



# CALLED TO BE NEIGHBORS & WITNESSES



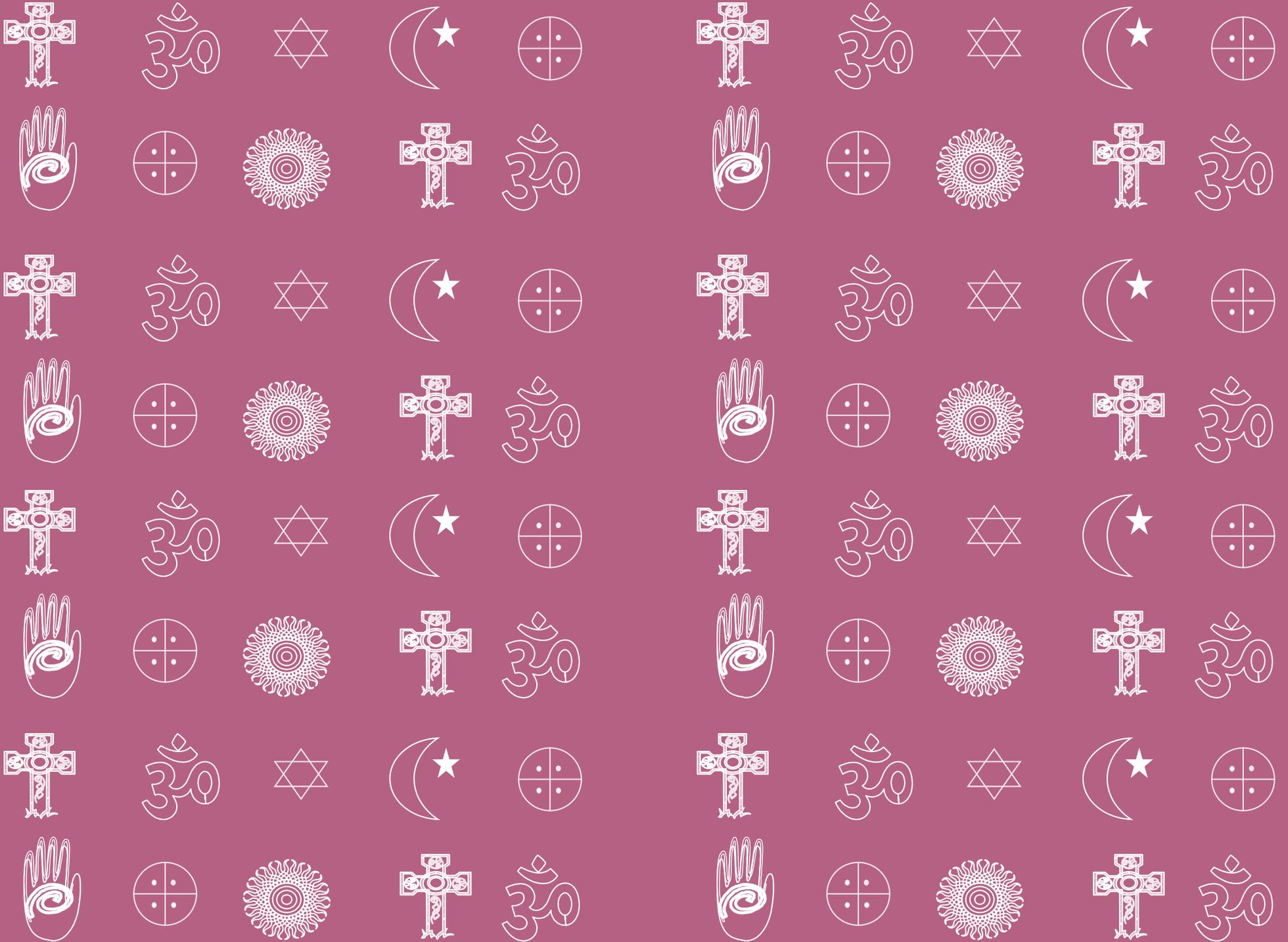
## Guidelines for Interreligious Relationships

Statement of  
The United Methodist Church  
on Interfaith Relations

The Book of Resolutions of  
The United Methodist Church – 2008

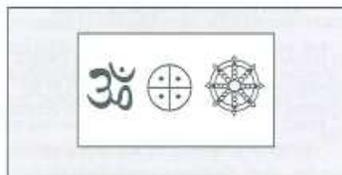
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In each place, we share our lives with each other, we witness and are witnessed to, we invite others into the Christian community and we are invited by others into theirs. Our prayer is that the lives of all in each place will be enriched by the differences of others, that a new sense of community may emerge, and that others may receive the gift of God in Christ, while we receive the gifts which have been given them.

