muhammad reportedly said through Hadith that statements attributed to him that contradict the Qur'an should be dismissed.

RITUALS and CELEBRATIONS

Communal worship takes place for Muslims on Fridays at noon. Muslim men are required to gather for prayer and a sermon by the *imam* (prayer leader) of the local mosque (*masjid*). Parents who must attend to infants and toddlers, and women who are on their periods are exempted.

Muslim holidays follow a lunar calendar, which is about 11 days shorter than the solar cycle, so the dates of their holidays move through in a 32-year cycle.

The two holidays observed by Muslims are:

‘Id al-Fitr (Festival Breaking the Fast). Occurs at the close of the Ramadan fast and is a time of gift giving and feasting.

‘Id al-Adha (Festival of Sacrifice). Occurs on the 10th day of the month when pilgrimages are made to Mecca, and is a period of sacrifice commemorating the willingness of Abraham to offer his son (Ishmael) to God. Muslims often sacrifice an animal on this day to mark the gift of a ram that God made to Abraham. It is also a time of gift giving, charity and hospitality. Abraham and his elder son, Ismail, built the Kaaba in Mecca, the first House of Worship to the One God (Allah) in history. Id Al-Adha comes at the end of the hajj, which brings over 1 million people to Mecca, the Kaaba and other historical sites.

MAIN SUBGROUPS

As in other traditions, a good deal of diversity exists in Islam. Below are overviews of three of the largest denominations.

Sunni. *Sunnah* in Arabic means “customary practice” or the practice of the Prophet Muhammad. Sunnis comprise about 85-90 percent of all Muslims today worldwide. They reject the idea that the Prophet’s blood descendants should inherit his authority, and instead opt for the election of their leaders, or *caliphs*.

Shi’a (or Shi’i). Shi’a in Arabic means “supporters” and refers to the supporters of the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, Ali. Shi’as venerate the descendants of the Prophet as imams, and believe that the last of them will return at the end of the world to redeem it. In Iran, Iraq, Bahrain and Azerbaijan, Shi’a Muslims are the majority.

Sufism. Sufi refers to a simple cloth worn by those who rejected materialism at the time that Muslim dynasties were controlling the rich resources of the world. While not technically a branch of Islam, Sufism is a mystical tradition dating from the eighth century that stresses the immanence of God and seeks intimate union with Him. They are best known by the “whirling dervishes” of Turkey, and by small Sufi communities that exist in North America.

As many as 1 million African Americans follow orthodox Islam. The Nation of Islam, which is commonly confused with orthodox Islam, is not recognized as a legitimate

Islamic group by United States Muslim authorities. Although The Nation of Islam follows most Muslim practices, such as the Five Pillars, it does not recognize the inherent equality of all peoples and races. The concept of equality before God is integral to Muslim belief, and means that anyone may become a Muslim.

THE ROLES OF WOMEN

According to many scholars of Islam and women’s roles in religion, the arrival of Islam provided women vast improvement over previous conditions. As Islam gained territory, it brought high culture, literature, science, law, philosophy and crafts, and it allowed conquered people to continue their own religious faiths.

The Qu’ran and Hadith also lay groundwork for basic rights of women, and Muhammad’s committed and compassionate life as a family man provides the example for all Muslim men. Muslim women have the right to dictate the terms of their marriage contract (marriage is contractual, rather than sacramental), and to receive a dowry. Although women are only allowed to marry one man, and he must be Muslim, according to Islamic law, men may marry up to four wives, but they must be able to provide adequately for each. Although no case involving Muslim polygamy has been addressed in the United States, existing laws and court cases outlawing polygamy would presumably apply. Wives may also retain their private property and earnings after marriage, and the Qu’ran guarantees specific inheritance rights.

Islam recognizes remarkable women and “mothers of the faith”, including Khadija, Muhammad’s first wife, who exemplify the traditional feminine ideal of beauty, modesty, and devotion. 🕌

ISLAM – Did you know?

- “Muhammadanism” is a term that one often sees used in outdated textbooks to refer to Islam. It is completely inaccurate as it suggests that Muslims worship Muhammad as a divine being. Islam stresses submission before God, not Muhammad.
- Many customs inaccurately associated with the submission of women in Islam actually originate in the cultural customs of various countries or regions, and have no basis in Islamic doctrine. For example, after marriage, Muslim women may retain any property or wealth they brought with them into the marriage, and may or may not wear the *Hijab*, or veil.
- There are approximately 4-5 million Muslims living in the United States, coming from various countries of origin. According to the New Historical Atlas of Religion in America, 28.4% are from the Middle East and Africa, 26.6% from Europe, 11.5 % from Asia, and 30.2% are from the United States and they are primarily African American.
- The term *jihad* is often misunderstood. It has two basic meanings: to struggle in defense of the faith; the spiritual struggle to become a better Muslim. It does not mean “holy war”.
- The crescent moon and star symbol often used in reference to Islam represents the position of the new moon at the start of the month of fasting — Ramadan.

INTRODUCTION TO JUDAISM

Judaism as a religious tradition began about 1250 BCE with Moses, who was commanded by God to lead the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt, and with whom God established a covenant on Mt. Sinai. The Hebrew people, however, originated with the patriarch Abraham about 600 years earlier. Though often identified as a “western” religion along with Christianity and Islam, Judaism originated in the Middle East. The earliest Hebrews were originally nomadic people who later became agricultural. The religion of Israel is the covenant with the One God, known as “adonai” or “elohim”, who is revealed through the teaching of the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel, and is documented in the 22 books of the Hebrew Bible.

After the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, Judaism became separated from its central worship site and the priesthood lost its function and authority. The study of God’s teachings and the observance of God’s commandments replaced the temple as synagogues spread all over the world, in spite of widespread discrimination.

Judaism today is a complex worldwide tradition that is more simply understood as a civilization and the way of life of the Jewish people. There is no word in Hebrew for “religion” or “Judaism.” This indicates that as a way of life, Judaism encompasses the cultural, social and religious history of a broad, diverse and widespread community, some of whom do not consider themselves religious.

BELIEFS and PRACTICES

Judaism is based upon belief in the one God (monotheism) who made a covenant with Israel to be the people who would carry on an ethical and religious lifestyle that is spelled out in the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible). Judaism is often conceptualized as a triangle comprised of: the Jewish People; the Torah; and the land of Israel at the points, with God at the center. Judaism has no creed as such, but rather emphasizes living according to the commandments in the Torah, or more generally, living an ethical life. Judaism is therefore an evolving relationship of the Jewish people with God, and a literary and legal tradition. Jewish faith is perhaps best expressed in these words from Deuteronomy 6:4 “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is OUR God, the Lord alone.” These words are repeated several times each day in Jewish worship services.

Among the practices of Jews is “keeping *kosher*”, which means to follow dietary rules first laid out in the Torah. Some kosher restrictions include not consuming meat and dairy at the same meal, no pork products, shellfish or meat-eating animals are to be consumed, and only meat prepared under rabbinical supervision is permitted. Not all Jews follow this system, but those who strictly observe these laws eat only in kosher homes and restaurants.

Jewish males are circumcised on the eighth day after birth, which is a sign of the covenant with God. Many Jews also participate in a naming ceremony for baby girls.

Initiation into adulthood is accomplished by a ceremony known as the *Bar* (son) or *Bat* (daughter) *Mitzvah* (of the commandment). The ceremony takes place at the age of 13 for boys and 12-13 for girls, and consists of the initiate conducting a synagogue service, including reading a portion of the Torah in Hebrew. Festive celebrations with gifts for the initiate follow the service.

The most important holy day for Jews is the Sabbath, which begins at sundown on Friday and ends at sundown on Saturday. A special meal begins the holy day. During this period, workday activities are ceased for many Jews, and Orthodox Jews in particular avoid operating electrical machinery, including driving a car or using the telephone. Special Sabbath synagogue services are attended on Friday night and/or Saturday morning. Jews are not divided into denominations, but there are branches of Jewish life, which respond in different ways to the encounter of Judaism with the modern world.

Orthodox Jews, the most traditional of these groups, adhere strictly to Halakhah (Jewish law). Orthodox Jewish men wear a small skullcap called a *yarmulke*, which signifies respect for the presence of God. A recognizable subgroup of Orthodox Jews is the Hasidim whose men dress in black suits and hats, and wear beards. Orthodox Jews account for about 7 percent of all Jews in the United States.

Conservative Jews are more willing than the Orthodox to reinterpret Halakhah to respond to changing modern conditions. They are, however, still quite observant of dietary laws and keeping the traditional Sabbath observances. They account for about 43 percent of American Jews.

Reconstructionists are an offshoot of Conservatism, but see Judaism as a culture or “civilization,” rather than simply as a religion. They are open to broader views of God, and reject the notion of Jews as a chosen people. Less than 2 percent of practicing Jews in the United States are Reconstructionists, but their numbers are growing.

Reform Judaism is the most liberal branch. It does not require keeping Kosher, observing Sabbath restrictions or other traditional practices of the kind. Reform Jews place ethical conduct at the center of religious life, and see the Bible as a document of human origin, which each individual must study to determine what God’s demand is upon him or her. About 35 percent of practicing United States Jews are Reform.

SACRED BOOKS/SCRIPTURES

The sacred writings of the Jewish people include the Hebrew Bible, which consists of three parts: the Torah (five books of Moses), the Prophets (Joshua, Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.) and the Writings (Psalms, Proverbs, Book of Job, etc.). The Christian Old Testament contains the same books, but Jews reject this name for the text, as it would imply acceptance of the New Testament, which is exclusive to Christianity.

The Talmud, second in importance only to the Bible, is a vast and complex document that is an interpretation of Jewish law and lore, and has been a tremendous influence in the life of Judaism over the centuries.

There is also a continual mystical tradition in Judaism known as the *Kabbalah* or “the received” tradition. It teaches the experience of communion with God, and about how the cosmos is maintained through the covenant interaction between God and humanity.

RITUALS AND CELEBRATIONS

All of the Jewish holidays occur on a lunar calendar, so their dates are different from year to year. Among all of the Jewish holidays, four have the most impact upon American Jews:

Rosh HaShanah (The Jewish New Year). While also a time of rejoicing, this holiday begins a ten-day period of reflection on how one has lived over the past year. Celebrated in September/October.

Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement). Celebrated ten days after the New Year, this holiday includes a 25-hour fast from all food and drink while Jews spend time in prayer and reflection.

Hanukkah. Celebrated in December and lasting for eight days, this is Judaism’s Festival of Lights, commemorating the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem in 165 BCE after a severe religious persecution. During this time, the miraculous event in which the temple sanctuary light kept burning for eight days without having enough oil for even one day is remembered. Candles are lit each night of the

celebration also to remind the faithful that the light of Judaism kept glowing because of Jews who refused to abandon their faith.

Passover. This holiday commemorates the Hebrews’ Exodus, or escape, from Egypt, and occurs in March/April. No food containing leavened products is eaten during the eight days of Passover. An elaborate ritual meal is eaten during this holiday, which is known as the *Seder* meal.

Other holiday observances include Sukkot (the Feast of Tabernacles) occurring in September/October, and Shavuot (the Feast of Weeks) in May/June. All Jewish holidays begin at sundown the evening before most western calendars indicate the start of the holiday.

ROLES OF WOMEN

The history of Judaism is peppered with stories about strong and faithful Jewish women whose acts of heroism for the faith are revered. At the same time, Jewish texts also contain stories of emotional pain, rape and murder of women.

In more recent history Jewish women have played a central and important role in providing needed services to their community. In the United States, for example, Jewish women organized the National Council of Jewish Women in the 1890s to give them a way to serve their communities, lobby for social issues, and educate themselves about Judaism and Jewish history. And Jewish women established America’s first Zionist organization, Hadassah, in 1912 to care for Jewish children being born in Palestine.

However, until the 20th century, Jewish women’s religious roles were relegated to the domain of the home. It was 1954 before Conservative Judaism allowed women to recite the blessing over the Torah, and to be included in the *minyan* (quorum of 10 required for public prayer). Beginning in the 1970s, in Reform and Conservative Judaism both boys and girls could receive the same religious education, and by 1972 the first woman, Sally Priesand, was ordained as a Reform rabbi. ☞

JUDAISM – Did You Know?

- Nearly 6 million Jews reside in the United States. 39% of Jewish congregations in the U.S are Orthodox, 29% are Reform, and 32% are Conservative. Many Orthodox synagogues are quite small. So although one-third of all congregations are Orthodox, they still account for less than ten percent of all American Jews.
- Jews do not accept Jesus of Nazareth as their messiah because 1) his followers claimed he was a divine being, which is contrary to Jewish religious belief; and 2) they do not see Jesus’ coming as ushering in the period of peace and justice, and an end to the persecution of the Jews that they associate with the messiah’s arrival.

- Jews who have converted to Christianity and have joined groups such as Jews for Jesus, Messianic Jews, Hebrew Christians and similar groups are not seen as Jewish, although their right to practice their religion freely is, of course, respected.
- Jewish understanding of the role of “chosen people” is not about superiority, but about special obligations and responsibilities. They view themselves as having a mission to live a monotheistic and ethical life.
- One important symbol of Judaism is the six pointed Star of David, which Jews in Nazi Germany were forced to wear for identification purposes. It has been linked to King David’s Shield, and scholars have attributed theological significance to the design.

INTRODUCTION TO SIKHISM

Sikhism, one of the world's youngest religions, was founded only 500 years ago. It is a monotheistic religion that originated in the Indian province of Punjab (now part of the undivided Punjab which includes part of present-day Pakistan and portions of Afghanistan). The founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, was born in 1469. For many years he traveled as a seeker of truth, visiting many Hindu religious sites, as well as Mecca and Medina.

