

## **A Study Resource on Interreligious Relations for the United Church of Christ**

### **Introduction**

1. The United Church of Christ, together with Christians around the world, face questions which have been present for the Church since its beginning: what is the most appropriate way to profess Christianity in a multi-religious context; how do our particular streams of Christian tradition inform us as we relate to and work with those who practice other religions?
2. The purpose of this document is to help the church reflect upon the reasons for engaging in interreligious relationships, the contexts in which these occur, and the distinctive gifts that the United Church of Christ brings to these encounters, to discern God's call to us as we live and work alongside people of other religious traditions.
3. As Christians we affirm our distinctive beliefs and our witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We celebrate boldly the richness of the Christian encounter with God revealed in the particular person of Jesus Christ and recognize that we are called to spread this good news of God's message of healing and reconciliation. We affirm our continuing and unambivalent mandate, as a part of the whole Church, to engage in life-enhancing relationships with all of God's creation. The foundation upon which we engage in interreligious relationships is our belief that God is sovereign of the entire cosmos and that all humanity is created in God's image. We believe that the community of the whole inhabited earth is a gift which together we are called to nurture.

### **Our current context**

4. We affirm, with the Preamble to the United Church of Christ Constitution, "the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own." Ever-changing circumstances provide new challenges. The events and realities of our current context are essential to understanding how we as faithful Christians are in relationship to people of other religious traditions today.
5. A variety of both positive and negative factors bring us into close contact neighbors of many religious traditions the United States. Ease of travel is juxtaposed with forced migration caused by war, ethnic displacement, famine, ecological collapse; access to information technology for some stands alongside lack of access to this technology for many; and international cross-religious peace movements contrast with war and communal conflict. These factors have made the encounter with people of other religious traditions a routine and necessary part of life.
6. Attitudes about culture and heritage also changed dramatically over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While for some the early, dominant melting pot image of generic homogeneity helped knit together an American community, for others it resulted in cultural and religious annihilation. In recent years new images have emerged which celebrate the specific and distinctive religious traditions and gifts of the diverse communities which make up the whole.
7. Despite the increasing presence of communities of other religious traditions, we acknowledge that we have not always worked to understand our neighbors, and often have made no effort at simple hospitality. Our country has a long history which includes tragedies such as slavery, genocide, exploitation, and communal displacement, resulting, among many other things, in the disenfranchisement of religious traditions. Recent events such as the attacks of September 11, 2001 have also put sharper focus on the need for interreligious dialogue.

### **Our United Church of Christ theological context**

8. Our engagement in interreligious relationships is shaped by the historic and cultural traditions which are part of our theological heritage. We look to testimonies of the Christian faith, in all cultures through the ages, which find witness in scripture, the ancient creeds, and the worship of the Church. With others in Christian family, the United Church of Christ affirms as foundational to our faith the doctrine of the Trinity.
9. The God that Christians know in the Trinity is one, yet is also understood and encountered as a community of persons in which unity in diversity is affirmed rather than uniformity. The three persons of the Trinity is in essence a profound, dynamic relationship. We experience God not only through the work of a “creator, redeemer, and sustainer,” but also as a community that honors difference and distinction along with unity and oneness. The triune God acts in a richly diverse creation and also welcomes the creation into God’s self which is, itself, richly diverse. Thus, the Trinitarian life of unity in difference is the eternal fountain at the center of our Christian reality, expressing itself in the relationship of human beings with God, one another, and the entire cosmos.
10. It is not our task here to offer a full explication of a theology of the Trinity, but rather to explore one aspect of the Christian theology of a triune God which we believe can provide a lens for Christians as we consider the question of relationships with people of other faiths.
  - According to the Biblical witness, God is at work in all of creation. God has covenanted with the Church, with all of humanity, and with the universe (Genesis 9:12). Therefore, we Christians are called to explore relationships with all members of God’s family including those outside the Church.
  - The traditions that comprise the UCC have rejected the notions of limited atonement (the doctrine that God loves only the “elect”). Therefore we believe that the God who redeems the world 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 (Romans 8:12, I Corinthians 15:22, Colossians 1:18-20).
  - 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 Holy Spirit’s movements inside and outside the Church (John 3:8).

