



Call to Unity

RESOURCING THE CHURCH FOR ECUMENICAL MINISTRY

Issue 6 • September 2006



Council On
Christian Unity

Disciples and Interreligious Engagement



FROM THE EDITOR

Engaging Our Neighbors

At the dawn of the 21st Century one of the most pressing questions facing Christians is how they relate to their neighbors of other religious faiths and traditions. One no longer need attend an interfaith dialogue to encounter people of the Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, or other faiths. They are our co-workers, neighbors, friends, and increasingly, members of our families. And of course, world events in recent years have highlighted the role of religion in both war and peace more explicitly than ever before.

Interreligious engagement and dialogue, once the domain of a small group of scholars or select members in our congregations who had a particular interest in this topic, is now a matter of regular public discourse—in the newsroom, as well as the classroom; in global conferences of world religions, as well as local community gatherings.

In these settings, Christians often find themselves confronted with questions about what they believe about other religions and how they should relate to persons of other faiths. Can we come together to pray for peace in our world? What does it mean to worship together when we address our prayers to different deities? Which texts from the Bible, sometimes seemingly contradictory, are the ones which give guidance in these encounters? Is a Christian required to seek to convert others in order to be faithful?

These are only a few of the questions which begin to arise as Christians explore relationships with people of other faiths. And, while not new, the events of the last decade have made them increasingly urgent.

This issue of *Call to Unity* is offered as a resource to help Disciples examine these important issues in light of our own identity, history, theological understandings and particular gifts. The purpose of the Report and the Study Guide is not to provide a comprehensive introduction to beliefs or practices of other religions or to address all the themes surrounding interfaith relations. Rather, based upon our experience and beliefs as Disciples of Christ, it presents and develops a theological rationale for interfaith engagement.

We began working on this material as an expression of our “ecumenical partnership” with the United Church of Christ, believing that we might produce a common resource for both churches. However, as we began to explore the issues involved, we soon discovered that each of us possesses particular emphases in the way we articulate our faith as Christians. You are invited to obtain a copy of the UCC interfaith statement from their website (www.ucc.org).

Living in the interfaith context of our world today requires greater understanding by all persons if we are to live in the peace that God wills for all peoples.

Robert K. Welsh

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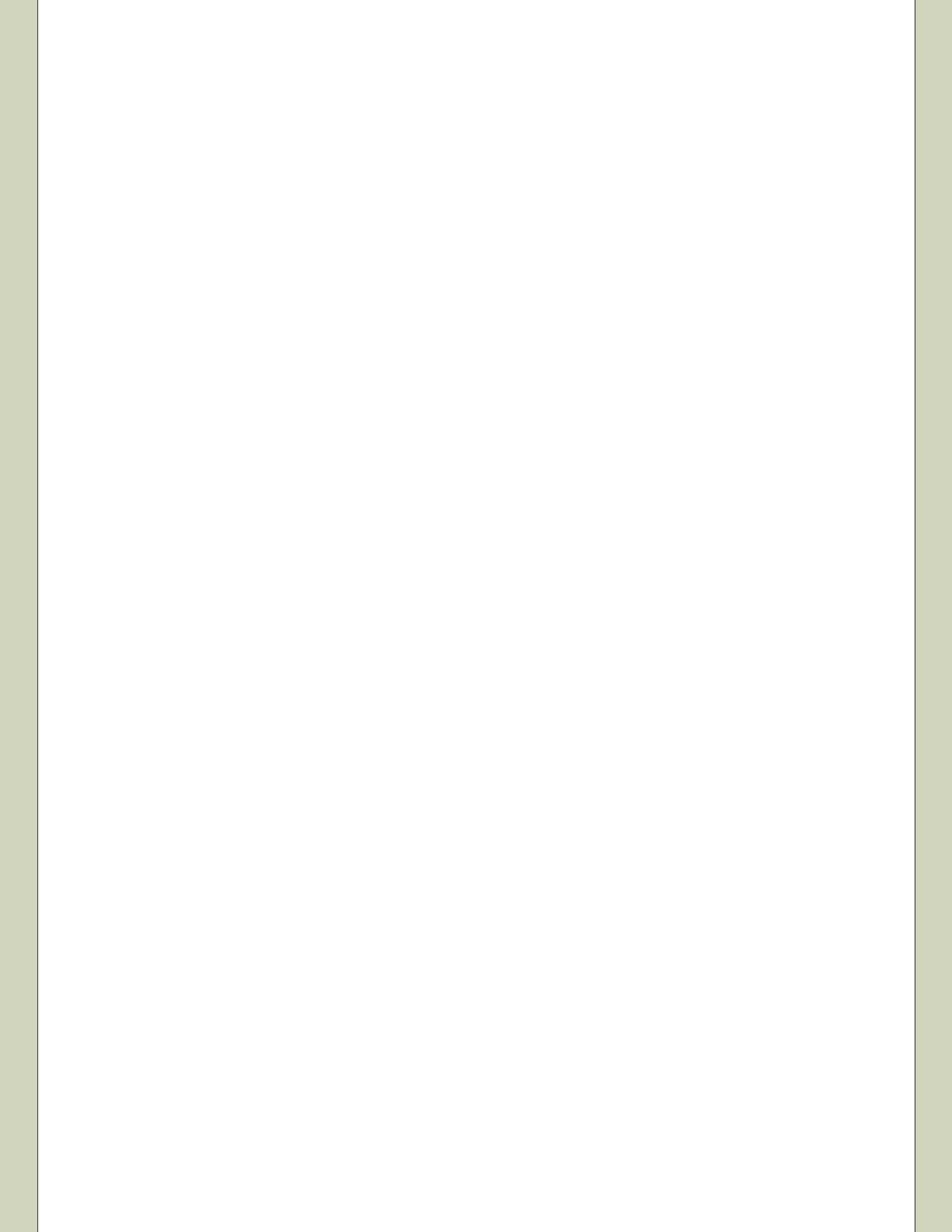
Disciples and Interreligious Engagement

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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.

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.

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 we 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.

We reject the notion that interfaith encounter can only take place if we suspend our deepest Christian convictions.

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.

We confess that we Disciples have 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.

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.

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).

Loving means not only the authentic sharing of our truth, but a deep listening to theirs.

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 others over 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.

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.

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.

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.

Alexander Campbell emphasized the importance of understanding the social and cultural contexts found in the biblical narratives.

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.**

We Disciples believe that the universality of God's unconditional love enacted salvifically in Christ for all people is the grand theme of Scripture.