Coming from a region that had been historically Hindu, but was subjected to Islamic rule at the time of his birth, Nanak sought peace by combining the values of Hinduism and Islam. At the age of 38, Guru Nanak had a revelatory experience and began to teach his direct revelation in the form of hymns. These hymns are still cherished and sung in the Sikh community. They teach that religion consists in being mindful of God, meditating on God's name, and reflecting God in one's life. Guru Nanak traveled throughout the Arab world, attracting both Hindu and Muslim followers. They became known as Sikhs, from the Sanskrit word *shishya* meaning "disciple".

Nanak and each of the nine Gurus who followed him selected their own successor while alive. Gobind Singh, who died in 1708, was the last living Guru. He pronounced the end of the lineage of Gurus in a physical body, and vested final authority in the Sikh community and in the Scriptures, which are called *Guru Granth Sahib*.

BELIEFS

The Mool Mantra, which begins the *Guru Granth Sahib*, outlines the beliefs of Sikhs:

There is One God.
He
Is Supreme Truth
Is without fear
Is Timeless, Eternal
Is not born, so
He does not die to be reborn.
Self-illuminated,
By Guru's grace
He is revealed to the human soul.
Truth was in the beginning,
and throughout the ages.
Truth is now and ever will be.

Guru Nanak accepted some traditional beliefs of Hinduism, such as the cyclical nature of time (the earth endures endless cycles of creation and destruction), and reincarnation. "Haumai," or self-centeredness, caused by greed, lust, pride, anger and attachment to the passing things of earthly life, is believed by Sikhs to be the source of all evil. It is this self-centeredness that produces *karma* and the endless cycles of rebirth.

Sikhs believe that the purpose of human life is to experience spiritual union with the Divine – "to merge with Ultimate Reality like a drop of water merges with the ocean and becomes one with it", rather than to attain salvation or a heavenly abode like Paradise. This union with God is enlightenment – release from reincarnation, and any person can attain it.

Sikhism believes in full participation in human life, work and family. Responsibility in these areas is a way to serve and seek God. Sikhs understand God to be both immanent and transcendent, encouraging each individual to aspire to become God-like while living.

Sikhism believes in the equality of all persons regardless of gender. Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth guru, declared that all followers should change their last names: Singh (or lion) for men, and Kaur (or princess) for women, indicating universal equality.

SACRED BOOKS/SCRIPTURES

The Guru Granth Sahib is the central scripture of Sikhs and is enthroned as the current living guru for the community. It is at the heart of Sikh worship and lends sacredness to the *gurdwara* or temple. Sikhs bow before the Guru Granth Sahib and pray in its presence. It has undergone developmental changes since the time of Guru Nanak, but received its distinctive form under the fifth Guru, Arjan. In addition to the teaching of several gurus, it also contains Hindu and Muslim hymns, and is written in rhyming couplets. It was composed in Sanskrit, Persian, Hindi and Punjabi. It is printed in "Gurmukhi" script, which is an alphabet adapted for the Punjabi language. The Guru Granth Sahib now consists of 1,430 standardized pages. Also an important text, and published in 1945, the "Rehat Maryada" (or Sikh Code of Conduct) regulates individual and corporate Sikh life.

PRACTICES, RITUALS and CELEBRATIONS

Sikh practices include dress, life cycle rituals, festivals, the *langar* meal, and worship in the temple.

At puberty, some Sikhs go through an initiation, called the *Amrit*, which originated with the last living guru in 1699. The initiate makes a promise to follow the Sikh code of conduct and then becomes *Khalsa*, belonging to God, or "pure". He or she vows to:

- Abstain from the use of alcohol, other intoxicants or tobacco
- Never to cut the hair on any part of the body
- Not to eat the meat of sacrificial or ritual animals
- To refrain from any sexual contact outside marriage
- To wear the five symbols (often called the five K's) of Sikhs.

All Sikhs, whether Khalsa or not, are enjoined to pray daily, to tithe time and income to the community, and to live a moral life of service and humility. The five symbols, or five K's are:

1. Kesh: not to cut the hair (men wear a turban over theirs) – surrender to the will of God.
2. Kanga: a comb is to be carried within the hair – to clean the hair.
3. Karra: an iron bracelet is worn – to experience oneself as a slave to the will of the prophets.
4. Kirpan: a kirpan or steel dagger is worn – symbol to fight against evil in oneself and in society through lawful means.
5. Kacherra: a specific knee-length undergarment is worn – symbol of chastity.

Sikhism has neither monks nor nuns, and both lay people and the “clergymen” or *granthi* are encouraged to marry. Most *granthi*, those who recite the Guru Granth Sahib, are male, but women who are Khalsa also may publicly recite from the scriptures. The term has no gender associated with it. There is no ecclesiastical hierarchy – all Sikh congregations are autonomous.

Sikh gatherings consist of singing passages of the Guru Granth Sahib, some teaching based on a passage delivered by the *granthi*, prayer and the congregational meal or *langar*. All the festivals celebrated by Sikhs include men and women, hymn singing, lectures, consecrated food, and food for the congregation. Sikhism is basically anti-ritualistic, so only simple rites and ceremonies are observed. Life cycle rituals observed by Sikhs include naming, baptism, marriage and funeral rites. Sikhs celebrate many festivals, but five are observed universally:

Birthday of Guru Nanak. Observed in October/November.

Birthday of Guru Gobind.

Celebrated on December 22.

Installation of the Guru Granth Sahib as Guru.

Celebrated in September/October, this festival commemorates the date in 1604 when the sacred book was installed as guru for the community at the Golden Temple in Amritsar.

Vaisakhi (the New Year). Celebration is on April 13, the date the Khalsa order was founded by Guru Gobind in 1699. Also celebrated is the first annual gathering of Sikhs at the center of pilgrimage, Goindwal, which took place during Guru Amar Das' Guruship (1552-1574).

Diwali. Similar to the Hindu festival of light, this celebration also commemorates the return of the sixth Guru, Har Gobind (1606-1644) to the holy city of Amritsar after his release from prison. Celebrated in October/November.

AMERICAN SIKHS

While there are no denominations in Sikhism, in the United States there is a grouping of Sikhs along cultural and language lines. This group, originating in the 1960s, is called American Sikhs and is distinguishable from other Sikhs by their mode of dress, which is all white, and they follow a strict vegetarian diet and set times of worship. Women as well as men also wear turbans. Their leader is Yogi Harbhajan Singh and they call themselves 3HO (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization). They know only a limited amount of Punjabi. Sikhs of Indian origin and American Sikhs also share some basic beliefs and practices, visit one another's gurdwaras and are mutually accepting.

THE ROLES OF WOMEN

The Gurus of Sikhism were among the first men in the modern world to encourage freedom and full status and participation for women. In keeping with the Sikh commitment to equality, men and women are expected to preserve their spiritual and social independence and identity from one another. There is no mediator between each individual and God – that relationship is personal and direct. ☞

SIKHISM – Did you know?

- The symbol most often associated with Sikhism is called the Khanda. It is composed of five parts, which have been interpreted to symbolize the unity of God, God's concern for justice and truth, and God's spiritual power.
- Sikh young people who have been initiated, and are therefore observant of the five K's, have been allowed by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals to carry their *kirpan*, the steel dagger, to school under certain conditions. Although all public schools must adhere to a “no weapons” policy, Sikh youth may wear the kirpan so long as it is sewn or bolted into the sheath so that it cannot be removed. In some of these cases it is also worn beneath the clothing.
- Sikhs were among the Asian groups denied the right to immigrate to the U.S in 1926. However, Sikh immigration returned in 1965, when immigration law was relaxed.
- The estimated number of Sikhs in the U.S. is about 400,000.
- One of the largest populations of Sikhs in the world is in Fremont, California.

Showing Southern Hospitality:

Guidelines for Respecting

Religious Diversity in Our Community

**Published for the residents of
Huntsville and Madison County, Alabama
By Interfaith Mission Service
Susan J. Smith, Executive Director
First and Second Editions, 1999**

This publication is not designed as an overview of the beliefs of the faiths included herein, but as a description of the ways in which adherents of these faiths may experience conflict with the “general culture” in Huntsville and Madison County, Alabama.... Within any faith community, different groups and different individuals will place different amounts of emphasis on the observance of religious laws and traditions.... It is impossible to be all inclusive. So, if you live next door to or work beside someone of a faith different from yours, we hope that you will use this publication to open a discussion about what you each believe. Both of your lives will be richer for the experience!

Susan Smith ... primary compiler of the information contained herein, thanks the thirty-plus participants in the Fall 1998 Interfaith Dialogue series and the thirty-nine religious leaders of various faiths and denominations who reviewed preliminary drafts of these Guidelines....

[These Guidelines are reproduced with the permission of the Interfaith Mission Service. You may copy and use them with attribution. No correction of original content has been made. The information compiled here is not only useful in itself, but a good illustration of one thing you might create together in your community. As of the fall of 2008, a new edition was being prepared by the same organization, now with new leadership. God willing, we will post it in place of this one when it is available.]

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Holidays/Holy Days

The following is not an attempt to explain the religious significance of holidays/holy days in each faith, but the ways in which religious observance may conflict with everyday life in our community.

There are three holiday-related issues which surface frequently:

1. Christian holidays are incorporated into school and corporate activities so completely that non-Christian children and adults can't avoid them.
2. While schools and much of public life close on Christian holidays, adherents of faiths other than Christian often have difficulty abstaining from their usual routines (e.g., school, work) on their holy days. Some schools recognize religious holidays as excused absences; others do not. Some employers permit the use of "flex time" for religious holidays, while others require the use of personal leave on such days.
3. Schools and employers occasionally schedule important events (e.g. the yearbook photographer, the company picnic) on a day which is a religious holiday for some of their students or employees.

Note: The calendar in standard use in this country (January 1-December 31) is known as the Gregorian calendar, named for the pope during whose reign it was developed. With the length of the year based on the sun's orbit, the Gregorian calendar is a solar calendar.

Baha'i Faith

The Baha'i calendar consists of nineteen months of nineteen days each, with four or five intercalary days to round out the Baha'i year as a solar one. Baha'i holy days begin at sundown the day before the date listed below.

There are nine days on which Baha'is are expected to suspend work or school attendance:

March 21	Naw Ruz (New Year)
April 21	First day of the festival of Ridvan
April 29	Ninth day of Ridvan
May 2	Twelfth and final day of Ridvan
May 29	Ascension of Baha'u'llah
July 9	Martyrdom of the Bab
October 20	Birth of the Bab
November 12	Birth of Baha'u'llah

Buddhism

There are several different schools of Buddhism, with the observance of celebrations varying among the different schools. The same celebration may be observed at different times in different temples. Most Buddhist holidays (e.g., the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death) are celebrated on the weekend and, therefore, do not usually interfere with the work and school routines of Buddhists.

Christianity

Some Christian holidays (e.g., Christmas) occur on the same date every year, while Easter (and the holidays preceding and following Easter) are determined by the moon's cycles. Most Christian denominations in the United States observe Christmas on December 25 and Easter on the first Sunday after the first full moon on or after March 21. Members of the Eastern Orthodox churches observe both these holidays at other times.

Most Christian denominations observe Sunday as the Sabbath, though some celebrate the Sabbath on other days. Every Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, with Easter (Resurrection Day) being the principal festival shared by most Christian denominations. Good Friday (the Friday before Easter, Pentecost (fifty days after Easter), and Christmas are observed by most denominations. Some Christians (particularly Roman Catholics) are expected to attend church on several other days, known as "holy days of obligation." Churches in these denominations usually have services scattered throughout the day so people may attend without seriously disrupting the usual work or school routine.

Some denominations observe a somber, reflective time during the weeks preceding Christmas and Easter. While church services are less festive, that mood runs counter to the Christmas parties (and sometimes Spring Break activities) which occur during these times.

The Seventh-Day Adventist Sabbath extends from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday. Adventists are expected to finish their work on Friday early enough to make preparation for the Vespers service, which takes place at home or at church about one-half hour before sunset.... Usual activities, both work and leisure, are suspended on the Sabbath. The SDA observance of the Christmas and Easter holidays focuses solely on the religious aspects (no Santa Claus or Easter egg hunt). Adventist children are discouraged from participating in Halloween activities.

Jehovah's Witnesses do not celebrate or take part in activities that are associated with religious or semi-religious holidays (e.g., Christmas, Halloween). Gifts may be given at various times, but not related to a holiday.

Hinduism

The timing of Hindu festivals is based on a lunar calendar, so their dates vary. Since holidays are usually celebrated in the home in early morning or evening, no absence from school or work is necessary.

Islam

The Islamic calendar is composed of twelve lunar months of twenty-nine or thirty days each. Since no days are inserted to maintain consistency with the Gregorian calendar, Islamic holidays shift forward eleven days each year, making a full cycle through the Gregorian calendar each thirty-three years. Islamic holy days begin at sunset. The weekly holy day is from Thursday sunset to Friday sunset, but the only time during this day in which Muslims are expected to refrain from work/school is during the Jummah (Friday) prayer, which is said at the mosque and lasts for about thirty minutes between noon and 1:00 pm.

During the Islamic month of Ramadan, healthy Muslims who have reached the age of puberty are expected to refrain from consuming both food and drink between dawn (the first appearance of light—approximately 1 ½ hours before sunrise) and sunset. At sunset, Muslims usually break the fast with dates or something similar before eating their evening meal.

Muslims are encouraged to refrain from work or school and to attend religious services and social festivities on Eid-ul-Fitr (the first day of the month following Ramadan) and Eid-ul-Adha.

Judaism

The Jewish calendar follows a lunar year, so holidays don't occur on exactly the same date each year. The Sabbath and all holy days begin at sundown.

Sabbath, the most important holiday, begins at sundown every Friday night and lasts until sundown on Saturday. The conflicts with school sports and other end-of-work-week events are obvious.

Observance of holy days varies among Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist traditions, but there are several holy days on which Jews of all traditions are expected to abstain from work/school/normal activities.