**RESOLUTION #3142**  
ADOPTED 1980  
REVISED AND ADOPTED 2000  
REVISED AND READOPTED 2008  
RESOLUTION #89, 2004 *BOOK OF RESOLUTIONS*  
RESOLUTION #79, 2000 *BOOK OF RESOLUTIONS*



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### Guidelines for Interreligious Relationships

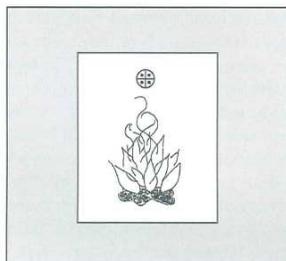
Nations of the world are growing increasingly interdependent politically and economically. The various world religious communities are also encountering each other in new ways. Religions of Asia and Africa are showing new life and power within their homelands and are spreading to other continents, creating new multireligious societies, especially in western nations. New sects, cults, and ideologies are emerging and ancient traditions are receiving renewed attention. To an unprecedented degree, the wonders of the information age bring the world's rich religious diversity into our homes and communities.

The emergence of religiously diverse societies and the new dynamics in old religious communities have prompted many faith communities to reconsider how they relate to one another and to prevailing secular ideologies. This represents a great opportunity for learning and an enhanced understanding of our common concerns. Yet there is also danger that religious tensions will lead to oppression of religious minorities and curtailment of religious freedom with real potential for armed conflict. At a time when worldwide problems of human suffering due to poverty, wars, and political oppression are so vast and pervasive that no one faith group can solve them, tensions between religious groups often prevent the level of cooperation needed to respond more adequately. As ancient religions demonstrate new life and power

to speak to the deepest human concerns, Christians are pressed towards a deeper understanding of other faith traditions and reexamination of their and our claims to a global mission to all people.

What are the implications of this religiously diverse situation for Christian theology and ministry? What does it mean to be a faithful follower of and witness to Jesus Christ? What does it mean to affirm the Lordship of Jesus Christ in a religiously pluralistic world? Can we, of different faith traditions, live together as neighbors, or will diverse religious loyalties result in mutual antagonism and destruction? What are the resources United Methodist Christians bring for building constructive relationships between persons of different religions?

The United Methodist Church provides this statement as guidance to its members and congregations in facing these questions in their and our relations with persons who hold other faith perspectives.



## INTENT

The intent in developing interreligious relationships is not to amalgamate all faiths into one religion. We Christians have no interest in such syncretism. To engage in interreligious dialogue is neither to endorse nor to deny the faith of other people. In dialogue we mutually seek insight into the wisdom of other traditions and we hope to overcome our fears and misapprehensions. Far from requiring a lessening of commitment to Christ, effective dialogue is only possible when one's own faith is strong, and may ultimately serve to deepen or extend it.

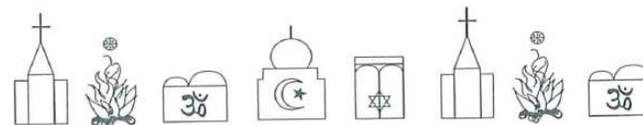
We Christians are seeking to be neighbors with persons whose religious commitments are different from our own and to engage each other about the deepest convictions of our lives. In our assurance of and trust in God's grace in Jesus Christ, we open ourselves to dialogue and engagement with persons of other faith communities and to other Christians whose understandings, cultures, and practices may be different from our own.

This interreligious engagement challenges United Methodist Christians to think in new ways about our lives in the broader human community, about our mission, evangelism, service, and our life together within the Christian church. We seek to promote peace and harmony with persons of other religious traditions in our various towns, cities, and neighborhoods. Yet we do not hide our differences, nor avoid conflicts, but seek to make them constructive.

## Guidelines for Interreligious Relationships

The following guidelines will assist United Methodists to be faithful to their call to witness and the call to be neighbors with persons of other faith communities.

- (1) Identify the various faith communities in your area and begin to familiarize your congregation with them. This may involve planned experiences which bring faith communities into contact with one another or the formation of study groups which provide an introduction to other faith traditions.
- (2) Initiate dialogues with other faith communities, remaining sensitive to areas of historic tension yet open to the possibilities for deepened understanding and new insight. Each partner must forthrightly face the issues that cause separation as well as those that foster relationship.
- (3) Work in practical ways with persons of other faith communities to resolve economic, social, cultural and political problems in the community. Soup kitchens, food pantries, Habitat for Humanity projects and other such efforts can be an effective focus for shared concerns for the common good.
- (4) Together with persons of other faith traditions, plan community celebrations with an interreligious perspective. Prepare carefully. Sensitivity to the integrity of each tradition is essential. Care should be taken to relativize all religious symbols and practices nor minimize religious differences.
- (5) Develop new models of community building which strengthen relationships and allow people to dwell together in harmony while honoring the integrity of their differences.