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

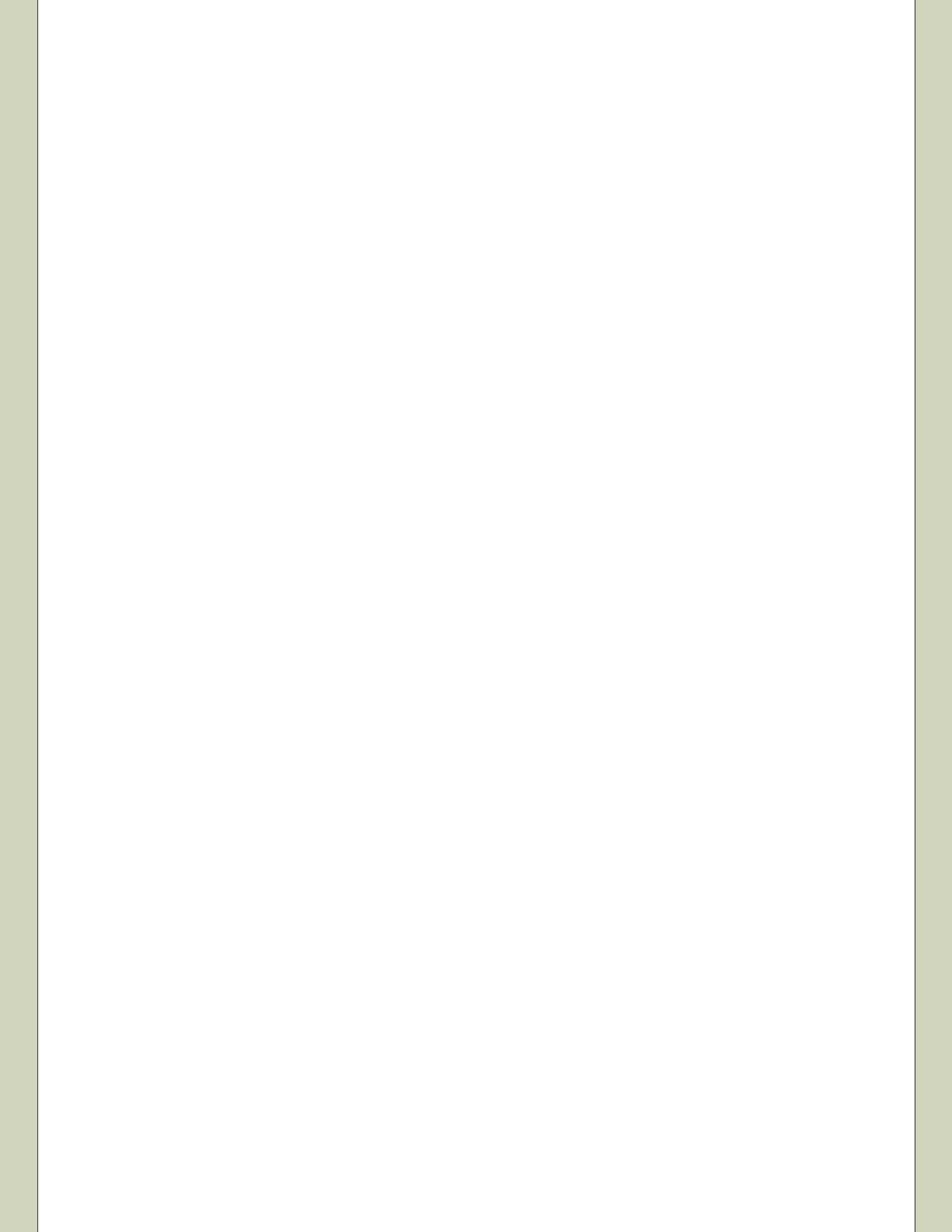
We believe that the cross and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew in search of Jews and Gentiles, reveals God's search to ultimately redeem all creatures.

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 wholeheartedly to engage in interfaith relations and work.**



A STUDY GUIDE

to accompany the report DISCIPLES OF CHRIST AND INTERRELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT

Nathan Digby



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Fortunately, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has known what it is to live in a new and changing religious environment.

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 re-

ligious 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.

There is something in the Disciples’ spirit that blends the cherishing of our convictions with honoring the freedom of others.

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, 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.

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.

The report itself is a reflection upon who we are as Disciples of Christ...and what gifts we have that uniquely prepare us for constructive interreligious engagement.

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.

The goal of the report is not to “weigh in” on a debate, but to articulate a theological rationale for interfaith engagement.

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.

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 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.

You will note that for each session we have included a prayer (or prayers) from different faith traditions. Please feel free to use these as part of the study session as you are comfortable. Clearly the whole issue of interfaith prayer is complex, and we do not want to impose anything upon the session that may prove

unsettling to your study. The prayers are offered as examples of the kinds of spirituality found in other faiths.

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. Look for stories from your newspaper or from magazines. Print out articles you may find on-line. 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. However, if this option is not available and printing resources are limited, group leaders should distribute the 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.

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Notes

- I 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.

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.”]

I. 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. What issues did you discover in the news that relate to 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.

May the Great Name, through our expanding awareness and our fuller action, lift Itself to become still higher and more holy;

May our names, along with all the names of all the beings in the universe, live within the Great Name;

May the names of all whom we can no longer touch but who have touched our hearts and lives, remain alight within our memories and in the Great Name;

May the names of all who have died in violence and war be kept alight in our sight and in the Great Name, with sorrow that we were not yet able to shape a world in which they would have lived.

Even though we cannot give You enough blessing, enough song, enough praise, enough consolation to match what we wish to lay before You, and though we know that today there is no way to console You, when among us some who bear Your Image in our being are slaughtering others who bear Your Image in our being,

Still we beseech that from the unity of Your Great Name flow great harmony and joyful life for us and for all who wrestle God. Amen.

*Mourner’s kaddish in a time of war
Jewish*

SESSION TWO:

Our Identity as Disciples of Christ

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

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?

The term “engagement” seems to rule out the practice of mutual indifference.

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.

O God! You are the Source of Good, the Guardian of Faith, the Preserver of Safety, the Exalted in Might, the Supreme: All Glory belongs to you!

Help us to see our glory in serving you and upholding the values of compassion and justice on earth. We beg you to forgive our sins and ask you not to hold us accountable for mistakes and missteps we did or were done in our names. Our Lord, give us the humility to recognize our mistakes and limitations, and the strength and courage to choose right over wrong and justice over pride. Fill our hearts with your Love, and help us to love one another, and show compassion to your servants throughout the world and your creation. O God! We ask you in submission and humility to allow wisdom to triumph over vanity, truth over falsehood, and love over hate. Amen.