Passover/Pesach begins with the first new moon in the Spring. During Passover Jews don't eat food products with yeast and many will only eat foods classified as "kosher." Reform Jews observe Passover for seven days, Conservative and Orthodox Jews for eight days. Passover is primarily observed in the home.

Rosh Hashanah (New Year) is the day of the first new moon in the Fall. The beginning of a ten-day period of reflection, Rosh Hashanah is observed for two days by Orthodox and Conservative Jews and for one day by Reform Jews. Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) comes ten days after Rosh Hashanah and is observed with a twenty-four hour fast from food and drink. Hanukkah, which lasts for eight days and occurs in November or December, is usually celebrated each evening at home. According to Jewish religious tradition, Hanukkah is a minor holiday. Except for Yom Kippur, abstaining from routine activities is not expected during these times.

Sikhism

Currently the Sikh community in Huntsville holds services in a rented space on the first Sunday of each month. Consequently, they observe all Sikh holy days on the first Sunday of the month closest to the actual date of the holy day. No variation is needed from normal work or school schedules.

Food/Dietary Issues

Fasting (abstaining from food and sometimes from liquid) is a part of many religious faiths. When an individual is observing a religious fast, it is most gracious not to invite him/her to a luncheon or party where much of the social focus is on food. Children who are fasting should be allowed to spend their school lunchtime somewhere other than the school cafeteria. They also may not be able to participate in physical activities at “full speed”.

Baha’i

During ‘Ala’(the last month of the Baha’i year), healthy Baha’is ages fifteen to seventy observe a fast, abstaining from both food and drink between sunrise and sunset. These days occur between March 2 and March 20 on the Gregorian calendar.

The drinking of alcohol and the consumption of food prepared with alcohol is forbidden.

Buddhism

There are several different schools of Buddhism with variations in dietary requirements among them. Generally speaking, Buddhists are encouraged to eat foods that are grown in their particular region of the world. In some schools, vegetarianism is expected, unless individual health needs make a vegetarian diet inadvisable. Some ordained monks do not eat meals after 12 Noon. Some do not consume alcoholic beverages.

Christianity

Some Christian denominations abstain from eating meat on Fridays during Lent (the six weeks before Easter). Some Christians fast or only eat one meal on Ash Wednesday (forty-six days before Easter) and on Good Friday (the Friday before Easter).

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (frequently called Mormons) take their health standards from the publication Words of Wisdom. In addition to encouraging the eating of grains, fruits, and vegetables in season, it states that Mormons are expected to refrain from tobacco, alcohol, coffee, and tea. Some church members apply this prohibition to caffeinated soft drinks as well. The consumption of teas without caffeine is permissible, however. Many members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints also fast from both food and liquid for twenty-four hours on the first Sunday of each month, contributing the equivalent cost of these meals to feed the poor.

As a way of following Biblical dietary principles, most Seventh-Day Adventists are vegetarians, but it is not mandatory. Those who do eat meat consume only “clean meat” – that which comes from cud-chewing animals with divided, cloven hoofs (e.g., cows, sheep). Chicken is permissible, but the eating of pork, rabbit, and fish without scales or fins is prohibited. Seventh Day

Adventists abstain from partaking of any food or substance that will bring harm to the body, including alcohol and nicotine products.

Jehovah's Witnesses do not smoke tobacco products.

Hinduism

Orthodox Hindus are strict vegetarians, refraining from eating all meat, fish, eggs, and products thereof. Most other Hindus do eat meat, but abstain from beef. A non-vegetarian Hindu may maintain a vegetarian diet during specific times. Orthodox Hindus also abstain from alcohol in any form. In order to promote self-control, Hindus are encouraged to fast one day a week, consuming only fruit and milk or juice.

Islam

Muslims are expected to abstain from all food containing pork (or pork products) and alcohol/liquor. While Muslims may remain at a meal where pork is served to others, they much prefer not to be in a place where socializing includes the consumption of alcohol/liquor.

Pork products such as lard and gelatin/rennet are found in many unexpected places, including some cake mixes, cheeses, margarines, and ice creams. Much southern cooking involves the use of pork as flavoring for vegetables, a habit so ingrained in our culture that we may forget to list it as an ingredient. Whenever pork is an entrée or merely used as a flavoring, it should be identified on the menu and another option offered to those who refrain from pork. If Muslims are being served, care should be taken that vegetable oil is used in food preparation and that the same utensils are not used to serve pork and non-pork foods.

The way in which animals are slaughtered also determines whether its meat is permissible (halaal) for Muslims. Because their rules for slaughter are so similar, meat that is kosher (acceptable to Orthodox Jews and labeled as such on the grocery shelves) is also halaal.

During ... Ramadan, healthy Muslims ... are expected to refrain from consuming both food and drink between dawn (...approximately 1 ½ hours before sunrise) and sunset. At sunset, Muslims usually break the fast with dates or something similar before eating their evening meal.

Judaism

Jews are expected to refrain from eating pork (including barbeque and bacon) and pork products. Pork products such as lard and gelatin/rennet are found in many unexpected places, including some cake mixes, cheeses, margarines, and ice creams. Much southern cooking involves the use of port as flavoring fro vegetables, a habit so ingrained in our culture that we may forget to list it as an ingredient. Whenever pork is an entrée or merely used as a flavoring, it should be identified on the menu and another option offered to those who refrain from pork.

Jews are permitted to eat the meat of any animal whose hooves are cloven and which chews its cud (e.g., cows, lambs/sheep). Pigs do not meet this requirement, hence the prohibition against their consumption.

Birds of prey and ostriches are forbidden as food, as are fish which do not have fins and scales (including catfish and all varieties of shellfish). Chicken and poultry are acceptable.

Permissible animals must be slaughtered according to specific regulations in order to be classified “kosher”. Orthodox Jews will eat only kosher foods, which are labeled as such on the packaging. Many Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist Jews eat only kosher foods during Passover and year-round will only consume wines and cheeses certified as kosher.

Many Orthodox Jews maintain a total separation of all dairy products from all meat products. Such families have two complete sets of dishes and cookware (“deli” and “dairy”).

During Passover ... Jews don’t eat food products with yeast. Reform Jews observe Passover for seven days, Conservative and Orthodox Jews for eight days. Jews also observe a twenty-four hour fast from food and liquid during Yom Kippur.

Sikhism

Alcohol and tobacco are prohibited by the Sikh scriptures. Sikhs are encouraged to eat a simple diet and to avoid stimulants such as caffeine. Some Sikhs are vegetarians.

Clothing

While there may not be specific clothing restrictions in many of the faiths in our community, most expect their adherents to dress modestly.

Christianity

In addition to dressing modestly, Seventh-Day Adventists are encouraged to limit jewelry to that which is functional (e.g. watches, cuff links). The wearing of heavy make-up is discouraged.

Male members of the Free Holiness and United Pentecostal Churches and Church of God of Prophecy are expected to keep their hair short, while women wear theirs long. Women are expected to wear dresses or skirts, while men wear long pants, not shorts. Jewelry should be modest.

Hinduism

Hindu women’s clothing is conservative, usually covering most of the body except the face.

Hindu women (and occasionally men) may wear a red dot of saffron on their forehead. This dot, which is both a religious symbol and a part of the culture in which Hinduism developed, is applied daily after the individual has said his/her morning prayers.

Islam

Beginning at puberty, Muslim women are expected to cover their entire bodies, except their faces and hands, when in the company of males other than family members. This clothing of the body (called hijab) is done in an attempt to be judged by criteria other than sexuality, rather than an effort at repression. This requirement can only be met in American high school gym classes and sports teams if the teacher/coach will allow flexibility in uniform/dress codes.

A Muslim man is expected to dress modestly, being covered from navel to knee, in all company except his wife's. Men's clothing is not to imitate women's.

Muslim men and women do not wear bathing suits in mixed company.

Sikhism

Sikhs do not cut their hair. Males wrap their hair beneath a turban. A young boy covers his head with a small piece of cloth (patka), while adult males and some females wear turbans (called dastars).

Child-Raising Issues

Schools have a unique opportunity to teach children respect for other religions and cultures. Some schools include a part of the daily announcements, "Today is _____ in the _____ faith."

Religious holidays are a particularly sensitive issue in schools. Especially in preschools and elementary schools, there is often a weeks-long build up to Christmas and Easter, with art activities, stories, etc., related to the holidays. This may be less the case in middle schools and high schools, though choral and band concerts in December usually have a Christmas theme. Several other faiths have holy days in December, but they rarely receive more than a moment's attention in the schools. Changing the focus of school holidays from Halloween, Christmas and Easter, to harvest, winter break and spring break would give equal "ownership" of these events to all children and break the ties (historical and present-day) with the Christian faith [alone].

In high schools in the Huntsville City Schools, there is great emphasis on near-perfect attendance so students can claim exemption from one or two exams at the end of the semester. The policy seems to vary from school to school, based on the goodwill of the principal, but children whose holy days are not school holidays sometimes lose eligibility for exam exemption because they were absent on their faith's holy days.

Convocations, graduation ceremonies, etc. have received a great deal of legal and media attention in recent years. Less the object of focus, but still important, are school events such as athletic banquets. Whether a prayer is led by an adult or a student, asking Jesus Christ to bless the event or the food means that the event does not “belong” equally to non-Christian participants.

The holding of baccalaureate services for graduating seniors is also a sensitive issue. While holding the event in a church, sponsored by the PTA rather than the school administration, does avoid legal conflicts, it is still a setting which prevents the participation by some of the students in whose honor it is planned.

Nationwide, the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) and American College Test (ACT) for college bound high school students are scheduled on Saturdays several times during the year. By following the instructions inside their registration packets, students for whom Saturday is the Sabbath may make arrangements to take the test on another day.

Christianity

Children in Free Holiness Church families traditionally do not participate in extra-curricular activities which require apparel that is not considered modest.

The Seventh-Day Adventist Church emphasizes a Christian education and runs one of the largest private school systems in the United States, from elementary school through universities. Adventist children are encouraged not to participate in activities related to Halloween, the Easter bunny, or Santa Claus.

Jehovah's Witnesses do not participate in birthday celebrations, patriotic, or religious holidays, though they respect other's beliefs and their right to do so.

Hinduism

Most Hindu women stay at home to raise their children.

Because traditional Hindu marriages are arranged by parents, dating is discouraged.

Islam

Observing Islamic dietary restrictions while eating in school cafeterias can be a challenge.... A more complete description of Islamic dietary restrictions is found on page 6.

When a Muslim girl reaches puberty, she is expected to cover all of her body except her face and hands (hijab) whenever she is outside her own home. Non-Muslim children need to be taught not to tease or pull at the clothing of girls dressed in hijab. Girls also need to be allowed 1) to wear modest, loose-fitting gym/PE clothes, and 2) to take private showers following gym activities.

All Muslims are expected to say ritual prayers on their knees with heads touching the floor at five specific times during the day. One of these times falls during the regular school day, so Muslim children need a quiet place to pray and permission to go there for five to ten minutes at these times. On Fridays (the Islamic Sabbath) boys of high school age are expected to join adult men for prayer at the mosque for about thirty minutes between Noon and 1 pm.

While the Jewish festival of Hanukkah usually receives some mention in local classrooms, Ramadan is rarely mentioned. Islamic parents are usually quite willing to come to school to tell their children's classmates about this holy month in the Islamic calendar.

Muslims are forbidden to participate in any celebration of any non-Muslim religious holiday. In order to avoid Christmas songs, parties and other activities, some Muslim children spend much of the month of December sitting in the school office or leaving school early in the day.

Judaism

Observing Jewish dietary restriction while eating in school cafeterias can be a challenge.... A more complete description of Jewish dietary restrictions is on page 7.

If school clothing is an issue for Jews, it is primarily for those of the Orthodox community, though males (and some females) of all groups may choose to wear a yarmulke (skullcap) as a symbol of their faith. The fact that athletic uniforms cover so little of the body may also make their wearing unacceptable to traditionally observant Jews.

Sikhism

Sikhs are encouraged to marry within their faith. Dating is not permitted, but individuals are permitted to choose their own spouse.

Public Prayer

In the Southern culture, many public events begin and/or end with a public prayer. Unless event organizers are sensitive to the religious diversity among attendees, many such prayers include references that are strongly Christian and end in some variation of "in Jesus name. Amen." Musical entertainment at such events frequently includes similar references as well.

Prayers can be powerful statements of shared respect without compromising the integrity of any faith represented. To make public prayers inclusive of the diverse people in whose name they are offered [and allowing them to publicly affirm the prayer offered], and to emphasize the fact that God transcends our human-made divisions, the following opening phrases might be used:

<i>God</i>	<i>Creator God</i>	<i>Mighty God</i>
<i>Source of all being</i>	<i>God, by whatever name we know thee/you</i>	

The body of the prayer should acknowledge the shared values and concerns of those in attendance. Thanksgivings in prayer are common to all faiths – for the blessings of the world, for the concerns that all share, for the work that has been given us to do. Supplications should also reflect the shared values and concerns – for vision, hope, strength, courage, etc.

Closings that represent all faiths [i.e. to which all can assent] include:

<i>Keep us faithful</i>	<i>Hear our prayer</i>
<i>In thy /your name</i>	<i>In thy/your holy name we pray</i>

Amen is almost universally used as a statement of affirmation. To emphasize the fact that the prayer has been offered on behalf of all those present, participants may be invited to join in the *Amen* with words like, “And the people say....”

If the person offering the prayer feels called to make a public prayer to her/her faith, he/she needs to introduce it with words like, “Respecting the fact that we come from many faiths, I offer my prayer in my tradition, the Christian faith.” Such a prayer can then be followed by a moment of silence in which people are invited to pray silently in their own tradition. More than one spoken prayer, each in a different tradition, could also be used.

People offering blessings over food that is to be consumed at the event need to be aware that individuals of other faiths may not be able to eat food that has been blessed in Jesus’ name.