While bearing a faithful witness to what we as Christians believe God has done and still does in and through Jesus Christ, our understanding of the triune God compels us to listen attentively to neighbors and colleagues of other faith traditions and respond to the challenges of our multi-religious context.

### **Our United Church of Christ denominational context**

11. We celebrate the distinctive gifts inherited from the various traditions of the United Church of Christ which enable our relationships with people of other faiths and our ability to learn with them.

The United Church of Christ, a church of the “united and uniting” family, brings to the pursuit of interfaith relations long experience in honoring diversity and celebrating the many gifts of “particularity” within the context of unity. A united and uniting church must, by its very nature, practice diligently the work of sustaining a broadly diverse community in covenantal unity as a grateful response to the faithful covenant God has made with us. We struggle daily with a cacophony of voices which often do not blend into a melodious harmony, and confess that at times

we lean too hard on the distinctive witness of one or another branch of our family in order to avoid conflict.

12. That very struggle, however, is also our strength. We have learned that together we are more than the sum of our parts, and that, if the particular gift of one is forced to melt into those of any other, we dishonor and diminish all. For example, our United Church of Christ congregations represent a diversity of cultural traditions which have often influenced the shape of our local worship and our theological expression. These traditions include African American, American Indian, European American, Native Hawaiian, Chinese, Philippino, Japanese, Samoan, and many others. We believe this experience is instructive for fostering genuine interreligious relationships.
13. We are a denomination which views the historic witness of the Church, including the creeds and confessions, as testimonies to faith but not as tests of fellowship. Because of this, and in faithfulness to the call “to make this faith our own in every generation,” we in the United Church of Christ carry the responsibility for understanding how these historic commitments and statements of faith speak to current context. We neither accept each word without question nor reject out of hand those elements which challenge us. Our experience with discernment in specific contexts, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the ageless testimonies of the Church, enables us to hold in tension our own conviction with a recognition that God speaks to others in ways we might not see or understand. This is valuable as we seek relationships with people of other traditions.
14. Finally, we approach any statement on interreligious relations aware of our history of engagement with many religious communities. Mission relationships have played a central role in the life of the United Church of Christ and its predecessor bodies. In each generation this engagement has influenced and enhanced our understanding of different global contexts, of other religious traditions, and of our place in the whole of God's family. This mission involvement has had both positive and negative impact. Witnessing to the gospel for two centuries through the sending of missionaries, the creation of educational and medical institutions, working for justice and peace throughout the world, and engaging in partnership with Christians and people of other faith traditions have been and remain vital characteristics of our church's life. It is critical, however, that we be aware as well of the cost to our neighbors and ourselves that has sometimes been exacted as a result of our mission activity. Our witnessing has at times created the tragedy of destroyed communities, separated families, and the loss of cultural and religious identities.

### **Churchwide actions and ecumenical involvement**

15. The United Church of Christ General Synod has spoken twice on relations with people of other religions and the traditions they represent: with the Jewish community (1987)<sup>1</sup> and with the Muslim community (1989).<sup>2</sup> In 1999 the General Synod requested that the church study and respond to the document of the National Council of Churches of Christ “*Interfaith Relations and the Churches.*” The United Church of Christ has participated for decades in the Commission on Interfaith Relations which produced this document. Because we are only one part of the Christian family and have much to learn from our brothers and sisters, we believe that much of our reflection on interfaith relations should occur in collaboration with our ecumenical partners.

### **Issues for further consideration**

16. We acknowledge that whenever questions of interreligious relations occur, complex issues arise. We will not attempt to resolve those issues here, yet we believe it is important to name some of them and we urge faithful Christians in the United Church of Christ not to ignore or avoid topics which can be troubling or confusing as they engage in interreligious relations. We acknowledge there are no simple resolutions to any of these questions. We name three categories for further consideration: scriptural interpretation, theological issues, and pastoral concerns.

## 17. Scripture

The Reformed Protestant tradition, of which the United Church of Christ is a part, confesses that a genuine encounter with scripture will necessarily include a dialogue among experience, community and reason. In community and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we will encounter texts that seem to contradict one another, and sometimes be at odds with our experience. Just as we are urged to view the Scriptures in the full context of our experience, our communities, and our reason, we are also taught that any reading of scripture requires us to interpret passages in light of the whole of the Bible, not simply in the context of a small segment. In this way we acknowledge a dynamic relationship between God's word to us and our own experience of faith.