*Sayyid M. Syeed
Muslim*

SESSION THREE:

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

This session addresses many of the same issues as session four, “Interfaith Relationships and the Christian Mission of Witness.” Therefore, these two sessions should be considered together.

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

1. Begin each session with Prayer.
2. Read Bible Reference: Hebrews 13:2 (2minutes)
3. Discuss Reflection Questions:

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.

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 com-

pletely understand the fullness of the mystery of God or that they alone have access to God.

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.
4. What issues did you discover in the news that relate to 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.

What role does love play in encouraging Christians to balance their convictions with openness to others’ faith? Give some practical examples.

Almighty God, the Great Thumb we cannot evade to tie any knot; the Roaring Thunder that splits mighty trees; the all-seeing Lord up on high who sees even the footprints of an antelope on a rock mass here on earth: You are the one who does not hesitate to respond to our call. You are the cornerstone of peace.

Native American

SESSION FOUR:

Interfaith Relationships and the Christian Mission of Witness

This session addresses many of the same issues as session three, “Given Who We Are, Why Should We Engage in Interfaith Relationships?”. Therefore, these two sessions should be considered together.

[** In preparation for this session, please reread “Given Who We Are, Why Should We Engage in Interfaith Relationships?” in the report “Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement.”]

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

Christian Witness—The report speaks about witness in many ways. (30 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 to? (What is the content of Christian witness?)
5. How is interreligious engagement a way of living out a Christian witness?

The report acknowledges that we have too easily accepted harmful stereotypes about other religions.

Confession—We Christians are also sinners who should confess that we have not always been loving toward 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. (20 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?
4. What issues did you discover in the news that relate to 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.

Merciful God, keep all beings and creatures in your care. Give them an abundance of grain and water; eliminate their pain and poverty; ferry them across. The Great Benefactor heard our cry; the parched earth was rendered green and my smoldering heart was made cool. Keep us in Your Embrace; remove all obstructions. Nanak, stay immersed in the Name and be forever fulfilled. I have forgotten my jealousy of others, since I found the Company of the Holy. No one is enemy, no one is stranger. I get along with all. Whatever God does, I accept that as good. This is the sublime wisdom I have obtained from the Holy. The One God pervades all. Gazing upon God, beholding God, Nanak blossoms forth in happiness.

*Siri Guru Granth Sahib
Sikh*

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.”]

I. 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?
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)

- I. 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. What issues did you discover in the 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.

O Thou kind Lord! Thou hast created all humanity from the same stock. Thou hast decreed that all shall belong to the same household. In Thy Holy Presence they are all Thy servants, and all mankind are sheltered beneath Thy Tabernacle; all have gathered together at Thy Table of Bounty; all are illumined through the light of Thy Providence. O God! Thou art kind to all, conferrest life upon all. Thou hast endowed each and all with talents and faculties, and all are submerged in the Ocean of Thy Mercy. O Thou kind Lord! Unite all. Let the religions agree and make the nations one, so that they may see each other as one family and the whole earth as one home. Thou art the Mighty and Powerful, Thou art the Forgiving, and Thou art the One who overlooketh the shortcomings of all mankind.

*Phyllis K. Peterson
Baha’i*

SESSION SIX:

How Do We Get Started?

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—“Key Questions for Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement,” especially the specific suggestions found on page 24 in this issue responding to question 10.

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. (1 hour)

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.

Close with prayer.

Evoking the presence of the great compassion, let us fill our hearts with our own compassion — towards ourselves and towards all living beings. Let us pray that all living beings realize that they are all brothers and sisters, all nourished from the same source of life.

Buddhist

May understanding obedience conquer ignorant disobedience! May Harmony triumph over Discord, and Generosity of Spirit over Covetous Avarice! And may Respect replace Derision.

Homi Gandhi

Zoroastrian

“My Lord, I seek refuge in You from the whispers of the devils, and I seek refuge in You, my Lord, lest they come near me.” (23:97-98)

“I seek refuge in the Lord of daybreak. From the evils among His creations. From the evils of darkness as it falls. From the evils of the troublemakers. From the evils of the envious when they envy.” (113:1-5)

“I seek refuge in the Lord of the people. The King of the people. The God of the people. From the evils of sneaky whisperers. Who whisper into the chests of the people.” (114:1-5)

“Our Lord, do not condemn us if we forget or make mistakes. Our Lord, and protect us from blaspheming against You, like those before us have done. Our Lord, protect us from sinning until it becomes too late for us to repent. Pardon us and forgive us. You are our Lord and Master. Grant us victory over the disbelieving people.” (2:286)

Prayers from the Qur’an

Muslim

Bless our beautiful land, O Lord, with its wonderful variety of people, of races, cultures and languages. May we be a nation of laughter and joy, of justice and reconciliation, of peace and unity, of compassion, caring and sharing. We pray this prayer for true patriotism, in the powerful name of Jesus our Lord.

Desmond Tutu

Christian

PART TWO

Key Questions for Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement

I. 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 cooperative 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.

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.

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

*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.*

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 wholeheartedly 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 multi-religious 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 helps 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.

Simply put, Christians get to say what it means to be Christian, and Buddhists get to say what it means to be Buddhist.

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 held 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 them by what they are not.

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.

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.

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 of other religious traditions.

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 of 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. Mem-

bers 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 for 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.

As Disciples, we have long affirmed that there is a fundamental difference between the unity of the Church and uniformity of belief.

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.

We certainly do not have to be professional theologians in order to establish relationships 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.

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.”

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 Christian 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?

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.

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 *a priori* evaluation 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 of 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.

Our openness to our neighbors is not determined by their merit, but by the way God has loved us in Christ.

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 do 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 organizations 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 United Church of Christ, 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.