While the [forms of prayer] above speak for most faiths which acknowledge a single God with power and might beyond that of humans, the Buddhist faith does not include such a God, so prayers that contain such a reference will not include any Buddhists who are present. A Buddhist prayer would be more likely to address the goodness and wisdom inherent in all human life and focus on opening one’s heart to those values. For example: Let us offer a prayer of appreciation for the opportunity to share this meal, to share our friendship, and to work together for the betterment of our community. Thank you.”

Other Issues in Public Life

In addition to the prayers offered at public events and the Southern tradition of serving barbecue, ham or bacon at many such dinners, other issues arise in which different faiths may experience conflicts with the “general culture”.

Baha’i

Baha’is are expected to recite an obligatory prayer each day. Many of today’s workspaces are not conducive to prayerful quiet.

Adult Baha'is fast from sunrise to sunset from March 2 to March 20, so it is difficult for them to participate in events such as going-away lunches or luncheon meetings during this time. An evening meeting, which prevents breaking the fast right at sundown, can also present problems.

Speaking of one another's shortcomings is "the most great sin" in the Baha'i faith. Because of this admonition, Baha'is will often excuse themselves from a conversation which includes gossip or backbiting.

Baha'is are expected to abstain from work and school on nine specific holy days, but they are not expected to risk their jobs for such an observance.

Christianity

Jehovah's Witnesses do not salute the flag of any nation and do not participate when national anthems are sung or played. They do respect the flag of the country in which they live, shown by respecting the laws of that nation. For religious reasons, Jehovah's Witnesses prefer non-blood management for all health matters.

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (frequently called Mormons) are strongly encouraged to observe "Family Home Evenings" on Mondays, which prevents participation in Monday evening meetings, school events, etc.

Islam

Muslims are expected to recite prayers at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and evening each day. Since some of these fall during traditional work/school hours, a quiet place needs to be available where a Muslim may kneel with his/her head touching the floor.

As a sign of modesty, Muslims do not shake hands with persons of the opposite gender. If one male and one female are in an office or other room alone, the door should be left open.

Judaism

The Jewish Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday, which brings Sabbath service into direct conflict with events ranging from high school football games to symphony concerts.

Several slang phrases (e.g., I think you can *jew* the price down") in common parlance are offensive to Jews.

SECTION 3

Additional Resources





Prayers for Peace in the Middle East

Sustain together in undiminished hope, O God of hope,
those who continue to labor with undiminished determination
to build peace in the land from which, of old,
out of brokenness, violence and destruction,
nevertheless hope emerged for so many of faith. . . .
Bless all the spiritual seed of Abraham together
with the light of your Presence.
For in the light of your Presence
we have found a way of justice and mercy
and a vision of Peace.
We praise you O God, Giver of Peace,
who commands us to Peace. *Amen*

Rabbi Herbert Bronstein

Northshore Congregation Israel, Glencoe, IL

God of mercy and compassion,
of grace and reconciliation,
pour your power upon all your children in the Middle East:
Jews, Muslims and Christians,
Palestinians and Israelis.
Let hatred be turned into love, fear to trust, despair to hope,
oppression to freedom, occupation to liberation,
that violent encounters may be replaced by loving embraces,
and peace and justice could be experienced by all. *Amen.*

The Reverend Said Ailabouni

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Chicago, IL

Almighty God!
After almost a century of mistrust and fratricide,
you inspired Jews, Christians and Muslims
to take the path of reconciliation in the Middle East. . . .
We ask for your forgiveness, O God,
yet we find it hard to forgive our past enemies.
May Your Words touch those who still stray
in the wilderness of vengeful violence,
forgetting your command to "forgive and overlook,
till God accomplish His Purpose;
for God hath power over all things." *Amen*

Abdelwahab Hechiche

University of South Florida, Tampa, FL

O God Source of Life, Creator of Peace. . .
Help Your children, anguished and confused,
To understand the futility of hatred and violence
And grant them the ability to stretch across
Political, religious and national boundaries
So they may confront horror and fear
By continuing together
In the search for justice, peace and truth. . . .
With every fiber of our being
We beg You, O God,
To help us not to fail nor falter. *Amen*

Rabbi H. Rolando Matalon

Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, New York, NY

Lord God, we turn to you in these trying hours when
conflict is a daily reality for our sisters and brothers
in Israel and Palestine. We promise you to work to our
utmost for peace and reconciliation in the region. But we
know we cannot do it alone. We very much need the strength
of your presence in our midst if we are to overcome the
obstacles before us. So our prayer at this moment is that
you add your support to our efforts, that you show yourself
as a tower of strength in those moments when the barriers
seem impassable. Together we can become beacons of hope
for just and peaceful societies in the land so very dear
to the peoples of your covenant. *Amen.*

Reverend John T. Pawlikowski, OSM

Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, IL

In the Name of God, The Everlasting Merciful, The Cherisher
Of the Worlds and Worthy of all Praise,
Our Lord: You have created us from a single (pair) of a male
And a female and made us into Nations and Tribes that we may
Know one another (not that we may despise each other) so
Help us to love each other and take the hatred and anger from our
Hearts so that the People of The Book (Christians, Jews and Muslims)
In the Middle East may live in Peace and Justice. *Amen*

Dawud Ahmad Assad

Council of Mosques, USA, New York, NY

Two peoples, one land,
Three faiths, one root,
One earth, one mother,
One sky, one beginning, one future, one destiny,
One broken heart,
One God.
We pray to You:
Grant us a vision of unity.
May we see the many in the one and the one in the many.
May you, Life of All the Worlds, Source of All Amazing Differences
Help us to see clearly.
Guide us gently and firmly toward each other,
Toward peace. *Amen.*

Rabbi Sheila Weinberg
Jewish Community of Amherst, Amherst, MA

O God of peace, you have established Jerusalem as the Lord's House and a place of peace, and you have called on all who live there to love you and prosper. Instill in her inhabitants - Jews, Christians and Muslims - a hunger for justice and dignity and a resolve to end the distrust that culminates in violence. Grant them the wisdom and patience to build a city where Israeli and Palestinian reside in safety, free from oppression and committed to the good of all.

In this endeavor, make everyone of us agents of your peace, O God. Forgive us our indifference and stamp out the prejudices that lead to hatred. Fill us with the reconciling spirit of your presence. So may we join people of good will - in the Middle East and throughout the world - who raise before Jerusalem's gates their insistent Shalom and Salaam: "Peace be within your walls. . . .Peace be within you." *Amen.*

The Reverends Harry and Judith Hoehler
First Parish (Unitarian-Universalist), Weston, MA

In the name of God, The Most Gracious, The Most Merciful:
Guide us on the straight way, the way of those whom thou has blessed.
Help us so that we do not transgress the bounds of what is right and lawful.
Take us out of deep darkness into light.
Make us not bear burdens which we have no strength to bear.
Help us bring about mutual affection and understanding between us.
Grant us Thy forgiveness and blessings, O Our Sustainer,
for with Thee is all journeys' end. *Amen.*

Mian Ashraf
New England Islamic Center, Sharon, MA

Selections on the Imperative for Peace from Jewish, Christian and Islamic Sacred Texts

*from the **Hebrew Bible***

Genesis 13:6-9; Numbers 6:24-26; Psalm 34:15; Psalm 85:7-13;
Psalm 122; Isaiah 2:2-4; Micah 4:1-5; and Proverbs 3:13-18

*from the **New Testament***

Matthew 5:1-11, 21-24 and 43-44; Luke 6:32 and 35-36; John 17:20-21;
Romans 14:19; Ephesians 2:13-14 and 6:12-17; and Hebrews 12:14

*from the **Holy Quran***

Sura 3:20, 84 and 133-134; Sura 4:90; Sura 5:32; Sura 6:54; Sura 8:61;
Sura 14:23; Sura 16:90; Sura 17:70; Sura 19:62; Sura 41:34; Sura 42:40 and 43

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NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Engaging in interfaith dialogue

BY NANCY MOLIN LONGATAN

Hindus are fatalistic. Buddhists are spiritual. Christians always try to force their religion down your throat. The tragedy and dilemma of our times is that, although we live in a smaller world, where travel is easier than ever before, we still rely on outdated and inaccurate stereotypes when thinking about and even meeting other people.

Can we learn to work together on common goals? Can we discuss problems without acrimonious debate? Can we be open to others without watering down or compromising our own faith?

Some have suggested a process of interfaith dialogue as a way forward in our pluralistic world. However, the whole notion of interfaith dialogue has become a conflict ground in itself, with different meanings and different potential outcomes seen by people with different perspectives.

Do we posit dialogue as a substitute for the proclamation of Christ? Is it just a play of ideas for academics with no connection to ordinary life? Is anyone else interested in dialogue, or only a few liberal Christians?

In my own experience working in other lands with people of many faiths, interfaith dialogue is not an option and not a sterile academic pursuit. It is a vital part of any job, and it can help us all live better. How? Come with me to Nepal and see ...

Life goes on

In 1991, anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista published a book titled *Fatalism and Development* (Sangam Books), about the culture of Hindu Nepal, saying that there will never be development there comparable to that of the West, unless Hindus abandon their fatalistic attitude. The book ignited a storm of controversy, not least because Bista was himself a Nepali Hindu. Everybody had a different point of view about it, and for a while “fatalism” was the word on everyone’s lips.

About that time, a great tragedy occurred in the town where I was living. A boy of 15, the only son of the town’s doctor, was sitting on the ground in the schoolyard watching a volleyball game. The ball bounced across the yard and hit him on the head. Although it hadn’t seemed like a heavy blow, he was momentarily stunned. Within a few days, he started having convulsions and was taken to the national university hospital for CAT scans and treatment. Soon after, he died.

A few days later, I was walking in the marketplace with Suman, a Nepali engineer on our project, and we met the mourning father. We paused to offer a few words of condolence.

“I guess it must have been written that this would happen,” Suman said.

The father nodded his acceptance of the gesture and walked on.

As we continued our walk, Suman laughed a bit sadly and said, “I guess I’m a fatalist, too. But what else can you say to a person in a situation like that?”

As a missionary, as an anthropologist, as a friend, I had no alternative to give him. The whole incident is equally absurd if you believe God grants free will to creation. Either way, a child has died before his time and a theological doctrine is cold comfort.

But that is the work that doctrines are supposed to do: They tell us how to live well in a complex, mysterious, and sometimes tragic world. Doctrines are not formed to be dialogued about, they are formed to teach us how to live, how to offer comfort, how to plan community improvement, how to share our blessings, how to go forward when the way is obscure. People of every culture and faith have experience of how to live well, and we can all enrich ourselves by sharing our experiences.

My brother works in a high-tech company in Texas doing artificial intelligence work, and many of his colleagues

come from around the world. He told me recently that an engineer from India told his friends that he would be going home to get married, and would be back at work in a few weeks.

“Married!” they cried, “What’s the lucky girl like?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “My parents arranged it. I’ve never seen her.”

Shock! Consternation! My brother said the consensus among his American colleagues was that arranged marriage just doesn’t happen in the twenty-first century. But apparently, the guy’s parents hadn’t heard about the consensus.

So how do you offer congratulations and best wishes in a situation like this? Plan an office party and spring for the salad server set with matching cruets? Or quietly drop the whole thing? In today’s globally connected society, interfaith dialogue goes on all around us all the time. It’s not the preoccupation of specialist theologians that everyone else can just ignore.

Dialogue is not persuasion

It should be clear by now that we can say more about what interfaith dialogue is *not* than about what it is. It is not persuasion. Generally, people don’t make a faith commitment on the basis of someone’s persuasive explanation of doctrine. And talk is not usually what motivates people to convert to a new way of knowing God. In fact, dialogue is not aimed at changing the participants in any way. Dialogue is getting to know each other better and thinking through some problem or shared project together.

My friend Pastor Ramos, a Lutheran minister from rural Indonesia, told me of a plan he and some colleagues had made in response to inter-religious violence in his country. They decided to have a picnic for everyone in town, Christian and Muslim alike.

“We spent a lot of time planning it, the pastors and imams together,” he explained. “We had to be especially care-

Disciples on interfaith dialogue

For a particularly Disciples take on all things interfaith, consult a masterful report produced by the Council on Christian Unity titled, “Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement.” The report was received by the Disciples’ 2007 General Assembly, along with a resolution meant to encourage congregations, regions, and all Disciples organizations to engage in interfaith work of one sort or another.

The report centers its theological framework on Disciples identity, which recognizes the *imago dei*, the image of God, in all of humanity and throughout the world’s religious traditions. Yet as Disciples, we are also decidedly Christian and need not “suspend our deepest Christian convictions” to engage, respect, and learn with and from our neighbors in other traditions.

The report and resolution can be found at www.disciples.org/ga/pastassemblies/05/. Click on “Resolutions” to find “Report 0518: Concerning Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement” and “Resolution 0519: Encouraging Interreligious Engagement.”

The Council on Christian Unity has also developed a study guide for the report, which can be found at www.disciples.org/ccu/resources/.

ful about the food, to make sure that we provided food that everyone could eat.”

That, in a nutshell, is interfaith dialogue: identifying a community problem, (violence); deciding on a way forward (have a picnic); and sitting down to plan the program together — how to live well in a complex world.

Dialogue is respect

It should also be clear that no one enters a dialogue as some kind of blank slate. All of us have a faith that we live by, and any dialogue starts with a position, not floating free in the air. Dialogue recognizes that each person treasures and values the position he or she has come to, and takes place in a context of people with beliefs — beliefs that help them shape their lives within the world as they find it.

When I lived at the Asian Rural Institute (ARI), a Christian, multi-faith community in Japan, we had many fascinating interfaith dialogues. Most young people in Japan today have been raised to consciously have “no religion,” a position that they see as ethical and peace loving. Kisaku, a young college graduate, commented on this aspect:

I thought it was best to have no religion, because religion causes conflict, like in the Middle East. Before I came to ARI, I knew that there are people of many religions here, so I expected there to be a lot of conflict and fighting. I was surprised to see that people of different religions can live together in peace and with respect for other beliefs.