The interpretation of scripture when engaging in interreligious relations, however, can sometimes be confusing or even troubling. We name here two examples which can cause difficulty.

- The church throughout history has seen as central Jesus' call to go out and make disciples of all the nations. For some, this has been seen simply as a call to witness to the faith they hold in the celebration of God's good news. For others, this has been understood as a mandate for converting all who are not Christian, sometimes resulting in the destruction of entire communities, family systems, and religious traditions. *How are Christians to engage and understand such texts when relating to neighbors and colleagues of other religious traditions?*
- With Christians throughout the world we affirm that in the particular person of Jesus Christ God revealed to us salvation. We read in John 14:6 "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." In the same chapter we read "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places" (John 14:2). *How do we reconcile these messages which appear to have such profound implications for interreligious relationships? How do we remain faithful to revelation and yet acknowledge that there is much of the mystery of God, and how God will choose to save, that we do not know?*

We strongly recommend that resources be developed, in the context of a variety of United Church of Christ communities, engaging the subject of scripture and interreligious traditions.

## 18. Theology: soteriology and Christology

How we understand soteriology (who is saved, by what path, and under what conditions), and Christology (who Christ is) impacts our approach to and expectations of interfaith relations. Some in the United Church of Christ profess that faith in Jesus Christ, as *the* Messiah, is the only path to salvation. Others believe that, for them, faith in Jesus as savior is the path to salvation, but believe that the mystery of God is such that we cannot know whether there are other equally valid paths. Still others affirm that there are multiple valid paths to God and that all lead to salvation; and there is a broad spectrum including variations of each of these views. Further, theologies such as those of liberation and others approach the soteriology in ways which do not focus on the traditional question of "saving souls." *How do these theological perspectives, alive in the United Church of Christ, inform our understanding of interfaith relations?* We believe that further deliberation on these specific concerns is vital to mature and responsible interreligious relationships. They are complex and deserve further study.

## 19. Theology: witness, mission, and evangelism

How one understands salvation will shape how we engage in mission, and how one engages in mission will, as noted above, shape approach to interreligious relationships.

Some in the United Church of Christ profess a belief that interreligious relationships are valid only in the context of a call to conversion, otherwise there is no distinction between the relationships of a Christian and those of secular humanitarian organizations; others proclaim that what is required is our witness to faith, but that the outcome, resulting in conversion or not, is up to God; still others maintain that it is never appropriate to engage in conversation which may have the effect of conversion, out of respect for the integrity of the other's faith. All of these positions, and variations on them, are held by members of the United Church of Christ. *How are we called to witness to our Christian faith in a multi-religious setting?*

We urge further rigorous consideration of the theological issues related to these topics and the impact on our interreligious relationships.<sup>3</sup>

#### 20. Theology: interreligious worship

As members of faith communities grow in relationship, they often desire to engage in worship together. This can be a deeply enriching experience, but one which can also cause difficulty as participants grapple with appropriate language and ritual. Some will choose to create ritual that pertains to no specific tradition; others will create worship that includes specific ritual from many traditions. There are important theological and liturgical assumptions embedded in each of these and many other choices and it is critical for Christians to be aware of them as they make decisions about interfaith worship.

The North American context for interfaith worship includes many instances of life-enhancing relationships among Christian immigrants and American Indian, Alaskan Native as well as Native Hawaiian peoples. However, we recognize that this context is also defined by a history of colonizing American Indian, Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian lands and resources, including cultural and spiritual resources. Because of this history, non-Native Christians need to develop a particular sensitivity when incorporating indigenous religious rituals into Christian worship. It is especially important that they inform themselves about how American Indian, Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian communities understand their traditions as separate from the Christian faith. We affirm that worship using American Indian, Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian religious ritual should only be created with an informed historical awareness, and in active collaboration with the relevant indigenous communities or institutional bodies within the United Church of Christ.

We commend for further study this critical and complex area of interfaith relations and urge care when creating worship experiences in interreligious contexts.