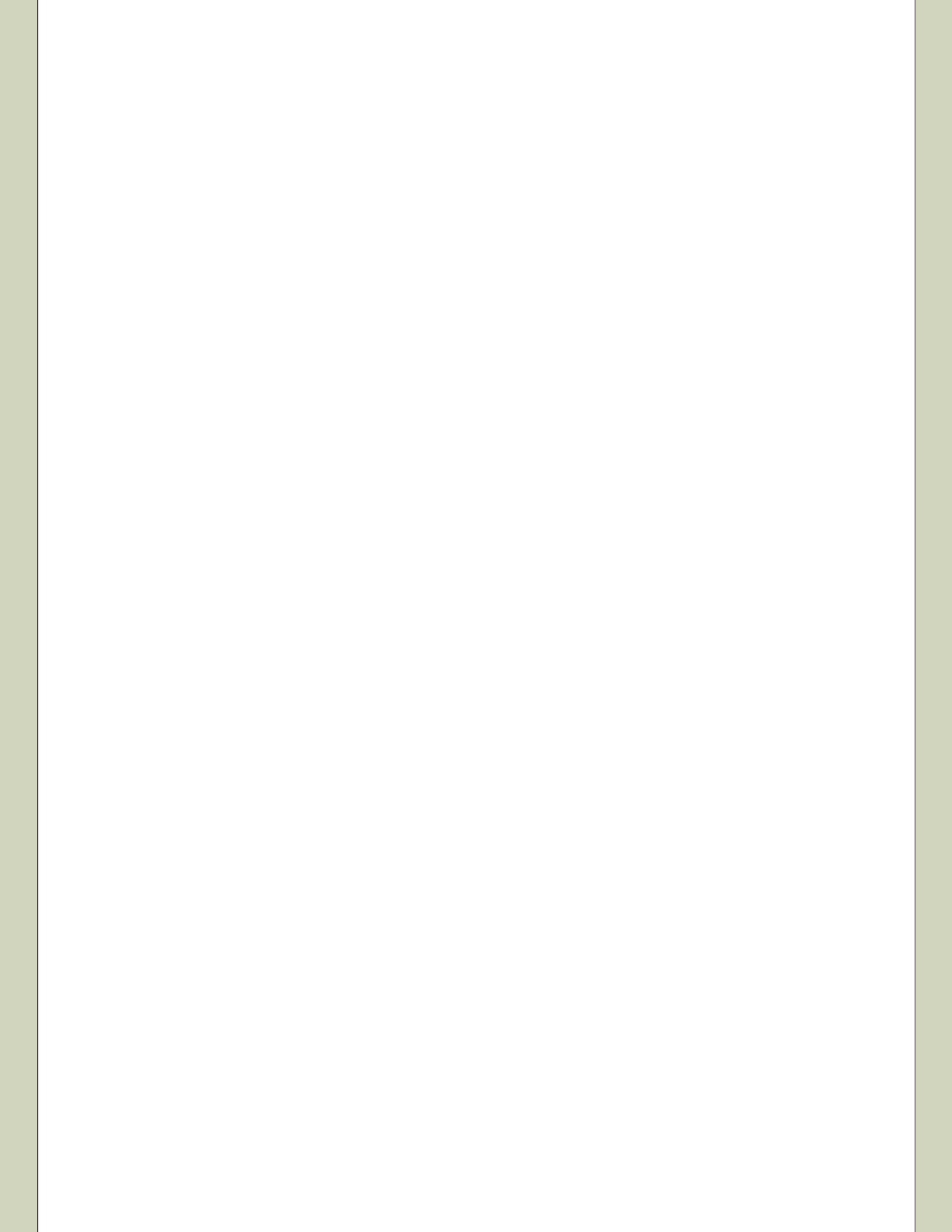
Recommended Resources

The availability of new interfaith resources is increasing 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>]
- **United Church of Christ** [<http://ucc.org/ecumenical/interfaith.htm>]
- **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/interreligiousindex-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 0-905468-015).
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 **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 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).



WORSHIP IN A STRANGE LAND

A Case Study of Interfaith Worship

Daniel E. H. Bryant

*PREPARED FOR THE 2005 NORTHWEST ASSOCIATION
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With appreciation to Eliza Drummond for her assistance and all those who have served on the Planning Committee of the Interfaith Service for Prayer and Reflection.



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By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
How could we sing the LORD’S song
in a foreign land?

Psalm 137:1-4

Stranded in captivity, the Hebrew people lament the difficulty of worshipping the God of Israel in a foreign place. Today the difficulty is similar but vastly different: how do we worship the Divine of many traditions in any place? Interfaith worship is almost by definition an oxymoron. How can one worship together with people of different traditions when there is no common tradition, let alone a common understanding, of whom or what the object of your worship is? Interfaith worship is indeed a foreign land. To go there is to venture into uncharted regions in search of an unknown destiny. This paper

seeks to tell the story of one group willing to make such a journey and what we, as a Christian people, might gain from their explorations.

The Eugene Story: Journey in a Strange Land Without Ever Leaving Home

The roots of the interfaith movement in Eugene, Oregon, go back to two pivotal events in the early 1990s. For the prior several decades, most of the “mainline” denominations participated in an annual educational event every February based on study materials produced by Church World Service, and a community Thanksgiving service held at one of the downtown churches. Interest in the February Interchurch Seminar was fading and the planning group aging. Various attempts to revive it had little effect, and the event died out in the mid ’90s. The Thanksgiving service likewise was struggling but had the advantage of a strong tradition that kept it probably from meeting a similar fate: a pie social afterwards! Responsibility for preaching at the service was rotated among the downtown pastors—until a 40-minute sermon on the virtues of motherhood by a guest preacher brought planners to the conclusion that the service would be better served without preachers—and thus sermons ceased to be a part of the event. Oddly, no one has complained in the eight years since.

The first of two pivotal events occurred in 1993 when First United Methodist Church hosted the

Anne Frank exhibit, working closely with Temple Beth Israel. As a result of that experience the Methodist pastor, Gary Powell, invited the synagogue's rabbi, Myron Kinberg, to be the preacher at the Thanksgiving service that year. (His was not the sermon on motherhood.) Thus began the tradition of an interfaith Thanksgiving service. The second event, like the story of Anne Frank, was born in the violence of anti-Semitism. In March of 1994 two Nazi skinheads riddled the synagogue with rifle fire on the Sunday prior to Passover and Palm Sunday which fell in the same week that year. A community event in front of the synagogue attended by close to a thousand people was held that Thursday evening and was covered by ABC News.¹ Twenty different congregations, plus a couple of other local organizations, provided members for a vigil outside the synagogue that began the next night and ran through Passover and Holy Week, concluding on Easter evening.

Concurrent with these historical events, a loose-knit group of ministers that had been meeting informally at Grace Lutheran Church formed the Lane Ministerial Association. When the officers failed to replace themselves after the first year, the organization died mercifully without a whimper. (The memorial service was canceled when no one could be found to mourn the death, let alone officiate.) Shortly thereafter, five clergy met in the office of Greg Flint at First Congregational Church to form Two Rivers Ecumenical Ministries and invited Rodney Page to help us form it as a cluster of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon. The group made two critical decisions: 1) the new organization would be interfaith, and 2) it would include lay leaders. "Ecumenical" was dropped the following year from the name in favor of "Interfaith" and thus we have been known as Two Rivers Interfaith Ministries (TRIM) ever since.