Strangers can open new paths

Although I emphasize that dialogue is not a “back door” to changing or watering down someone else’s faith, it should also be obvious that those who enter into open, respectful dialogue can expect to have their ideas challenged and their eyes opened to new ways of seeing.

I made this point in an article published in the *UCC News* in 1995, in a discussion of declining membership in mainline churches. Someone noted that the average age of United Church of Christ members was “up to” 57. I used this statistic to take off on an imagined dialogue with a Hindu, who sees all of life as a series of *ashrams* or life stages — student, householder, forest dweller, and wandering seeker. From such a context, the relatively young age of 57 is a great achievement for churches: People are being drawn into the religious life even as they are still preoccupied with the cares of life.

“How are you getting them in so young?” I heard my imagined Hindu ask. “How do the older retired people mentor the younger retired people in their roles in the church? And what does it mean for your country that so many of your wisest citizens gather each week to pray for the community and the nation?”

Although this was an imagined dialogue, it still makes the point that our set ideas can be challenged fruitfully and positively by dialogue partners who have perspectives that are alien to us. Change is not necessarily threat or unfaithfulness. Indeed, openness to change can show us the way out of what may appear to be a dead end.

Yuko, another young Japanese citizen at ARI, made this same point:

I used to be very opinionated, and I wasn’t interested in people with different ideas from mine. But here at ARI, there are so many people who come from different cultures and different backgrounds. Their opinions were made by their situations and personalities. Just like mine, I realized. Sometimes I couldn’t understand other people’s behaviors and feelings. What is right? What is wrong? I couldn’t find one answer. Of course, to give one’s own opinion clearly is important. But without making an effort to understand others, it is meaningless.

Christian dialogue

Finally, interfaith dialogue is important for us as a way to gain skills we need in our own church life. American Christians are used to seeing their churches as divided by a gulf between liberal and conservative. We believe that this division is natural in the church and unlikely to be bridged in our generation. But how much effort do we put into dialogue across this gulf?

I was at one big church assembly where a hot topic was being debated. A resolution passionately supported by one side was just as passionately opposed by the other. I was standing in the back with some national staff members.

“Everybody knows the script,” said one, cynically. “All these people always make the same comments at the same stage in the debate. Everybody always knows what everybody else is going to say.”

Just a few minutes later, a man stood up and broke the script.

“I don’t know how I’m going to explain my vote to the folks back home,” he said. “They sent me here to get this resolution passed, but I’m against it now. For the past three days, I’ve been in the study group looking at this, and I’ve heard people telling stories like I’ve never had a chance to hear before. I think we need to spend less time passing resolutions and more time listening to each other.”

“Spend more time listening to each other.” What could be of more practical value in a complex and perplexing world? What better way to demonstrate the love of Christ? How can we afford not to dialogue in our tense and confusing times? 🇺🇸


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Visiting the other children of Abraham

What to expect at a
synagogue or mosque



Back in the 1970s, when I first began exploring the diversity of the world's religions, I read a lot of books. I did that because there weren't many Hindus, Muslims, Jews, or Buddhists in my hometown of Corvallis, Oregon. The American religious landscape was less complex back then.

Today, we live in a more diverse religious environment. Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims are no longer people who live "over there" but are our neighbors and part of the fabric of American life. In 2008, studying another faith means cultivating personal relationships with the parents of my kids' classmates or the Information Technology director at the software company in town.

Visiting non-Christian houses of worship is an easy way to learn about another faith tradition. Well, it's easy if you approach the visit with an open mind and an awareness of the potential problems an interfaith encounter can bring.

One of the biggest barriers to interfaith sharing is the firm belief we bring to the dialogue. To put it bluntly, it's difficult not to assume an air of superiority, to feel that *my* religion is the best of faiths. Sure, my Hindu or Jewish friends have perfectly fine religions, but their religions do not express the fullness of God's will for humanity as found in Christianity. And my dialogue partners

likely hold the same thoughts about their faith vis-à-vis Christianity. For all believers, this attitude of religious superiority remains a handicap in pursuing a deep and creative interfaith dialogue.

The difficulty we face in dialogue stems from the very nature of religion. Because religion takes the believer into realms of salvation and ultimate meaning, the stakes are much higher and the emotions much stronger than, say, my political choice for president. This sense that my religion is better than yours has been expressed clearly by Pope Benedict in his controversial pronouncement (available on the Vatican website) that non-Catholics are "in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of means of salvation."

What Pope Benedict expresses openly is, I suspect, what most of us believe quietly to some degree: My faith provides the fullest expression of God's purpose and will. That said, there is a counterbalancing view that God works through all creation and all religions, and that in our global village we must become more fluent in the languages of many faiths. In his book *Christianity and the World Religions* (Doubleday, 1986), Catholic theologian Hans Kung boiled it down to two essential points: We must come to recognize that truth and untruth run through every faith tradition, and there can be no peace in the world until there is peace among religions.

Kung suggests recognizing that we may believe in the absolutes of our own faith tradition, but at the same time we should acknowledge how our understanding remains limited, relative, and open to mistakes and the need for change. Meeting with believers from other religions is a wonderful means of shedding light on just what we do believe and how our beliefs can be deepened, expanded, questioned, and tested.

Visiting a synagogue

I love going to synagogue. In my town we have two vibrant Jewish communities — Reform and Renewal — both led by brilliant rabbis. I am always touched by the warm bonds of affection apparent between members of the synagogue and extended toward guests. Entering synagogue feels just like a welcoming family experience. That sense of family and tradition is palpable in acts of love such as the kissing of one's fingers and then touching the plaque placed in the sanctuary in memory of a deceased parent or child.

Synagogue is the most common name for a Jewish spiritual center. It is the Greek translation of the Hebrew *beit kneset* (house of spirituality). Orthodox and Chasidic Jews often prefer *shul* to synagogue, while Reform Jews also refer to their place of worship as the Temple.

Every synagogue has four common elements.

1. There is at least one Torah — the Hebrew Bible, which contains the first five books of the Old Testament — written in calligraphy on a parchment scroll.

2. The Torah scroll is housed in an Ark, a beautiful wood cabinet placed at the front of the sanctuary.

3. The sanctuary is oriented so that prayers are said facing Jerusalem.

4. Above the Ark is a lamp called the *ner tamid* (eternal light), which remains lit at all times to represent the eternal presence of God.

Christians will find synagogue services familiar yet wonderfully different. There are hymnbooks to follow, the rabbi usually provides a meditation or rabbinic teaching, there's lots of music. Yet the experience of a *shabbat* service reflects the uniqueness of Jewish spirituality. It's hard to characterize this spirituality succinctly, but for me it has to do with the openness of the Jewish people to the fullness and richness of life — life in its highest and

BY STEVEN SCHOLL

best moments right along side its darkest dimensions. Jews know the pain of exile and persecution, culminating in the Holocaust (*Shoah* in Hebrew). But they also know the beauty of their psalms and sacred texts, great literature, music, art, science, and spirituality.

It is this ability to look life straight in the eye that makes Jewish spirituality so vibrant. The stories from Jewish scripture and history provide endless food for thought on the complexities of life and guide us to search for meaning in what often looks like a meaningless world.

But back to synagogue services. Here are some aspects of attending synagogue to be aware of:

- Appropriate dress for synagogue is what you might wear to church or to a business meeting. Renewal congregations are often more casual in attire, however, so it's always good to check with your host or the synagogue's information person before attending.

- Depending on the congregation, a visiting man may want to don a *yar-mulke* (skullcap), and a visiting married woman should wear a head scarf. Again, check with your hosts regarding such expectations.

- Stand when the Ark housing the Torah is opened and remain standing until it is closed. Sometimes in Reform synagogues the Ark remains open during a part of the service when the congregation may be seated. In this case, the rabbi usually announces that you may be seated.

- In Orthodox synagogues, men and women are not seated together.

- There are some occasions in Orthodox and Conservative services when only some people stand — for example, during the *kaddish* (mourners' prayer) — when only those mourning or commemorating the anniversary of a loved one's death stand.

I highly recommend attending your local synagogue during High Holy Day services. Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Passover services are beautiful and moving ceremonies that will enrich and deepen your understanding of Judaism.

Visiting a mosque

In post-9/11 America, nearly everything about Islam is contested and controversial. Many Muslims feel their faith is under attack from influential quarters, and especially from conservative political and religious sources. Televangelists

Franklin Graham and Pat Robertson have made disparaging comments about Islam, as have countless national and local talk show radio and television commentators, politicians, and columnists.

In short, many Americans have uneasy feelings about Islam and Muslims. Yet despite all of this, Islam continues to grow in America, with reports indicating increases in attendance at mosques and steady conversions to Islam from all sectors of American society. Books on Islam are bestsellers, and the poetry of Rumi, a thirteenth-century Persian-speaking scholar-mystic who lived in what is now Turkey, remains quite popular.

Given this background, a visit to your local mosque is perhaps fraught with more theological tensions than a visit to a synagogue or Buddhist temple. American mosques also have their fair share of internal controversies. Until recently, funding for many mosques came from rigid Saudi Arabia-based religious foundations.

Ibrahim Hooper, director of communications for the Council on American-Islamic Relations, told me that “today any funding of mosques from foreign sources is carefully scrutinized. This just is not an issue anymore, as funding for American mosques now comes mainly from local fundraising efforts.”

Another hot button issue for American Muslims is the role of women in the Muslim community and especially at mosques. Mosques, like Conservative synagogues, segregate women and men during religious services. Some mosques go so far as to require separate entrances, and then wall off women believers from men so that there is no interaction during prayer. This has led many Muslims, both men and women, to question their participation in mosque services. Today, only 15 to 20 percent of American Muslims attend mosque regularly.

Some groups are trying to change the culture of American mosques. Several national organizations have joined together

to publish the booklet titled “Women Friendly Mosques and Community Centers.” This widely disseminated work, based on solid scholarship, challenges all mosques in America to create more equitable sacred space for all Muslims.

So, what can you expect at your visit to a mosque? First, the basics:

A mosque is the place of worship for Muslims. The English word comes from the Arabic word *masjid*, which means the place of prostration or prayer. The primary function of the mosque is as a house of prayer. It is also a place for study and the place where major festivals are celebrated. The prayer hall (*musalla*) of a mosque is oriented so that when believers face the *mihrab*, a niche in the wall, they will be facing Mecca while praying.

You’ll immediately notice something different about a Muslim prayer hall compared to a church or Jewish temple. The space is open, with no seating, except for some chairs at the back of the hall for those who require them. This is because the Muslim practice of prayer is a moving meditation, where the supplicant calls on God through a series of movements. The praying Muslim bows, kneels, and touches the nose and forehead to the ground. When believers pray this way together, this invocation to God is a powerful experience.

Muslims say five prayers daily. These are referred to as *salat*, or ritual prayer. These prayers are most often said outside of the mosque, at home or at work. Muslims gather on Friday for group *salat* and to hear a sermon from the mosque’s *imam*, or leader, or from a knowledgeable scholar of Islam. Muslim clerics are, like rabbis, scholars of religious law and do not perform sacred rites as do Christian ministers. In Islam there are no human intermediaries between the individual and God.

As a visitor to a mosque, you will likely want to observe the prayer as opposed to joining in, as it is complicated

To learn more

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Hans Kung, *Christianity and the World Religions: Paths to Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism*. New York: Doubleday, 1986.

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in its movements and is recited in Arabic, the sacred language of Islamic scripture, the *Qur’an*. Every Muslim learns enough Arabic to recite basic prayers and to make the declaration of faith, known as the *shahada* — *la ilaha illa’llah, Muhammadan rasulallah* (there is no god but God and Muhammad is the Prophet of God). There is no rule against non-Muslims performing the prayer, but you should do so only if you feel you can participate sincerely in the practice.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims share many beliefs while differing on key teachings. It is important not to gloss over the theological diversity, but it is also important to keep sight of those beliefs that unite the children of Abraham. I have been inspired by meeting members of the Abraham Reunion, an interfaith organization based in Jerusalem that brings together Jews, Muslims, and Christians. These lovers of the light work tirelessly to promote common values and peace in the Holy Land. One thing they have found is

that the most effective form of interfaith dialogue is not theological discussion or debate but the sharing of festivals, holy days, and religious ceremonies.

Menachem Froman, an Orthodox rabbi living in the Occupied Territories and friend to Hamas spiritual leaders, says it is time for the children of Abraham — Jews, Muslims, and Christians — to build together a network of life among one another so that peace/shalom/salaam will have a chance to repair this world.

Your visit to a mosque, synagogue, or temple is a practical way to help build bridges of peace. 🏠

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world council of churches

Ecumenical considerations for dialogue and relations with people of other religions

*Taking stock of 30 years of dialogue
and revisiting the 1979 Guidelines*

■ <u>INTRODUCTION</u>
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1. From its beginning, the Church has confessed that God is reconciling the world to Godself through Christ Jesus. Throughout history, the Church has been seeking to understand and apply the fundamentals of its faith to concrete situations in which it found itself. The early Church continuously had to rethink its self-understanding when it moved from being part of the Jewish tradition to becoming a church of Jews and Gentiles, and beyond its Greco-Roman setting into other cultures and regions of the world. Today the church is continually called upon to enable its members to relate to persons of other faith traditions and to live as witnesses with others.

2. True to this vision, the World Council of Churches developed the "Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies" in Chiang Mai in 1979. We affirm the values of these guidelines, which were widely shared and received by the churches. However, we now have thirty years of experience in interreligious relations and dialogue, making it possible to move forward by drawing on what we have achieved or attempted. Since the **1979 guidelines**, the ecumenical movement has taken significant steps toward facilitating interreligious relations and dialogue, but expectations for the fruits of our efforts have also risen.