For some Christians, it may seem strange even to refer to “persons who hold other faith perspectives.” Some are accustomed to calling them “non-Christians” or “nonbelievers.” These attitudes may have developed out of confidence in the ultimate truth of our own faith perspective or from limited experience of and insensitivity to other traditions, to the truth they may contain, and to the profound meaning and purpose they give to the lives of people. How, then, are we to relate to those who seem different from us religiously?

Scripture gives us many images of neighborliness which extends across conventional boundaries. In the Old Testament (Genesis 12), we find God challenging Abram and Sarai to go live among strangers. In the New Testament, Jesus breaks convention by speaking with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:6-30) and shows how she can be reached through dialogue. Speaking with a lawyer (Luke 10:25), Jesus reminds him that his neighbor, the one to whom he should show love and compassion, and from whom he may receive grace, may be a stranger. Today, our Lord’s call to neighborliness (Luke 10:27) includes the “strangers” of other faith traditions who live in our towns and cities. It is not just that historical events have forced us together. Christianity itself impels us to love our neighbors and to seek to live in contact and mutually beneficial relationships, in community, with them.

What does it mean to be a neighbor? It means to meet other persons, to know them, to relate to them, to respect them, and to learn about their ways which may be quite different from our own. It means to create a sense of community in our

neighborhoods, towns and cities and to make them places in which the unique customs of each group can be expressed and their values protected. It means to create social structures in which there is justice for all and that everyone can participate in shaping their life together “in community.” Each race or group of people is not only allowed to be who they are, but their way of life is also valued and given full expression.

Christians distinguish several meanings of “community.” One definition expresses their relationships as members of one another in the body of Christ, the church, a people called together by Christ, a “communion of saints” who work toward the reign of God. A broader definition points to the relationship that is shared with others in the wider human community, where Christians are concerned for peace, justice, and reconciliation for all people. Other faiths also have their understanding of “community.” The vision of a “worldwide community of communities” commends itself to many Christians as a way of being together with persons of different religious convictions in a pluralistic world.

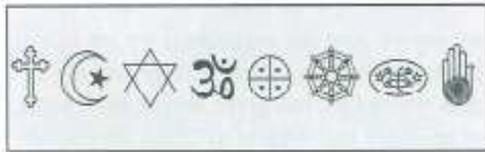
Ultimately, this is to shift the question from, “To which church do we belong?” to “Have we participated in promoting the work of the Holy Spirit?” That suggests that we United Methodist Christians, not just individually, but corporately, are called to be neighbors with other faith communities (such as Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Native American), and to work with them to create a human community a set of relationships between people at once interdependent and free, in which there is love, mutual respect, and justice.

How can we live peacefully together, unless we are willing to be neighborly? How can we say we love our neighbor if we are unwilling to be attentive to the message and the gifts which God has given him or her? Love of neighbor and witness to Christ are the two primary attitudes United Methodist Christians must affirm in their relationship with persons of other faith traditions. When we affirm our love for the neighbor, we discover that God has given us another gift-people in other faith communities. We join hands with them to fight against the evil powers and principalities of this earth.

God is calling United Methodists into a new millennium full of its own challenges and opportunities. We seek to learn how the Holy Spirit works among all people of the world, especially among those in other religious traditions. We desire to read the holy texts that others believe to be inspired by God and to open ourselves to the power and spiritual insights held in the stories, images, and rituals of other traditions. And we pray for guidance as we yearn to proclaim the Savior whom we know among people who believe in other saviors and lords. May all our mission and witness to the peoples of this world be inspired by the Holy Spirit and centered in the love taught us by Jesus Christ.

## NEIGHBORS AND WITNESSES

Into the New Millennium

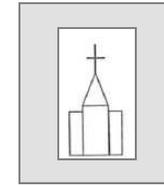


The command to love one's neighbors and the call to witness to Jesus Christ to all people are inseparably linked. The profound challenge which this represents for United Methodist Christians can be seen most sharply in the new religious movements which have arisen in recent years. These movements have become a source of concern for many Christians. Some groups seem to utilize methods that are manipulative and coercive.

However, many people have found new vision, meaning, and hope in some of these new faith perspectives. These new religious movements are very diverse and they should not be lumped together indiscriminately, condemned, and dismissed. Neither should they automatically be embraced as valid expressions of human dignity and freedom. Careful study and contact will enable Christians to distinguish those which are manipulative and coercive and which are to be challenged for reasons of faith.