One of TRIM's first public events was given in 1995 in response to the performance of Bach's St. Matthew Passion marking the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II. Local Jewish leaders were quite disturbed by the selection and requested help from Christian clergy to engage the Bach Festival leaders in dialogue. The result was a "Service of Reconciliation" held at the Hult Center where the Bach piece was to be performed just a couple of days later. In the service Christian leaders, which included Rodney Page, requested forgiveness from members of the Jewish community for the church's contribution

to anti-Semitism and failure to stand up to the atrocities of the Holocaust. Many were the misty eyes from the 300 in attendance.

Slowly over the next six years the interfaith character of TRIM began to expand from largely a Jewish-Christian organization to a truly interfaith community as a new faith community found their way into the group every couple of months. Other than the community Thanksgiving service and the Service of Reconciliation, however, there were no attempts to join together in a service of worship. Long philosophical discussions were held in various TRIM gatherings on whether one could worship at all in an interfaith gathering. Indeed, the only ritual that could be found that all could share in comfortably was a time of silence. The sufficiency and serenity of that silence, however, was shattered on the morning of September 11, 2001. The community, if not the world, needed something more.

The first response to the terror of that fateful day was organized by the Reverend Ken Henry at Central Presbyterian Church. Where others opened the doors of their sanctuaries for a much needed time of prayer, Ken put together a community service of prayer for that evening and asked me to find a suitable location. We settled upon an outdoor amphitheater owned by the City of Eugene. All the normal fees, rental for sound equipment, union labor and the rest were donated by the City. The program included Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders. Word went out on the local news channels. Approximately 400 people attended.

On September 13th the President proclaimed September 14th to be a Day of Prayer. I received a call that morning on my way up Interstate 5 to a previously scheduled EMO meeting that Steve Overman, the pastor of the Eugene Faith Center (a Foursquare congregation), wanted to talk to me about it. Steve was the organizer of a quarterly Pastor's Prayer Lunch which had been meeting for a couple of years and included a wide spectrum of clergy from Roman Catholic to Pentecostal. He was also the prime mover for the Pentecost 2000 community celebration at the Eugene Fair Grounds that attracted 5000 worshippers on that Sunday afternoon. Steve and I have had a good relationship over the years.

I assumed that Steve was calling to discuss what we might do in response to the President's declaration. At that time Faith Center had the largest worship facility in Eugene. (First Baptist has since build a

larger one.) Steve is a progressive pastor for the Foursquare community. He represents his denomination in bilateral dialogues with the Vatican. He is a powerful witness for the importance of Christian unity. He is very appreciative of TRIM, though has only come to our programs when he was a part of the program. Because of my relationship with him, I knew that if Faith Center hosted a community service, it would be a full house and that it would be exclusively Christian. Before calling him back, therefore, I made another call to Debbie Pitney, pastor of First United Methodist Church, the largest worship facility among those faith communities associated with TRIM. Once I had secured the location for the TRIM sponsored event to be held the next day, I called Steve. Much to my chagrin, embarrassment and relief, the good pastor of Faith Center said to me, "I just wanted to call you to say that I know you will be organizing something with TRIM, and though we cannot be a part, I want you to know that my prayers are with you!" I had a full day of meetings ahead of me, and it may well be that someone else would have stepped forward that day to finish this story, but it makes me pause to think that if a friend had not called me to say that he would be holding me in prayer while I was doing the thing he could not—but which he knew I would be doing—I would not have been doing that very thing! I do not know how much different the story that follows would have been without that call, for clearly something was moving in our community that had a momentum of its own, but different it would have been.

Thanks to the wonder of cell phones, we had the service for the following day entirely planned by the time I returned to Eugene that afternoon. Two phone calls stand out in particular. The first was a call I made to Tammam Adi, a Muslim leader active in TRIM. I had spoken with Tammam on 9/11. I learned that he had just received a death threat and was uncertain of what to do, especially since he knew the identity of the caller. I asked him how he knew. He said that he had just gotten this new phone service called "Caller ID"! I told him to call the police. (They picked up the caller the next day.) Tammam understandably was very apprehensive about leaving his home and therefore declined to participate in the service we held that evening. I called him again to see if he felt comfortable enough to participate in the service on the 14th. Though the police had indicated that they were confident the man who made the death threat was not dangerous (in fact, he made

a public apology and later reconciled with Tammam), Tammam was not yet ready to make a public appearance. Fortunately for us, Tammam called back to say that he had changed his mind and would like to say something.

The second call I received on the morning of the service was Snatam Kaur Khalsa, a leader in the Sikh community, who wanted to know if it would be safe for the Sikhs to participate in the service. (Recall the murder of the Sikh gas station attendant in Arizona on 9/11.) The Sikhs were not a part of TRIM at that point. In fact, I had no awareness of their presence in Eugene. I told Snatam that the program was already set but that we could probably find a place to squeeze them in. She replied, "Oh no, we do not want to be on the program, we just want to know if it would be safe for us to *come*." I assured her that it would be, and a handful of Sikhs did come.

*By this simple, profound demonstration
and Divine assistance, the powerful
message goes forth that "we are all one"
and "greatly loved."*

Those two calls were both hugely significant in what transpired next. Tammam gave a five-minute oration that brought the packed house of nearly one thousand people immediately to their feet. After the service, the Sikh members insisted that we should do this again and do it monthly. They offered to provide refreshments, and First Christian Church offered to host a service for the next three months. The decision was made to do it on the 11th and to call it the Interfaith Service of Prayer, Remembrance and Reflection. An interfaith committee was quickly formed to plan the service consisting of four women, a Muslim, a Baha'i and two Sikhs. The group later was assumed under the auspices of TRIM but continues to function with its own planning committee. One of the Sikh women, Siri Kaur Khalsa, describes the origins of the service:

In response to the tragic events of September 11, 2001, Snatam Kaur helped me bring a proposal to TRIM (Two Rivers Interfaith Ministries) to provide a consistent time for all Sacred paths to unite in the spirit of harmony and Peace. The purpose has always been to nurture appreciation and confidence in one another and the Universal Power that transcends all earthly limitations.

Each month hundreds of people of all ages and walks of life come through the doors of this beautiful old church. With sincerity, each person contributes to building trust and goodwill from a foundation of deep respect and sensitivity. By this simple, profound demonstration and Divine assistance, the powerful message goes forth that “we are all one” and “greatly loved.”

These services have been based on a powerful Divine Vision and are the result of Divine Intention. All of us involved feel grateful in helping to establish the common ground and Sacred space where safety, comfort and inspiration can be found. Because we celebrate diversity with the grace of unity, we have become a model of respect that others may want to emulate—a unique center of light and hope. I was told that these services “would not only help our community, but with enough heart—the world.

I figured the interest in such a service would wane once the novelty wore off. I could not have been more wrong.