3. In recent years, member churches have requested guidelines on interreligious relations and dialogue that address today's context. More than ever, we sense a growing need not just for dialogue with people of other faiths but for genuine relationships with them. Increased awareness of religious plurality, the potential role of religion in conflict, and the growing place of religion in public life present urgent challenges that require greater understanding and cooperation among people of diverse faiths.

4. From a global perspective, we speak as Christians of diverse traditions to the member churches. We hope local churches will study, discuss, and adapt these ecumenical considerations to address their own contexts. In this effort, Christians should seek to go further to produce, in collaboration with neighbours of other religious traditions, commonly agreed guidelines for relations and dialogue that would inform, instruct, and enable all to embrace the way of trust and community building.

INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS AND DIALOGUE TODAY

5. Greater awareness of religious plurality has heightened the need for improved relations and dialogue among people of different faiths. Increased mobility, large-scale movement of refugees, and economic migrations have resulted in more people of diverse faiths living side-by-side. Where mechanisms for dialogue and encounter exist, there are opportunities to foster greater knowledge and awareness among people of different religions.

Unfortunately, increased relations between communities have sometimes been marred by tension and fear. For many communities, this tension confirms the need to protect their individual identities and distinctiveness. Sometimes the difference between the legitimate search for identity and hostility towards neighbours of other religions and cultures is blurred. Throughout the world and among the followers of major religious traditions, there has been a rise in influence of movements and leaders mobilising their believers in the name of preserving a perceived threatened distinctive identity. Often such an understanding of identity is made into the exclusive basis for the creation of a new societal order, shaped by a selective retrieval of doctrines, beliefs and practises from a sacralized past.

6. Whenever religious plurality gives rise to communal tensions there is a possibility of religious sentiments being misused. Religion speaks for some of the deepest feelings and sensitivities of individuals and communities; it carries profound historical memories and often appeals to uncritical confessional solidarities. Religion is sometimes seen as the cause of conflict, while it is in fact more likely to be an intensifier of conflict. Interreligious relations and dialogue are meant to help free religion from such misuse, and to present opportunities for religious people to serve together as agents of healing and reconciliation.

7. Too often religious identities are drawn into conflict and violence. In some parts of the world, religion is increasingly identified with ethnicity, giving religious overtones to ethnic conflict. In other situations, religious identity becomes so closely related to power that the communities without power, or who are discriminated against, look to their religion as the force of mobilization of their dissent and protest. These conflicts tend to appear as, or are represented to be, conflict between religious communities, polarizing them along communal lines. Religious communities often inherit deep divisions, hatreds and enmities that are, in most cases, passed down through generations of conflict. When communities identify themselves or are identified exclusively by their religion, the situation becomes explosive, even able to tear apart communities that have lived in peace for centuries. It is the task of interreligious relations and dialogue to help prevent religion from becoming the fault line between communities.

8. Efforts to prevent polarization between religious communities at the world level are more important than ever. Through media, people tend to perceive conflict in one place as part of a conflict in another causing enmities in one part of the world to spill over into other regions. An act of violence in one place is used to confirm the stereotype of the "enemy" in another place, or even to provoke revenge attacks elsewhere in the world. There is a need therefore to de-globalise situations of conflict and to analyse each one within its own context. The emphasis on the specificity of every context should not prevent people of faith in other parts of the world from being both concerned and involved. An

interreligious engagement in one place may in fact be an essential contribution to peace building and reconciliation in another place.

9. There is in many countries a growing role of religion in public life that requires greater understanding and cooperation among religions. Religious leaders are being called by governmental and non-governmental agencies to address public issues of moral concern. However to speak collectively and with moral authority, religious communities must discern their common values, decide to what extent they can express themselves with one voice, and discuss how they can avoid being manipulated by political forces.

APPROACHING RELIGIOUS PLURALITY

10. In their encounters with neighbours of other religious traditions, many Christians have come to experience the meaning of a "common humanity" before God. This experience is rooted in the biblical affirmation that God is the creator and sustainer of *all* creation. "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it" (Ps.24.1). God called the people of Israel to be witnesses among the nations while, at the same time, affirming that God is the God of all nations (Ex.19: 5-6). The eschatological visions in the Bible anticipate all nations coming together and the creation being restored to the fullness that God intends for all. This conviction is reflected in the affirmation that God is not without witness among any people or at any time (Acts 14.17).

11. When relating to people of other faiths, Christians must be aware of the ambiguities of religious expressions. While religious traditions reflect wisdom, love, compassion, and saintly lives, they are not immune to folly, wickedness and sin. Religious traditions and institutions sometimes support, or function as, systems of oppression and exclusion. Any adequate assessment of religious traditions must deal with their failure to live in accordance with their highest ideals. Christians are particularly aware that history testifies that our own religious tradition has sometimes been used to distort the very meaning of the gospel we are called to proclaim.

12. As witnesses, we approach interreligious relations and dialogue in commitment to our faith. At the heart of Christian belief is faith in the triune God. We affirm that God, the Father, is creator and sustainer of all creation. We hold the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the centre of God's redeeming work for us and for the world. The Holy Spirit confirms us in this faith, renewing our lives and leading us into all truth.

13. We are convinced that we have been called to witness in the world to God's healing and reconciling work in Christ. We do this humbly acknowledging that we are not fully aware of the ways in which God's redeeming work will be brought to its completion. We now see only dimly, as in a mirror, for we now know only in part and do not have the full knowledge of what God has in store (cf. 1 Cor. 13.12-13).

14. Many Christians have found it difficult to make sense of, or relate creatively to, the reality of other religious traditions. However, as Christians we believe that the Spirit of God is at work in ways beyond our understanding (cf. John 3. 8). The activity of the Spirit is beyond our definitions, descriptions and limitations. We should seek to discern the Spirit's

presence where there is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal. 5. 22-23). The Spirit of God is groaning with our spirit. The Spirit is at work to bring about the redemption of the whole created order (Rom. 8. 18 - 27).

15. We are witnesses in a world where God has not been absent and to people who do have something to say about God. We meet people who already live by faiths that rule their lives and with which they are at home. We witness among them in a spirit and spirituality informed by our Christian faith. Christians need to open themselves to the witness of others, which is made not just in words but also in faithful deeds, in devotion to God, in selfless service and in commitment to love and non-violence.

16. Our witness is marked by repentance, humility, integrity and hope. We know how easily we misconstrue God's revelation in Jesus Christ, betraying it in our actions and posturing as owners of God's truth rather than as undeserving recipients of grace. The spirituality, dedication, compassion and wisdom we see in others leave us little room for claiming moral superiority. Awaiting the freedom God wills for all creation (Rom. 8. 19-21), we cannot but make known to others our own experience and witness and at the same time listen to them expressing their deepest convictions and insights.

17. In dialogue and relationships with people of other faiths, we have come to recognize that the mystery of God's salvation is not exhausted by our theological affirmations.

Salvation belongs to God. We therefore dare not stand in judgement of others. While witnessing to our own faith, we seek to understand the ways in which God intends to bring God's purposes to their fulfilment.

Salvation belongs to God. We therefore feel able to assure our partners in dialogue that we are sincere and open in our wish to walk together towards the fullness of truth.

Salvation belongs to God. We therefore claim this hope with confidence, always prepared to give reason for it, as we struggle and work together with others in a world torn apart by rivalries and wars, social disparities and economic injustices.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

18. Dialogue must be a process of mutual empowerment, not a negotiation between parties who have conflicting interests and claims. Rather than being bound by the constraints of power relations, partners in dialogue should be empowered to join in a common pursuit of justice, peace and constructive action for the good of all people.

19. In dialogue we grow in faith. For Christians, involvement in dialogue produces constant reappraisal of our understanding of the Biblical and theological tradition. Dialogue drives all communities to self-criticism and to re-thinking the ways in which they have interpreted their faith traditions. Dialogue brings about change in the experience of faith, helping

people to deepen and grow in their faith in unexpected ways.

20. In dialogue we affirm hope. In the midst of the many divisions, conflicts and violence there is hope that it is possible to create a human community that lives in justice and peace. Dialogue is not an end in itself. It is a means of building bridges of respect and understanding. It is a joyful affirmation of life for all.

21. In dialogue we nurture relations. Building bonds of relationship with those considered "the other" is the goal of all dialogues. Such bonds however are not built easily or quickly. Therefore patience and perseverance are crucial in the practice of dialogue. The tenacity to go on, even when the fruits are not obvious, is one of the basic disciplines of dialogue.

22. In dialogue we must be informed by the context. Dialogue takes place in concrete settings. Awareness of such realities as historical experience, economic background and political ideologies is essential. Further, differences in culture, gender, generation, race, and ethnicity also have an important impact on the nature and style of interaction. The purpose of dialogue, once the context is taken seriously, is not to remove or run away from differences but to build confidence and trust across them.

23. In dialogue we strive towards mutual respect. Dialogue partners are responsible for hearing and listening to the self-understanding of each other's faith. Trust and confidence comes from allowing partners to define themselves, refraining from proselytism, and providing an opportunity for mutual questioning, and if appropriate justified criticism. Such practices promote an informed understanding of each other, which becomes the basis for all other relationships.

24. In dialogue it is important to respect the integrity of religious traditions in the variety of their structures and organisations. Equally important is to recognise the way that participants in dialogue define their relation with their community. Some affirm their right and obligation to speak for their community. Others would choose to speak from their own experience.

25. Dialogue is a co-operative and collaborative activity. All partners involved need to be included in the planning process from the very beginning. The strength of setting the agenda together lies in the fact that all partners own the agenda and become committed to making it work. For the conduct of dialogue clear objectives and commonly agreed criteria for participation and regular assessment are essential.

26. In dialogue we strive to be inclusive, since dialogue can easily become an elitist activity and be confined to certain strata of society. Care should be taken to ensure that dialogue takes place at different levels, between different groups and on subjects that affect the lives of all sections of the community.

SOME PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

27. Individuals and communities may, even with the best of intentions, encounter problems and difficulties in interreligious relations and dialogue. Sometimes the call for

dialogue is met with hesitation, suspicion, indifference or opposition both from within one's own community and from other religious communities. Sometimes interreligious relations communicate attitudes that contrast with the values upheld by the culture and ethics of dialogue. Sometimes the possible outcome of dialogue does not seem enough to really justify participation. In addition, other problems invite careful consideration, some of them emerging in recent discussions.

28. There are often expectations that dialogue can significantly contribute towards resolving political or communal conflicts and restoring peace, in situations where religion seems to be implicated. In a number of countries there are dialogue partners who are able to cooperate, across the religious divide, in concrete efforts of peace making. There are also cases where religious leaders are invited to play a visible role in state-sponsored peace initiatives. The impact of dialogue in the context of conflicts may disappoint high expectations. When it is unable to quell conflict, its relevance is questioned. However, by its very nature, interreligious dialogue is not an instrument to instantly resolve problems in emergency situations. Contacts and relations of precious trust and friendship between people of different religions, built quietly by patient dialogue during peacetime, may in times of conflict prevent religion from being used as a weapon. In many cases, such relations may pave the way for mediation and reconciliation initiatives. At times of communal tension or at the peak of a crisis, contacts across the communal divide may prove to be invaluable in the construction of peace.

29. Although dialogue by its very nature is direct encounter, there are invisible participants on each side in every dialogue. Our dialogue partners will every so often hold us responsible for what fellow Christians have done or neglected to do, said or not said. While this in some ways is inevitable and even sometimes understandable, we are well aware of deep disagreements within religions and we know that the dividing lines do not always go between religious communities but often within religious communities. The differences may be not only theological, but relate to social, political, and moral issues. We may for various reasons find ourselves in opposition to some of those with whom we share a common faith. We learn that religious communities are not monolithic blocks confronting each other. Plurality of positions on each side should not be ignored or suppressed while defending what is perceived to be the interest of one's community. Commitment to a faith does not entail identification with what is done or not done in its name. Therefore, we should not be defensive, but remain confident of the potential of dialogue to changing deeply held opinions or prejudices.

30. Among many religious communities, we come across people who seem to be primarily interested in the growth of their own community through various forms of mission including proselytism. They seem to have little interest in dialogue or may make use of it to further their missionary design. Such situations can be discouraging for people willing to engage in dialogue. Their disappointment often overshadows the possibility of identifying partners critical of those attitudes in their community. It is essential that we intentionally seek such partners and explore ways of rebuilding the credibility of dialogue enabling people of divergent positions to enter a relationship of mutual respect and openness in discussing divisive issues.

31. There are several expressions of dialogue, reflecting the various aspects of life itself.

There is not one expression better than the other and our engagement therein should not conform to any pre-set model or hierarchy of dialogue but respond to the need, doing what is possible. In some contexts, we may discuss "cultural" differences more readily than "religious" ones, even as issues of religious concern and practice are considered in such a discussion. Similarly, co-operation about "social" concerns may be possible and even strongly supported, where there is hesitancy to consider dialogue on theological issues.

32. Motivations for dialogue can sometimes be conditioned by power relations between religious communities and by the importance, objective and subjective, of numerical disparities. In many countries, these communities share the same language and often the same culture. Often their members are said to be granted by law equal civil and political rights. But discriminatory practices exacerbate distrust and division. The intermingling of state policies and confessional identities rooted in communal traditions may lead communities to look at each other as a threat. This is particularly true in times of uncertainty or political and constitutional changes involving a redefinition of state-religion relationships. Interreligious dialogue cannot shy away from recognising the effects of uneven power relations and the impact of mutual perceptions, no matter how distorted they are. The relevance of dialogue initiatives depends largely on their intentional and concentrated effort to dispel fears and suspicions between those who are seen to represent religious communities. Equally, it is essential that interreligious dialogue creates an opportunity for strengthening cross-confessional loyalties, always upholding, in discussion and joint action, the centrality of the common good and inclusive political participation.

