

“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 misunderstanding, 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 monological 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.