I figured the interest in such a service would wane once the novelty wore off. I could not have been more wrong. The October service had nearly a hundred folk. The November service slightly more, and December larger yet. A decision was made to continue the service for another three months. I suggested that it should move to other locations, but the planning committee felt comfortable at First Christian and felt the consistency would be beneficial. Interest and attendance in the service continued to grow. Attendance began to hit the 150 mark regularly. Our church became so closely affiliated with the service that a Hindu leader who rented our chapel for an event on the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi announced at a TRIM gathering that the event would be held at “First Interfaith Church.” (I politely corrected the innocent mistake amidst much laughter, but in reality, no correction was needed as all knew what he meant.) The service on September 11, 2002 and every anniversary since have filled the church to its capacity (500). Meanwhile, the average throughout the rest of the year is now closer to 200.

After it became apparent that the service was going to be ongoing, a purpose statement was developed. It reads,

The Interfaith Service of Prayer and Reflection provides a special occasion to pray for peace, remember our loved ones, reflect upon the interconnectedness of all beings, and to uplift our hearts and minds. Its purpose is to bring together people from different faith communities in the spirit of harmony and growing appreciation, and to nurture confidence in the universal power of love and unity for all.

Observations and Reflections

Pragmatic issues

First, a couple of quick notes on practical matters: Through trial and error the planners of the Interfaith Service have hit upon a formula that appears to be working well. The concept is surprisingly simple. Pick a theme, ask each participant to select something from their tradition on that theme to share in the service, arrange the service to provide a logical flow, and limit each participant to a specific time frame. In the first few months of the service time was allotted to every tradition that wished to participate. As more and more groups sought time in the monthly program, planners soon realized that time would not allow for every group to participate in every service.

A critical discovery made early on was how to speak, or not to speak, on behalf of all present. For instance, a common phrase heard in many Christian prayers—“we pray in the name of Jesus”—does not work well in an interfaith service. By the same token, asking everyone to join together in chanting “ohm” is not the best way to make more traditional Christians comfortable. Thus leaders in the service are asked to speak only for themselves or the community they represent, and participants are invited to participate in prayers, singing or chanting only as they feel comfortable.

Another minor but important discovery has been on the use of symbols. A well-meaning participant in the service purchased a banner that displayed six symbols of major religious traditions. We quickly learned that if any such symbols are to be used, then it is best to include symbols from all traditions represented. Otherwise it is better to use neutral sym-

bols such as candles. And if you have a lit cross in the sanctuary, it's best to leave the light off!

From Dialogue to Worship

When asked why interfaith relations are important, the Rev. Dr. Shanta Premawardhana, Associate General Secretary for Interfaith Relations of the National Council of the Churches of Christ, gives three reasons: 1) the increasing religious plurality of our nation makes it imperative for Christians to understand how to relate to their neighbors of different faiths; 2) the only means to respond to religion-inspired violence is for religious people to learn how to work together in peace;² and 3) if God created the whole universe and God's revelation is evident throughout that universe, then that must include other religious traditions. If then we do not become more familiar with those traditions, then are we not "missing something of the grandeur of God's revelation?"³

I had the opportunity this past December to meet Dr. Premawardhana at a NCCC event in Washington DC. I described the Interfaith Service to him and asked if he was aware of any other such effort. The only one he could name was the Parliament of the World's Religions that met in Barcelona in July of 2004. More than 8000 people attended this event which was first held in 1893 and then again in 1993 and 1999. (For more information and outstanding resources on the interfaith movement, see www.cpwr.org.) The 260-page program book for the 2004 Parliament lists 140 gatherings each morning for "spiritual observances, meditation, prayers and reflections" from a wide variety of traditions. Most are services offered from the perspective of a particular tradition. Some offered a particular contemplative practice apart from any one faith tradition, such as walking the labyrinth or sacred dance. Only a few appear to have brought many traditions into one service; e.g., a gathering entitled "A Celebration of the World's Religions Through Prayer and Practices."

The Parliament is the creation of the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions which seeks "to cultivate harmony among the world's religious and spiritual communities and foster their engagement with the world and its other guiding institutions in order to achieve a peaceful, just, and sustainable world." The bulk of their activity is centered on dialogue to promote interfaith relations. Likewise the NCCC office on Interfaith Relations also em-

phasizes dialogue. The one worship resource they provide on their website is an order of service that affirms the importance of interfaith relations for Christians.⁴

Disciple and UCC leaders gathered in October, 2002 to develop a rationale for engaging in interfaith conversation and work, issuing a joint report with separate sections on the rationale and gifts of their respective traditions.⁵ The Disciples listed five reasons for interfaith work:

- We are called by Christ's teachings to "love our neighbors."
- We are called to build human community.
- We are called to Christian unity.
- We are called to express sincere hospitality
- We are called to be learning, growing Disciples.

Four gifts from the Disciple perspective to this work are: the centrality of the Lord's table, the importance of scripture, our "frontier spirit," and our emphasis on education. On the first, the report states,

As Disciples we confess 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 the inclusion, compassion, and respect for all our neighbors that can foster true reconciliation. At the table we feel the Spirit of God offering liberation and deliverance in our daily lives. Historically we Disciples saw 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 both the motivation and the model for interfaith relations.⁶

Regarding scripture, the report emphasizes the Biblical themes of God's unconditional love and God's passion for justice, stating that, "our experience has been that real meaning is given to these themes only as they are lived out in relationships with our neighbors."

Recalling our frontier spirit and the value Disciples have placed on creativity and freedom in theological expression, the report calls us "to be open to the radical spirit of God who finds us at the margins and borders—the frontiers of our faith" My favorite in-

sight from this report builds on the old restoration slogan, “we are not the only Christians, but Christians only.” If we truly believe that other religious traditions include the revelation of God, then our slogan today might be, “we are not the only children of God, but children of God only!”

One of the most significant results of the Interfaith Service in Eugene has been the development of a true interfaith community vs. a community that has members of many faith traditions.

Lastly, as *Disciples* of Christ that have placed such a great emphasis on learning and a “reasoned faith,” the report affirms that “we believe that there is much we can learn about God and about ourselves from encounter and engagement with our neighbors” of other faith traditions. It then concludes that Disciple tradition . . .

inherently demands engagement in interfaith work. Disciples are a people who see in the welcome table of Christ an affirmation of the essential unity of all humanity and who hear a call to be students of the Truth who always approach the frontiers of life with flexibility and openness. Thus, to be a Disciple is to be involved in interfaith connection. As a consultation we recognize the radical nature of this statement and affirm that, in some sense, to be a Disciple is always to be radical.