33. Participation in multireligious prayer has become increasingly common among a large number of Christians. Concrete situations of everyday life provide opportunities for encounter with people of different religions. These include interreligious marriages, personal friendship, praying together for a common purpose, for peace or in a particular crisis situation. But the occasion can also be a national holiday, a religious festival, a school assembly, and other gatherings in the context of interreligious relations and dialogue. There are various forms of prayer among people of different religions. Christians may be invited to other places of worship, where they should be respectful of the practices of that tradition. Christians may invite guests of another religion to a church service and should ensure a welcoming hospitality. Multi-religious prayer juxtaposes the prayer of different traditions. The advantage is that the variety and integrity of each tradition is honoured and that we are praying in the presence of each other. The disadvantage may be that one remains a bystander. United interreligious prayer is an occasion where people of different religions plan, prepare and participate together in a common prayer. There are those who feel that this risks reducing prayer to the lowest common denominator and that it can take away from the unique spirituality of prayer of each religion. For others such prayer is not at all possible. Yet for some, praying together could be a spiritually enriching occasion. All these different responses indicate that serene conversations among Christians on this issue are not a finished task.

CONCLUSION

34. In the many pluralist societies where they live, Christians and people of other religions are bound together in a dialogue of life, with all its difficulties but also its riches and promises. They gain new insights about their own faith and that of others. They discover

afresh resources, which will help them become more humane and make the world a better place for living together. They learn how to be more sensitive to the needs and aspirations of others and more obedient to God's will for all creation.

Confessing Christ in an Interfaith World

by S. Wesley Ariarajah

In our attempt to relate to peoples of other traditions, Christians have come to know them as praying and believing peoples with long spiritual histories. We have come to know their scriptures and spiritual practices and the reality of their religious life has begun to challenge some of the assumptions we have made about God and God's dealings with other peoples. There is greater emphasis today on knowing more about other religious traditions and of the need for dialogue as a way of building relationships across the religious barriers.

Biblical Perspectives

The Bible begins with the story of creation, not of Jews or Christians, but of the earth and all its peoples. Psalm 24 declares this basic affirmation in beautiful language: "The earth is the Lord's and all its fullness; the world, and all who dwell in it." All people live by the grace of this one God, who provides for them and sustains them. This means that God cares for my Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist neighbors in the same way that care is extended to me. This is what we mean when we say, "God is love." No one is outside God's love and protection.

However, the Bible also tells us that the world is not what God intended it to be. There is sin and wickedness, war and violence. The story of the Bible, therefore, is also the story of how God is at work to heal the world and to bring it back to what God intended it to be.

The Bible also says that God used Moses to bring the Hebrew people out of slavery and made a covenant with them. God will be their God and in return they must live a just and righteous life according to the Teachings (Law) that were given to them through Moses.

Jesus' Approach to Mission

Jesus, himself of the Jewish tradition, appears to have held the Jewish understanding of what mission was all

about. He compared the act of witnessing to the function of salt, of leaven in the dough, of a city that is set on a hill, of seed that is sown, etc. All these images point to a much humbler task than going out to 'win the whole world to Christ.' In the Acts 1 passage on witnessing, Jesus said, "you shall be my witnesses", indicating the importance of 'being' as a dimension of witness (Acts 1.8).

Solidarity with the Poor

Clearly Jesus did announce the in breaking of the Reign of God and spent his life in the mission he was called to do. But what constituted this mission? It was certainly not an attempt to draw people away from the Jewish or other religious traditions of his day or to win numbers for his own group. Rather, Jesus' mission consisted in healing all dimensions of peoples' lives - physical, mental, and spiritual, announcing God's love for and acceptance of all people, and challenging them to love God rather than Mammon - the god of wealth and power. In his first sermon at Nazareth (Luke 4) this is further elaborated in terms of solidarity with the poor and the oppressed.

It is in the light of this that we ask, "What does confessing Christ mean in an interfaith world?"

Confessing with Humility

First, our witness must be in humility because we do not really know the religious experience of others. If the biblical assertion that God has an ongoing relationship with all God's creatures is

true, our neighbors have stories to tell us about their life with God, and God's life with them.

Confessing with Confidence

Second, as Christians, we confess Christ with confidence because what we have come to know about God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is distinct from other experiences. We confess our insights and experiences of God in Christ to others as *our own specific witness* to the way God relates to humankind.

Confessing with Compassion

Third, our confession of Christ in the context of religious plurality must have the right intentions and goals. If our approach is based on compassion and solidarity, as Christ's was, and is about the healing and wholeness of the community, it will be welcome.

Confessing with Hope

Fourth, our confession of Christ is based on our faith that God loves the world, and intends to bring the whole world unto Godself. We know, and we have experienced, God's offer of salvation in Jesus Christ; but we do not know what other forces are at work in the service of God's saving love. There is much hopelessness and widespread cynicism in the world around us. Hope in the midst of all hopelessness, or as Peter says in his letter, our readiness "to give an account of the hope that is in us," is perhaps the strongest confession of Christ that we can make in a religiously pluralistic world.



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Understanding Unity in a Religiously Diverse World

12th Joe A. and Nancy Vaughn Stalcup Lecture on Christian Unity

Dr. Diana L. Eck

Diana L. Eck is Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies and Frederic Wertham Professor of Law and Psychiatry in Society at Harvard University. This lecture was presented on June 9, 2013 at East Dallas Christian Church, Dallas, Texas.



It is a great pleasure to be here in Dallas, Texas to talk about Christian unity in a religiously divided world, to talk about faith—our faith and other faiths. As Christians we recognize religious diversity as a salient fact of the world in which we live, but we too seldom contemplate just what this diversity means for those of us who follow in the way of Christ, and what our unity means. We know Christian unity does not mean uniformity, but something deeper: a commitment that underlies and supports our diverse ways of being Christian.

Christian unity is the theme of the ecumenical movement. The modern ecumenical movement began in the wake of World War II as Christians came together from all sides of a war-torn world to affirm a common commitment. This, after centuries of fission and separation. This, after years of the horror of war. The old scars of Europe, the legacies of colonialism, and the denominational extravaganza of the United States have not made this work easy. Today, it is unclear how ecumenism, at least institutionally supported ecumenism, will develop as the future unfolds. Both the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches in the U.S. face dwindling financial resources, and perhaps dwindling enthusiasm as well.

One thing we do know, however, is that the intra-Christian dialogue represented by the ecumenical movement is as important now as at any time in Christian history. The questions at stake are critical. What does it mean to be Christian in the face of Christian diversity and, too often, deep division? What does it mean to and to gather in communities called "churches" at this time in human history? How has the communications revolution transformed the ways in which Christians relate to one another across the globe? How has a new agenda been set for all of us by the environmental crises that affect the rivers, the seas and the plains of the planet, and by the deep and deeper chasms that separate those who have far too much from those who have way too little.

These are some of the theological issues we all face. And we know that theology is most importantly in the hands and hearts of the laity, who constitute the vast majority of the world's Christian theologians: the people who read, study, go to

church, listen, and think about what it all means as they negotiate the white- waters of life. That is theology, and it is not primarily the domain of that small group of people who call themselves theologians. They do a great service, to be sure. But the lion's share of Christian theological interpretation is in the understandings of the laity. So I congratulate Joe and Nancy Stalcup, the founders of this institute and this lecture series. There could be no more important venue for the cultivation of Christian thinking, and we have a lot of thinking to do.

My own introduction to the ecumenical movement was as a teenager, involved in the Methodist Youth Fellowship. I was a young person from the West, who went to college in the East, just weeks after marching in the March on Washington with a national Methodist youth group. In spring break of my freshman year, I lobbied for the Civil Rights Bill, again with Methodist students. And about this time, I was appointed as a youth delegate to the negotiations that brought about the creation of the United Methodist Church from the Evangelical United Brethren and the Methodist Church. I was never too sure what the issues were, to be frank.

My family in Montana was like many in the 1950s: we were part and parcel of what the sociologist Will Herberg called the "triple melting pot." That is to say, the whole of religiously diverse America began to evolve into three main groups: Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish. Each was becoming more homogeneous. By the 1950s, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Lutherans were all generally "Protestant." Irish, Italian, and French Catholics were basically "Catholic." Polish and German Jews were now simply "Jewish." When my parents arrived in Bozeman, Montana to settle down, they visited various churches, loved the teaching and preaching of the Methodist minister, and these two life-long Lutherans, each the immediate descendants of Swedish immigrants, all Swedish Lutherans, became Methodist. There was no ecumenical distress here.

In any case, my involvement in ecumenical church-merger negotiations came to an abrupt end at the end of my sophomore year in college. By that time, American

involvement in Southeast Asia, in Vietnam, was on my mind. Buddhist monk Thich Qang Duc walked into the intersection in Saigon, sat in a posture of meditation, poured gasoline over himself, and burning himself to death. What did this have to do with our war? Did we know anything of the people in whose world we were fighting? That fall, I was on my way to India for a year of study, and Christian ecumenical issues were overwhelmed by a much broader and more urgent set of issues: how do I understand my own faith as a Christian in a world of Buddhists and Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs?

I would suggest that this is where most of us are today. These are our issues. They are not just issues of Christian unity, but of human unity and human relationship in a world fractured by religious division. They have been my issues for a good long time. To ask how we understand "unity" in a religiously diverse world is a critical question. It is our human unity that is at stake here. The deep connection toward which we strive today is our human connection. It is not about unity of belief or uniformity of practice. But it is about relationship in the context of global and local diversity.

There are at least two important ways of understanding of our religious differences. The first is as co-citizens in communities that expect and require our participation in decision making—at the ballot box, in the school committee, in the neighborhood. This asks us to consider who "we" are—we who are citizens of Boston or of Dallas, or "we the people of the United States of America." There is surely no more important question than "Who do we mean when we say 'we'?" As people of a democratic society committed to underlying principles of freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, freedom of speech and association, our "we" must of necessity include people who are different from us in faith and who participate in a variety of religious communities.

The second way of understanding religious difference is as people of faith, in our case, as Christians. Who are we in relation to neighbors of other faiths? How do we understand their lives of faith? How do we interpret them in the context of our own faith, which to many seems to be exclusive? These are related questions, but they are different from the civic questions of our citizenship in a larger society. These questions call upon the resources of our faith—our understandings of scripture, the teachings of our religious leaders, and the experience of our co-religionists.

These ways of thinking about religious difference are, of course, intertwined—in ourselves and in our collective experience. Teasing apart the civic voice and the voice of faith is an important and ongoing task for all of us.

I was already eight years old and had memorized the Pledge of Allegiance when Congress passed legislation in 1954 adding the words "under God." My classmates and I in Longfellow School in Bozeman, Montana tripped over those words that so

interrupted the more melodious flow of "one nation indivisible." But we did not trip over the concept. Nor did most Americans. In a rough and ready way, we knew what "God" and "under God" meant.

In the past fifty years, however, this has become much more complicated, and that is a matter of distress for some. America has become a multireligious society with a substantial and diverse Muslim minority virtually equal in size to the Jewish population, and growing Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, and Jain communities, along with new immigrant Christian communities, such as the Mar Thoma Syrian church. Today when we pledge "under God," we all bring different and contested conceptions of just what that means. We Americans—Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, Jewish, Christian—speak of God or gods in various ways, do not all mean the same thing, do not all have a theistic concept of God or, as with many Buddhists, do not use the symbol "God" at all. To add to the confusion, Keith Ellison, a Muslim, elected by his district in Minnesota to the U.S. Congress, was sworn into office on the Qur'an, a copy of the Qur'an that had been owned by Thomas Jefferson. And Hawaii's Tulsi Gabbard, the first Hindu elected to Congress, took her oath on a copy of the Bhagavad Gita.

The "we" of "We the people" has become more complex, uncomfortably so for some, surprisingly so for some, happily so for others. But for all of us, it is an ongoing challenge to pay special attention to the first person plural as we discern the currents of today's American identity crisis. Who do we mean when we say "we"? We are, of course, situated in multiple "we's." Which are our "we's" as citizens, as adherents of particular political parties, as members of various ethnic groups, as members of different religious communities?

How did we become as diverse as we are today? Here I would ask us to cast our minds back, again, to the 1960s. There were three great pieces of legislation that became the pillars of a stronger and more inclusive democracy: 1964 Civil Rights, 1964 Voting Rights, and the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. The latter is sometimes not recognized as civil rights legislation, but it addressed a critical issue of fairness in American policy. As Attorney General Robert Kennedy put it in supporting this legislation before the House Judiciary Committee: "Everywhere else in our national life, we have eliminated discrimination based on one's place of birth. Yet this system is still the foundation of our immigration law."

President Lyndon Johnson signed the Act into law at the base of the Statue of Liberty. In doing so, he said, "This bill that we will sign today is not a revolutionary bill. It does not affect the lives of millions. It will not reshape the structure of our daily lives, or really add importantly to either our wealth or our power. Yet it is still one of the most important acts of this Congress and of this administration [as it] corrects a cruel and enduring wrong in the conduct of the American nation." As

right as he was about correcting a "cruel and enduring wrong," he was not right about how important the effects of this legislation would be in reshaping the demographics of our society and in adding to America's wealth and expertise.

In the decades that followed, immigrants came from all over the world to the United States. Some who had come to the U.S. as graduate students were able to stay and use their talents here. They brought not only their economic ambitions and dreams, but their Bhagavad Gitas, Qur'ans, and images of the Bodhisattva Kuan-yin and the Virgin of Guadalupe. Over the past fifty years, these new immigrants have built mosques and Islamic Centers; Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist temples; Sikh gurdwaras, Hispanic and Vietnamese churches. They have introduced the rest of us to iftars and bhangras and chicken tikka masalas. They have negotiated new and multiple identities in the American context. Immigrants have discovered the leverage of religion and religious organizations in American civil society and the challenges of voluntarism in the creation of religious institutions. There would be no government support for their religious ambitions, other than the commitment to freedom of religious expression. And some of these immigrants, to be sure, would also describe themselves as secular. They have had quite enough of the dominance, even the oppression, of religion in their home countries and are relieved to be in a society that recognizes not only the freedom of religion, but the freedom not to be religious should they so choose.