#### 21. Pastoral concerns

It is no longer unusual for Jew to marry Christian, Christian to marry Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist; for children to choose faith traditions which are different from those of their parents; and for members of one family to function in a multi-religious setting. Such families have experiences which are often rich with opportunity and perspective on religious commitment. They can provide wisdom and insight born of hard choices and healing encounters.

Such circumstances may also, however, provide particularly difficult personal and pastoral challenges. Such families juggle the commitments of more than one tradition, determine how to raise children, and confront what may at times appear to be opposing faith claims, all the while nurturing coherent family life. This presents significant pastoral challenges both for members of such families and for leaders in congregations.

Much has been written in this area of pastoral care and we commend for consideration resources which alert pastors and congregational leaders to the issues facing such families.

## **We confess**

22. As we call ourselves to interfaith relationships, we acknowledge those ways in which we have fallen short:

We have not always practiced humble listening, and as a result have been disrespectful of others and have impoverished ourselves. We confess that frequently our dialogues have been serial monologues, and we have postured ourselves as the absolute standard against which others are measured for integrity and wisdom.

We acknowledge the strong temptation to “read ourselves into others” as a way of softening the edge of difference, because the result has often been to mute the distinctive gifts of others.

We know that at times faithful Christians, in witnessing to what God has done in our lives, have claimed more certainty about the divine than we possess. We have sometimes forgotten that our ways are not always God’s ways, and in forgetting, we have often dishonored the beauty of God’s creation.

We confess that we have allowed fear and misunderstanding to guide many of our actions and reactions to those who are unlike us, and this has often had disastrous consequences for those we encounter and for our own integrity. We know that we are called to rise beyond fear and misunderstanding and with humility and vulnerability to know God’s image in all whom God created.

## **Call for deeper engagement**

23. Past mistakes, however, should not inhibit present commitment. In a spirit of hospitality and welcome we believe we are called to new relationships and new ways of relating, knowing that in those encounters we will have much to receive as well as much to give.

24. We are called as faithful members of the United Church of Christ to deeper engagement with people of other religious traditions. For some this will take the form of dialogue for understanding. Others will choose to engage in cooperative projects in local communities. Some will join in witness on issues of social or political significance. Still others will encounter interfaith relations primarily in pastoral commitment to families and friends whose lives encompass more than one religious tradition. We recognize that in order to build deeper relationships we must be willing to face both responsibility and risk.

25. First, if we are to honor our religious neighbors, it is essential that we demonstrate the trust of being honest about who we are and what we believe. Trust is built when individuals can learn, over time, to reveal even those aspects of themselves which they fear will engender anger or anxiety. Genuine relationship, built on mutual trust, then enables partners to give and receive critique when appropriate. By risking the trust which allows honest engagement in affirmation and admonition, we honor our partners and remain faithful to our deepest convictions.

Confronting issues which have divided us will enable us to engage more deeply in the work which we believe will enable us to make our communities places of peace and respect. The very topics

which we may be most inclined to avoid, in an effort to avoid conflict, may actually help us overcome difficulties which arise when we work closely together as partners.

26. Second, if we are to “love one another,” as Christ has taught us, we have a responsibility to come to *know* our religious neighbors – not with the intent of changing them, but truly seeking to show the care Christ expects of his followers. Love of neighbor which truly respects their particularity and integrity means openness to the possibility that we both may be mutually transformed in the relationship.
27. We engage in interreligious relationships out of gratitude for the gifts we have received from a generous and loving God. We engage in such relationship also with the expectation of the gifts we will receive from our religious partners. Even as we affirm our own Christian witness and conviction, we acknowledge with humility that there is much of the mystery of God unknown to us.

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<sup>1</sup> The question of Christianity’s historical posture toward the Jewish faith and supercessionism is named in this resolution and we feel that it is a crucial topic for ongoing study, as it has been one of the most difficult barriers to genuine Christian-Jewish relations.

<sup>2</sup> The texts of these actions can be found on the United Church of Christ website in the section on ecumenical and interreligious relations.

<sup>3</sup> We especially recommend for study the text “*Missio Dei*,” written by Norman Jackson and adopted by the Executive Council of the United Church of Christ in 1992. This work focuses on the issues of God’s mission and how our understanding of God’s work informs even our ecclesial structures.