As we take seriously this calling to be witnesses and neighbors to people of all faith communities, old and new, we become aware of the biblical caution not to bear false witness (Matthew 19:18) and the admonition to live at peace with all people (Hebrews 12:14). How are we to avoid bearing false witness unless we know our neighbors and understand their faith commitments? How can one truly love a neighbor and hold back what to Christians is the greatest of all gifts – God becoming present to people in Jesus Christ?

## CALLED TO BE WITNESSES



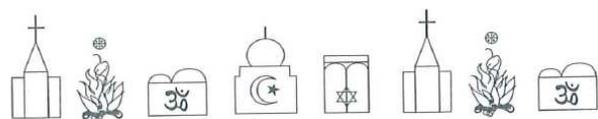
Within this religiously diverse community, Christians, trusting in Jesus Christ for their salvation, are called to witness to him as Lord to all people (Acts 1:8). We witness to our Lord through words which tell of his grace, through deeds of service and social change that demonstrate his love, and through our life together in the Christian community, exhibits God's power to heal, reconcile, and unite. When Jesus issued his famous missionary mandate, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:20), the Greek word is *poreuthentes*. This literally means "to depart, to leave, to cross boundaries." Thus, a witness to Jesus Christ is one who can bridge boundaries, be they geographic, sociological, racial, or cultural. The gospels tell story after story of Jesus crossing boundaries and reaching to outsiders, drawing them into his circle. As disciples of Jesus, our outreaching draws upon the gospel call to be even more than neighbors. We are to proclaim and witness to the God who has bound humanity together in care for one another, regardless of the differences between us.

As a relationships with persons of other faith communities deepen, Christians discover how often our witness has been neighborly, how much we have talked and how little we have listened, and how our insensitive and unappreciative approaches have alienated sincere truth seekers and persons who already have strong faith commitments. We become aware that we frequently communicate attitudes of superiority regarding our own faith, thereby perpetuating walls and hostilities between us as human beings. These can only restrict Christian witness.

As United Methodist Christians reflect anew on our faith and seek guidance in our witness to and encounter with our new neighbors, we rediscover that God who has acted in Jesus Christ for the salvation of the whole world, is also Creator of all humankind, the “one God and Father of all, who is Lord of all, works through all, and is in all” (Eph. 4:6 TEV). Here Christians confront a profound mystery – the awareness of God who is related to all creation and at work in the whole of it, and the experience of God who has acted redemptively for the whole creation in Jesus Christ. Christians witness to God in Jesus Christ in the confidence that here all people can find salvation and in the trust that because of what we know of God in Jesus, God deals graciously and lovingly with all people everywhere.

Because of our theological understanding of John Wesley’s insistence on prevenient grace, we know that our task of witness is not set in the context of a world that is totally lost and deprived of God. Our task is, instead, set in the context of a world in which God is very much active and where people have already experienced the love of God in good measure through the activity of the Holy Spirit, despite the realities of sin and evil in the world. Because we understand prevenient grace that “goes before,” we know that the activity of the Holy Spirit is not limited to the confines of the church. The Spirit of God is at work in the world, too, even at work in persons of other religious traditions. A large part of our task, and foundational to interreligious dialogue and cooperation, is to learn to discern the Spirit’s work.

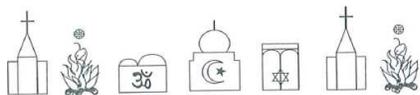
Our concern is to be obedient to our own call to witness and to follow the imperative to be loving and neighborly to persons of other faith communities. In dialogue, these deeply held truths encounter each other in witness and love, so that greater wisdom and greater understanding of truth may emerge which benefit all parties in the dialogue. As we exhibit courtesy, reverence, and respect and become neighbors, fears of each other are allayed, and the Holy Spirit works within these relationships.



Dialogue at these depths holds great promise. Long-cherished convictions may be modified by the encounter with others. Misunderstanding may be clarified, potential hostilities reconciled, and new insights regarding one's own faith may emerge in contrast to that of another. The depths of another's faith may be so disclosed that its power and attractiveness are experienced. Dialogue is a demanding process, requiring thorough understanding of one's own faith and clear articulation of it to the other person. It asks that we "translate" our perspectives to one another with integrity, that we have the patience and attentiveness to discern what meaning words and images have for the other persons as well as ourselves.