The report on Interreligious Engagement from the Council on Christian Unity⁸ for the upcoming General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) builds on the 2002 report and further articulates the theological justification for Disciples to be engaged in interfaith activity. In addition to the rationale put forth in the 2002 document, the 2005 report cites the importance of *listening* to those from different traditions as a critical form of witness required of us as Christians. It also cites the concept of *imago dei* as the basis to 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.” The report notes that “when Christians and others have made such claims to exclusivity, much suffering and degradation has often been the result.”

The 2005 report also adds three “gifts” which Disciples bring to interfaith work:

- Two centuries of work for Christian unity which leads to an expectation not of a common theological confession, but that “the Holy Spirit of truth [will] cast a broad light on a path to mutual understanding and to peace.”
- Intense dialogue with our Jewish brothers and sisters which “has sharpened our grasp of the many beliefs we share with Jews and has led us as well to appreciate our significant differences.”
- Unflinching belief in God as the Ultimate Companion of all creatures which leads us to believe that God seeks ultimately to redeem all creatures and that “God’s definitive words to the world are words of forgiveness, rather than the threat of ultimate annihilation and punishment.”

The incredible work of the Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions, the NCCC Interfaith Relations office, the Council on Christian Unity cited above, as well as many others, has contributed enormously to the emerging interfaith movement. Dialogue is an integral part of interfaith relations. There is a deeper unity, however, that is achieved when communities of different traditions join together in acts of worship and prayer. It is to that unity and its theological underpinnings that I now turn.

From one to community

One of the most significant results of the Interfaith Service in Eugene has been the development of a true interfaith community vs. a community that has members of many faith traditions. Now into our fourth year of monthly services, the attendees are coming to know each other on a personal level, and they are learning much about each other’s faith traditions in the process. Over half of those who attend the services stay for the fellowship time that follows. Save for the variety of religious garb, one could easily mistake the group for a typical congregation where people have known each other for a long time.

Eugene, though a sizable city, is still small enough that we run into people from other portions of our life in places we do not expect. I frequently meet people who introduce themselves by saying, “I was at the service on the 11th...” I have found it especially enriching to learn that the person whom I have known as a staff member at the American Red Cross

is part of a group of Whirling Dervishes, and an organic farmer I know through EMO-sponsored programs on the environment is a practicing Sufi. As we interact with each other in this new form of worship, we find connections in other parts of our lives that share some common spiritual values.

While most of the participants come from other faith communities, for many this service represents their only regular involvement in an organized, spiritual community. Or in some cases, their numbers are so few that they are not organized in any way, such as the Masda Yasna, a religion from ancient Persia, from which there is a single participant in the Interfaith Service.

For me, the historical roots of this service presented above are critical both to understanding how this service came to be and what this service reveals about the character of the One we worship, if indeed it can even be said that there is One we do worship, or who we understand that One to be. The service is the outgrowth of two factors that merged in the fall of 2001. The first was the relationships developed through TRIM. Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Baha'is were not just groups we had studied in some comparative religion course. They were people we had come to know and respect in our midst. This made the task of coming together for a service much easier. Not only did we know whom to invite, but we knew something about them, their beliefs and practices. Further, we had already developed a common respect for each other and a common understanding that we would not engage in or support efforts to proselytize in our gatherings. Thus we had already established a basis of trust upon which the service could be built. Even though the Sikh community was not yet a part of TRIM activities before the Interfaith Service began, the foundation of trust was there to allow them to be quickly assimilated into the interfaith community.

I believe this relational characteristic of the interfaith community is itself a reflection of God. In a recent conversation with Robert Welsh, the Executive Director for the Council on Christian Unity, I discovered that the Orthodox understanding of the Trinity provides a wonderful theological explanation for this relational aspect of the Divine that fits beautifully with the Interfaith Service. To understand God as the Trinity means, by definition, that God is relational. Whether we use traditional language (Father/Son/Holy Ghost), inclusive language (Creator/Christ/Holy Spirit) or other terms (Redeemer/Liberator/Sustainer), to describe the God-

head as multiple manifestations implies that God is the Divine Community.

Such manner of thinking about God was not new to me. What was new and quite stunning, as I understood it from Welsh, is that this means for the Orthodox that there is no individual salvation. The traditional formulation of the confession of faith used in many Disciple churches, "I believe that Jesus is the Christ, Son of the Living God, and accept him as my *personal* Lord and Savior," would be quite foreign to an Orthodox congregation. To understand God in such relational terms means that we are not saved solely through our relationship to God in Christ, but also through our relationship to the community in Christ. In other words, if I understand this way of thinking correctly, we are saved as a community or we are not saved at all.

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Granted, one may argue that the community here means the community of Christ, but such a limited understanding of community limits the freedom of God and impoverishes the true richness of community. Can a community which excludes the largest portion of humanity be considered Divine? If all humanity is created in God's image, then all humanity must be represented in the Divine Community. The Interfaith Service may well be, therefore, a more complete reflection of the Divine Community than any of our efforts to create Christian unity can ever hope to be.

The UCC portion of the UCC/Disciple report from 2002 cited above provides further reflection on how the doctrine of the Trinity can be used to provide theological rationale for interfaith work. It states,

The God we know in the three persons of the Trinity is in essence a profound, dynamic interrelationship. The Trinitarian life of unity in difference is the eternal fountain at the very center of reality, expressing itself in the relationality of human beings with God, one another, and the entire cosmos. We as Christians experience the call to mirror that divine life by living in faithful relationship

with all of God's children, including those who are different from us Christians. Our threefold encounter with this triune God helps us to see what it means to relate to people of other faiths.

1. According to the Biblical witness, God the creator is at work in all of creation. God the creator has covenanted not only with the church but also with all of humanity and the entire world (Gen. 9:12). Therefore, we are called to explore covenantal relations with all members of God's family including those outside the church. This theme is suggested by the Reformed doctrine of common grace.
2. God the redeemer has reached out to embrace all of humanity in the covenant of grace and reconciliation, and therefore we also are called to extend our embrace to all of humanity (Rom. 8:12, I Cor. 15:22, Col. 1:18-20). The traditions that form the UCC have rejected the notions of limited atonement (the doctrine that God loves only the "elect").
3. God the Holy Spirit is at work throughout the world, giving hope, healing wounds, and building community where division and animosity threaten to prevail. Therefore we are called to be open to the Spirit's movements in and outside of the confines of the Church (John 3:8).