For all it's Texas-exceptionalism, Texas is no different from any other part of the country in the changes this state has experienced. Indeed, with its booming metropolis cities like Dallas and immigration "gateway" cities like Houston, Texas has in many ways been ahead of the country in encountering the new and more complex religious, cultural, and racial diversity of our country. A glance at Texas newspapers, tells us of the Hindu Diwali celebrations in Amarillo in the panhandle, the open-house held for Latinos at the Dallas Central Mosque, the Texas Buddhist Association's retreat center in Waller County, the temporary ordination of a young Thai teenager as a monk, the Vietnamese New Year or Tet Observances in San Antonio, the San Antonio police department's special education sessions on Islam, the celebration of Guru Nanak's birthday by the Sikh community in Austin, and the Muslim celebrations of Eid al Adha with prayers in the George Brown Convention Center in Houston.

Indeed, on an evening drive down Abrams Road last night after dinner, my host, Robert Welsh, and I dropped into the Islamic Center of North Texas, where a graduation exercise has just taken place. As people poured out of the main doors into the parking lot, we ventured inside and were greeted warmly as strangers. We were shown to the office in the lobby and given an impromptu tour of the Islamic Center, which provides not only prayer and education space, but also sports facilities, girls

and boys basketball teams, a volunteer medical service, and speakers for churches and schools.

I know that Texans, like Muslims, have their own stereotypes to overcome. Two decades ago, a 1993 special issue of Texas Highways featured a cover photograph of a young Hindu woman in a traditional mirrored red Indian dance costume for its extensive cover story, "Texans: Who we were, Who we are." The theme of the whole magazine was that from its Native American and Hispanic roots, Texas now includes people from all over the world, most recently immigrants from Asia. "As they put it, "Texans wear jeans and kimonos, ten-gallon hats and fezzes, huaraches and Western boots." The articles detailed the history of the Chinese and Japanese communities that settled in Texas early in the 20th century, the arrival of Hindu and Muslim immigrants from South Asia during the oil boom of the 1970's, and the flood of Southeast Asia immigrants in the wake of the Vietnam war.

This has not been a wholly celebratory history. On the downside of the register, we certainly could collect the instances of racism and prejudice. We could take note of a dozen fires set by arson in Hindu homes around Houston a few years ago, the vandalism of a mosque in South Plains outside Lubbock, the firebombing of an Islamic Center in Denton, a Dallas Suburb, shortly after 9/11. The list could go on. But I believe that more serious than scattershot acts of prejudice, ignorance, and violence are the sustained, organized groups now focused on creating fear of "radical Islam." Two groups that are worth knowing about have links and chapters here in Texas: Stop the Islamization of America and Act! for America. Both are highly organized, have their own "research" base, and participate in Washington lobbies focused on stopping "the growing threat of radical Islam to America."

And what are the counter-forces to this kind of negativity, even here in Texas? Surely, they are the various forms of interfaith initiatives that have brought people together across lines of difference. For example, the people of the Interfaith Center of Dallas started an interfaith coffeehouse a few years ago called "Brewing Community with Every Cup" to help people from different religious traditions meet and learn about each other's faiths. The head of the nonprofit group, stated, "Once you make friends with someone from another culture or another faith tradition, it's hard to hear degrading remarks about other groups without having a different perspective." The center also holds monthly dinners where speakers discuss their religious or faith tradition and learning can take place as all participants articulate who they are in their own voice.

One of the initiatives I have found most innovative is one that began in Texas. Perhaps it began with Roy Spence, an Austin "purpose-based" advertising executive who was deeply disturbed with the competition between religions, and especially the claim to be the one true faith. He took to the road

and decided to put together what became a beautiful book, photographic portraits of The Amazing Faiths of Texas: Common Ground on Higher Ground. About the same time, Houston Mayor, Bill White, was reflecting on the remarkable faith communities of an increasingly diverse Houston as they mobilized to respond to Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Yet to White, like Spence, what seemed to be omnipresent in the news about religion was interreligious violence and tension. Surely there was more to be said than that. He had seen it for himself. And so, with the support of the mayor and the organizational skill of the Boniak Center for Interreligious Dialogue at Rice and the Interfaith Ministries of Greater Houston, the Amazing Faiths Dinner Dialogues were launched. It began with 20 host homes and 250 people in 2007, expanded to 850 people in 75 host homes in 2008. By the third year, the Dinner Dialogues had expanded to nine other cities –and not surprisingly the big coastal cities, but places like Oklahoma City, Chicago, Raleigh-Durham, Harrisburg, Syracuse, and Greenville.

Guests can register on the Internet and hosts agreeing to provide a simple, nutritious vegetarian meal for ten to twelve people. The guests are, for the most part, strangers. They are not asked to explain the features of their faith. Rather, the dinner table discussion is launched with a stack of cards that ask questions about one's own faith, not to be answered as an expert, but as an individual. For instance:

- Faith sometimes changes as we grow older. Are you the same spiritual or religious person you were ten years ago?
- Where do you see acts of compassion in the world around you?
- What do you pray for, and how do you understand it if prayer is not answered?
- What is the role faith or spirituality in your life at work?
- Many faith communities believe that there is one message God wants us all to hear. Do you believe that? What is that message from your perspective?
- Today, as in the past, people of faith are persecuted for what they believe. What would you do if your faith were forbidden?

A moderator is present to facilitate the discussion, structured in a way that creates a safe space for all to share and listen. In a dinner hosted by a Muslim woman, she said, "As the host, the most memorable part of the evening for me was when someone talked about the fear they have of Muslims. I've never seen myself in that way. Confronting our fears slows us to begin the process of understanding each other." One of the participants wrote, "It's one thing to read about Islam. It's quite another to sit down to dinner together and talk." A Houston researcher studying the project said that 57% of the participants had never been involved in anything interfaith before.

The Dinner Dialogues are not meant to create new organizations, but simply to create new relationships. These threads of connection and friendship strengthen ties between the people of different faith traditions and become part of the fabric of a Texas city.

On the whole, interfaith initiatives in America's cities and towns are not connected at all with city government or the mayor's office. They are citizen led and as diverse as the places they come from. I can report on some of these initiatives from American cities, recognizing that this is but the tip of a movement that is as wide as the U.S. and as under-reported as such things are the world over. For much more information and inspiration, look at the "Interfaith Infrastructure" on the Pluralism Project website. As we think about new efforts toward connection in the context of America's new religious diversity, where will we find guidance and inspiration? The Amazing Faiths Dinner Dialogues is certainly one instance. But let's look at some others.

In Louisville, Kentucky, a whole city celebrates an annual Festival –a Festival of Faiths. It was launched in 1996 by citizens of Louisville and supported, at first, by the Cathedral. Over the years, it has become a major weeklong civic event to highlight and better understand the religious communities of Louisville. It includes citywide events, with speakers, breakfasts, dinners, and arts performances. One year, the speaker might be Mary Evelyn Tucker, who has launched a major initiative on the world's religions and ecology. Another year it might be Geshe Gelek Chodha, the Gelugpa Tibetan teacher of the Kadampa Buddhist Center in Raleigh, North Carolina. There might be an Israeli-Palestinian youth choir on tour, or a Sufi singer. The week of programming includes a Passport to Understanding program that extends that week into a year of visiting in one another's places of worship to learn first-hand about religious communities other than their own. Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Sikh, Buddhist, and Baha'i centers will all be hosts to visitors during the upcoming year. The Passport program provides just the needed impetus to move people from thinking about visiting a religious community to actually doing it, crossing the thresh hold. Chanrika Srinivasan of the Hindu Temple of Kentucky told us that she has experience positive changes in the Louisville community because of the Festival. "I have lived in Louisville for ten years," she said, "and people are more respectful of others because of this event." The Louisville festival packaged its approach so effectively that other cities –like Greenville, South Carolina and Kansas City, Missouri-- have replicated it.

Kansas City capped off its own Festival of Faiths with a remarkable dramatic ethnography, *The Hindu and the Cowboy*. After careful interviews with people of faith in Kansas City, the author composed a drama with professional actors in the roles of the new immigrants in their city. A college student from Kansas City talks about what it was like being a Muslim

in New York after 9/11. A Holocaust survivor from Poland speaks of the terror of being rounded up and the horror of the concentration camps. A Hindu couple from Kansas City tells the story of building the first Hindu temple in Shawnee, KS. They came often to check the temple site during construction, especially after the community found a piece of beef nailed to the door, a deliberate slam against vegetarian Hindus in beef-country, U.S.A. In the following months, the couple, if they came late in the afternoon, would often see a man mounted on a horse riding in the distance. One day they saw the man dismounted, picking up what seemed to be trash from the site. They approached, apprehensive, and asked him who he was. He was a Shawnee Indian, and this land used to be part of their tribal land. When he found that a Hindu temple was now being built, he wanted to be sure, he said, that it would be safe, that the same thing would not happen to the Hindus as happened to the Native Indians. Last night, he said, someone had come and dumped the wastebaskets of a local hamburger chain on the property, an overt gesture of disrespect for the Hindus. He was here, now, to pick it all up. And so, the title, "The Hindu and the Cowboy," a drama enacted in schools and sanctuaries around this increasingly cosmopolitan city.

Syracuse, New York, is not a large city, but it is cosmopolitan in the modest way that so many cities are, with a new diversity that spans the globe. There, shortly after 9/11, a Presbyterian woman brooded about rumors that Muslim women were feeling unsafe leaving their homes. She had attended an adult forum at her church right after the September 11th attacks, and there a young woman spoke of having seen a Muslim woman at the grocery store who looked anxious and nervous. The young woman had wanted to reach out to her in some way, but was uncertain of what to do or say. She did not want to intimidate the woman or aggravate the fear in the Muslim community. At this forum, the young woman told her Christian group, "Thinking about it later, I still don't know what I should have said." Realizing that she did not know what to say either, Betsy felt certain that somebody had to do something. She started with the Interreligious Council of Central New York, and then the local Islamic center, and then Danya Wellmon, a Muslim woman involved in the center and women's affairs. She invited Danya for coffee in her kitchen. After hours of conversation, each decided that the next move would be to invite nine friends to a meeting. Before long Women Transcending Boundaries was born. The group kept meeting, and kept growing. In their discussions, they took hold of critical issues including the alarming arrests of local Muslims in upstate New York, the impending war in Iraq, and their own life cycle issues --birth, marriage, and death. They began to look beyond Syracuse as well, linking their local concerns to those of women around the world and raising money for a school in Pakistan, for Women for Women projects in Afghanistan.

Many of the issues faced by local interfaith initiatives and projects are not of their own choosing. Issues present themselves and, like it or not, they become the microcosms in which we grapple with much larger issues. A Danish newspaper publishes a cartoon Muslims consider denigrating of the Prophet and it becomes an issue for Muslims and the communities in which they live the world over. A University president at the College of William and Mary has the cross in the historic chapel moved to the sacristy to make the space more comfortable for students of many faiths and touches off a major campus dispute. A mayor's leadership of the National Day of Prayer on the first Thursday in May explodes in her face when a Hindu woman asks to participate. We do not pick these issues, but they arrive on our doorstep nonetheless. This is where what we call "interfaith" discussion often begins.

The fact of diversity is here --right here in just about any place you live in the U.S. today, including in the cities and towns of Texas. What we make of it as citizens and as people of faith is up to us. All over the country, we live too closely with new neighbors to have the level of ignorance that most of us still have. The local questions interest me, because most of the religious and interfaith encounters in today's world do not take place at the global level of Dalai Lamas, Popes, and Swamis, but in the neighborhoods of our immediate world. Most of us don't get a chance to be bridge builders to world peace, but we do have the opportunity every day to build the bridges of relationship and understanding that make a huge difference at the local level. As few years ago, the faith communities of a suburb of Dallas called Plano got together for a blood drive. "We can't bring peace in the Middle East," they said. "But we can sure make a difference in Plano if we work together." To that I would add, Amen. We can make a difference in Plano or in any community you can name, if we work together.

Changing our world one relationship at a time, one community at a time, one city at a time--this is the very definition of a movement. I believe that the moments of interfaith engagement I have mentioned here--in Texas and elsewhere--are powerful representatives of the way in which moments become a movement. Hydra-headed, but with common purpose. Pluralism is not just diversity or difference pure and simple. Diversity is a complex and powerful fact of the world in which we live today. Pluralism is one way of appropriating and engaging that fact: creating through relationships a web of connection, rather than acquiescing in the isolation of difference.

In Austin, Texas in the weeks following the September 11 attacks, hundreds of citizens showed up for the Sunday afternoon open house held at a local mosque. Many, perhaps most, had never been to a mosque in America before. A woman interviewed by the Austin American-Statesman put the matter plainly and succinctly for many Americans when she said, "The time of not getting to know each other is over."



***“Interreligious Dialogue:
a necessary condition for peace
...a duty for Christians...”***
– Pope Francis

CATHOLIC RESOURCES FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

CATHOLIC DOCUMENTS:

- **Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue** (1964)
- **Nostra Aetate: Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions** (1965)
- **Commission of the Holy See for Relations with the Jews** (1973)
- **Dialogue and Mission** (1984)
- **Dialogue and Proclamation** (1991)
- **We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah** (1998)
- **The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible** (2001)
- **40th Anniversary of Nostra Aetate** (2005)
- **Message of Pope Francis on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue** (2014)

COMMON DECLARATIONS:

- **Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews Guidelines for Implementing Nostra Aetate in** (1974)
- **On the Occasion of the Colloquium of the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate** (1985)
- **“You Are Our Elder Brothers” – Pope John Paul II’s Speech at Rome Synagogue** (1986)
- **God’s Mercy Endures Forever** (1988)
- **Statement on Israeli-Palestinian Violence** (2002)
- **Break the Cycle of Violence in the Holy Land, USCCB** (2006)
- **A Common Word Between Us and You** (2009)

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