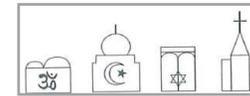
Dialogue is not a betrayal of witness. Dialogue and witness are wrongly placed in opposition to each other. They need each other. Dialogue creates relationships of mutual understanding, openness, and respect. Witness presses dialogue to the deepest convictions about life, death and hope.

Many persons of other faiths are suspicious that dialogue is a new and more subtle tool for conversion. In some ways this is inevitable since Christians do want others to learn of and receive the truth and grace we know in Jesus Christ. The difference between dialogue and other forms of witness is that it is a context for learning from the other the truth and wisdom of the other faith as well as sharing with the other the truth and wisdom of our own. We leave to the Holy Spirit the outcome of our mutual openness.



## DIALOGUE

### A Way to Be Neighbors



"Dialogue" is the word which has come to signify an approach to persons of other faith. Communities which takes seriously both the call to witness and the command to love and be neighbors. To be engaged in dialogue is to see witnessing and neighborliness as interrelated activities. Rather than one-sided address, dialogue combines witnessing with listening. It is the intentional engagement with persons who hold other faith perspectives for purposes of mutual understanding, cooperation, and transformation.

"Dialogue" may be as informal as a conversation in the marketplace or as formal as the leader of one religious group explaining to others its belief or worship life. Dialogue is more than an individual or academic enterprise. It also involves groups or communities of people holding different convictions who reach out to one another. This community orientations gives a practical bent to interreligious dialogue.

In dialogue, one individual or group may seek relationship with another in order to expose misunderstandings and stereotypes and to break down barriers that separate and create hostility and conflict. Ethnic or religious communities may approach each other in dialogue in order to resolve particular problems or to foster cooperation in dealing with a local, national, or even global situation of human suffering. At its deepest level, dialogue is both learning about and sharing our faith through its stories and images. Each partner learns from the rich store of wisdom of the other, and each expresses his or her own deepest conviction in the faith that it has truth worth sharing with the other.

Through dialogue with persons of other faith communities, new insights are received regarding God's activity in the world today, the divine purpose for humankind as a whole, and the place of the Christian community within these purposes. It is also a common experience for Christians to feel the need to express their own faith with greater clarity. We trust in the Holy Spirit to make known new and different insights through such encounters.

Even though Jews, Christians and Muslims share the same covenant, in many of our cities and towns we continue to live as strangers to each other. A positive foundation from which to connect with persons in other faith communities is recognition of some of the gifts they bring to the human community. For instance, through Judaism, Christians can connect to the covenantal faithfulness of God; Islam illustrates the joy of life lived in obedience to God's will; the spiritualities of indigenous peoples encourage a deep reverence for God's natural creation; Buddhism offers contemplative ways to connect to the divine; and Hinduism in its varieties brings the gift of tolerance. Engaging in dialogue with positive expectation offers the possibility of sharing mutually beneficial spiritual gifts as well as overcoming past hostilities.

Dialogue frequently has been misunderstood. Some see it as limited to the commonalities that exist between different religious traditions. It is important to discern and explore those commonalities and to utilize them to strengthen relationships. But there is more! Dialogue offers to both partners the opportunity of enriching their own faith through the wisdom of the other. In the process it helps overcome the deepest mistrust, of hatred, hostility, and conflict that characterize so many intercultural and interreligious relations. Each religious community asserts that its faith offers a way to resolve conflict in positive ways and has resources for building community among diverse peoples. Dialogue seeks to provide an environment which allows space for differences, builds on the positive affirmations of each faith, and brings them into relationship with each other.

## DIALOGUE

### A Way to Witness



The only precondition for dialogue –sometimes a challenging one– is a true willingness to enter a relationship of mutual acceptance, openness, and respect. Effective dialogue requires that both partners have deep convictions about life, faith, and salvation. True dialogue requires that Christians not suspend their fundamental convictions concerning the truth of the gospel, but enter into dialogue with personal commitment to Jesus Christ and with the desire to witness to that faith. Effective dialogue also requires that Christians be truly open to persons of other faith communities, to their convictions about life, truth, and teachings about the meaning of life. Engagement in dialogue is a form of Christian ministry.

Is not this urge to witness an obstacle to interreligious dialogue? It often has been, but it need not be. Where there is listening as well as speaking, openness and respect as well as concern to influence, there is dialogue and witness. Indeed, dialogue at its most profound level is an exchange of witness. Participants share with each other their perceptions of the meaning of life, of ultimate reality, salvation and hope, and the resources of their faith for enabling community. In genuine “dialogue,” we “witness and are witnessed to.” The most effective dialogue takes place when both sides really do care that the other hear, understand, and receive the other's wisdom. Part of our witness is our openness to hearing the witness of the other.