One more note on this concept from the perspective of Process Theology. In Process Thought, beauty is defined as the relationship between harmony and complexity. A single violin can be quite beautiful, but more violins played simultaneously does not create more beauty. In fact, if they do not play together, the sound they create can be hideous. But if they play in harmony, beauty is increased. God seeks to create beauty in the world by bringing greater harmony out of the increasing complexity of creation. The complexity of beliefs and practices among the various religious traditions of the world is quite amazing. When they compete against each other, the result is often destructive. But when they come together in a new harmony, the result is a beautiful creation greater than any one of the tradi-

tions could create on their own. This is the work of Divine Community.

From tragedy to good

The second key ingredient to the creation of the Interfaith Service was September 11th. Without it, it might have been years before TRIM even attempted anything like this, if at all. The terror of that day did not make the service inevitable, but it did make it urgent. On the morning of September 11th, I placed a sign in front of our church, which is a busy one way street. The sign simply said, "open for prayer." No one came that day, but months later some one told me that the sign had been an important symbol for her. The news that morning had left her numb. It was not until she drove past our church and saw that sign that she was suddenly overcome with the enormity of it all and broke into tears. The Interfaith Service every month provides people with something concrete they can do in response to this new terror without perpetuating the terror or fixating on hate. In so doing, I believe it has touched a deep longing among many for a different way of being in the world. In the words of St. Francis, it offers love where this is hate, pardon where this is injury, faith where there is doubt and hope where there is despair.

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When the tsunami hit the coastlines of the Indian Ocean, the Reverend Paul Jeffrey was photographing the work of Action by Churches Together (ACT) in response to a flood in Sri Lanka. Over the next several days, he captured the tremendous devastation of those few hours in the faces of the survivors. Asked how to make sense of the disaster, Jeffrey responded, "If you take the crucifixion seriously, you have to understand where God is in such a disaster. God's not on high somewhere. God is present with the people who are suffering. God's under the rubble. God is trapped, God is washed away."⁹ Ellie Wiesel found the same answer in the midst of Auschwitz when a young boy was hung for attempting to escape, his small body too light to end his struggle for breath mercifully. Said the voice inside Wiesel, "God is there, hanging from the gallows."

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Coming together as people of many faith traditions in the wake of September 11th was not only a way for people of all religions to stand in solidarity with the victims and their families, it was in and of itself a statement of faith. It affirms that God is not idle in tragedy, God hears the cries of the afflicted and knows their suffering. From the time of the Exodus, this has been a central affirmation of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The voice of God proclaims to Moses from the burning bush, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings.” (Exodus 3:7) Other faith traditions also share this understanding of the Divine’s empathy for human suffering. Tamam Adi opened his statement at the September 14th Interfaith Service with this adaptation of a traditional Muslim funeral prayer:

Merciful God, our brothers and sisters in the World Trade Center, in the Pentagon, and in Pennsylvania, are now in your care.

Please protect them from the trials of the grave and the torment of the fire. Indeed, you are faithful and truthful.

Forgive them and have mercy upon them. Excuse them and pardon them, and give them an honorable reception. Cleanse them with water, snow and ice.

Purify them from sin, as clean white robes. And comfort their families. Exchange their home for a better home and admit them into your garden.

Perhaps more importantly, the Interfaith Service is an act of resistance to the kind of religious intolerance and zealotry that led to September 11th, the subsequent murder of the Sikh gas station attendant and the persecution felt by many Muslims. It is a way of saying that we refuse to succumb to such suspicion, hatred and violence. It has turned the terrible tragedy of that day into a powerful good. This good does not surpass the tragedy or somehow make it

better, but it does affirm that good can come out of tragedy. This too is the lesson drawn by Paul Jeffrey—for whom God not only is with the suffering, but God is also in the relief efforts working to restore not only life, but hope. The Interfaith Service is giving hope not only to those who attend on a regular basis, but also many who are simply aware that it exists. In a world where religion continues to be the source of great division and violence, the coming together of the divergent faith communities is a powerful witness to what can be. It not only speaks to the human hunger for peace and harmony among all peoples, but to the power of the Eternal as transformation, bringing good out of tragedy and new life out of death. As a symbol of this transformation, I find it fitting to note that “Remembrance” has now been dropped from the title of the service, so that even though it still is held on the 11th of every month, it no longer focuses on the tragedy out of which it was born, but on the hope into which it grows.

Conclusion

When the monthly service began in October of 2001, it did not occur to me then that this service would not only be continuing four years later but that it would be growing stronger. I attribute that success in part to the wise choices of the planning committee, but mostly to the spirit of God moving in this effort and the longing of people for an alternative to the madness they see in the world that has given us the current war on terror.

I opened that first service in October with this quote from Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng, “There will be no peace among peoples of this world without peace among the world religions.”¹⁰ I said then and believe even stronger now after these three and a half years that the significance of this service is just that, creating peace among the world’s religions which will finally enable those religions to bring peace to the world.

Notes

- 1 Another community which had a similar experience and response is in Rogers Park, Chicago. In 1996 the Center for a Parliament of the World's Religions formed a local organization in Rogers Park called "Creating Community Vision" (CCV) In July 1999, a white supremacist shot and killed Ricky Birdsong, Northwestern University's loved basketball coach. Mr. Birdsong, an African American, was the first of several victims of Benjamin Smith, a list which included three Orthodox Jews and an Asian-American in Indiana. The first shootings took place in and around the Rogers Park neighborhood, and affected the community deeply. Within seventy two hours, the people involved in CCV organized a 800-person interreligious vigil. Muslim, Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Zoroastrians and Native Americans, stood side by side to support their Jewish neighbors, and people of all religious and spiritual traditions came together to decry the violence perpetrated in the name of racism and prejudice. CCV became Rogers Park Interreligious Partners in 2002, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. For more information, see <http://www.cpwr.org/what/programs/ccv2.htm>.
- 2 Premawardhana cites Charles Kimball, author of *When Religion Becomes Evil*, for this point.
- 3 Shanta Premawardhana, "Setting the Stage for an Emerging Interfaith Movement: A Report After One Year." October 2004 newsletter.
- 4 <http://www.nccusa.org/interfaith/ifrliturgy.html>
- 5 For more information, see <http://www.disciples.org/ccu/ifd.htm>.
- 6 Consultation on Interfaith Dialogue and Relations Report, p. 4.
- 7 Consultation on Interfaith Dialogue and Relations Report, p. 6.
- 8 This report will be published in the docket for the 2005 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The quotes below are taken from a preliminary copy provided to me by Robert Welsh.
- 9 *The Register Guard*, January 16, 2005. The actual quote in the newspaper inaccurately referred to God as "He." Jeffrey says he was misquoted since he never uses male pronouns for God.
- 10 Hans Küng, *Christianity and the World's Religions*. Orbis Books: New York, 1993. p.443