



# Called to Dialogue

Interreligious and Intra-Christian Dialogue  
in Ecumenical Conversation

*A Practical Guide*



**World Council  
of Churches**

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*WCC Publications is the book publishing programme of the World Council of Churches. Founded in 1948, the WCC promotes Christian unity in faith, witness and service for a just and peaceful world. A global fellowship, the WCC brings together 345 Protestant, Orthodox, Anglican and other churches representing more than 550 million Christians in 110 countries and works cooperatively with the Roman Catholic Church.*

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ISBN: 978-2-8254-1677-8

World Council of Churches  
150 route de Ferney, P.O. Box 2100  
1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland  
<http://publications.oikoumene.org>

## Foreword

*I am glad to commend this short booklet, which puts into comparative perspective both interreligious and ecumenical dialogue for a wide range of ecumenical friends and partners. As it says, it is intended as a practical guide to assist groups and individuals needing to work in one or both areas. This is another dimension of being on a pilgrimage of justice and peace together. Increasingly in the World Council of Churches we are seeking to work in a way that spans and bridges traditional boundaries. So it is appropriate methodologically that this booklet has resulted from collaboration between a range of specialists in concerns of Faith and Order and those working in the area of Interreligious Dialogue. I believe and trust that you will find the results of their work useful.*

**Olav Fykse Tveit**

## Introduction

The ecumenical movement faces a number of contemporary challenges. One of them is the question of the relationship between intra-Christian dialogue and interreligious dialogue. This issue has come to the fore for a number of reasons. These include the shifts in demography caused by large-scale human migration, the changing nature of relationships within the global Christian family itself, the maturity yet also frustration of developments in institutional inter-church relationships, and overt political and humanitarian pressures that have an explicit interreligious dimension in a number of regions of the world.

Both forms of engagement in dialogue – intra-Christian and interreligious – are affected by these developments, both are experiencing a degree of defensiveness, and the new situation has altered the dynamics of the relationship between them. At times it has led to a certain amount of confusion or even hostility. At other points the overlapping of the two areas has offered creative and positive opportunities. The changing contexts for both intra-Christian and interreligious relations, namely the crisis in traditional expressions of ecumenism and the rise of religious extremism and fundamentalism across several religions, impinge on one another but also seem to undercut the efforts of both endeavours.

However they also impel us to explore new language and methods to affirm and promote both intra-Christian and interreligious relations, recognising both their commonalities and distinctiveness. Despite their differences, both forms of engagement hold the promise of diffusing tensions, addressing violence, fostering understanding and reconciliation and deepening the religious commitment and spirituality of those involved.

## Challenges

A few concrete examples and stories linked to these challenges are given below. These examples are not intended to be comprehensive but illustrative.

- The 10<sup>th</sup> assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Busan, South Korea, was marked by regular, sometimes large-scale, demonstrations against its presence, undertaken by a number of Korean Christians not identified with the WCC. According to the banners they displayed and the leaflets they handed out, their major criticism of the WCC was due to the way, in their eyes, the organization had moved from a focus on ecumenical dialogue to interreligious dialogue. The publicity handed out by the demonstrators made comments such as, “While the original goal of the ecumenical movement and the WCC was ‘the unity of the churches,’ the new vision of the WCC is for the unity of all religions – and in fact, all mankind.” Although these voices were mistaken, the question remains: what does the WCC need to learn from this experience and perception?
- There is an increasing use of such expressions as “a new ecumenism” or “a wider ecumenism” to describe interreligious dialogue. The value judgment implicit in terms such as “new” or “wider” can and does lead to confusion or feeling undermined for those engaging in intra-Christian dialogue.
- The dramatic and violent actions of some Muslims over the past 15 years, even though their activity has been disowned by the vast majority of the world Muslim community, has led to a high profile for Islam internationally, including among a number of governments and in the media. This has led to considerable funds from governments and other sources being made available for interreligious work of a diaconal nature. Perversely, this has sometimes disadvantaged those working in the field of Christian and intra-Christian relationships. In several parts of the world there is also linked external, sometimes governmental, pressure for intra-Christian/church councils to re-establish themselves as interreligious bodies.
- In some parts of the world, churches themselves now seem to want to give greater priority to their interreligious relationships, rather than their intra-Christian ones. This is true both in regions where Christians are a majority and where they are a minority.
- The obituary for Rev Dr Philip Potter, the former general secretary of the WCC, published in the United Kingdom broadsheet newspaper, *The Daily Telegraph*, 29 April 2015, included the following paragraph: “Long

before inter-faith dialogue became common, Potter and his team were arranging consultations between leaders of world religions. A lasting achievement was the publication in 1982 of a consensus document expressing the agreement of the major churches on the theological basis of Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry.” The implication of these sentences is that either the obituary writer, or the editors of *The Daily Telegraph* are unaware of the difference between inter-faith (interreligious) dialogue and intra-Christian dialogue.

- The entry for “Interfaith Dialogue” in Wikipedia in May 2015 included the following misleading paragraph. “To some, the term *interreligious dialogue* has the same meaning as *interfaith dialogue*. Neither are the same as Nondenominational Christianity. The World Council of Churches, though distinguishes between ‘interfaith’ and ‘interreligious.’ To the WCC, ‘interreligious’ refers to action between different Christian denominations. So, ‘interfaith’ refers to interaction between different faith groups such as Muslim and Christian or Hindu and Jew for example.” This entry, which was not written or authorised by the WCC, and is hopefully now corrected, is another typical example of the widespread confusion of terminology in this field.
- There is an increasing desire on the part of the WCC to explore Christian unity not simply in terms of facilitating closer relationships and understanding between its member churches, or between its member churches and the Roman Catholic Church, but also to engage explicitly with groups of Christians from an evangelical or Pentecostal background or non-denominational networks. Does this necessitate a different kind of intra-Christian engagement? And what impact will such developments have in terms of the WCC’s work with people of other religions, given the nervousness among some of these new dialogue partners about interreligious dialogue?
- Increasing interest on the part of what are sometimes called “new religious movements” to engage with Christian churches and the ecumenical movement has raised a number of questions. Should dialogue between the Church of the Latter Day Saints (Mormons) and representatives of Christian churches, for example, be described as intra-Christian or interreligious? Perhaps Christians linked to the ecumenical movement would consider such dialogue as interreligious, but it is likely that members of the Church of the Latter Day Saints would regard it as intra-Christian.
- The relationship between Christianity and Judaism, which many Christians would describe as a “special relationship” as compared with

that between Christianity and other world faiths, raises particular questions about the relationship between intra-Christian and interreligious dialogue, given the institutional place sometimes accorded to Christian-Jewish relations in Christian structures. For example in Roman Catholic structures relationships with Judaism are the responsibility of a special Commission for Religious Relations with Jews, which is included within the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, rather than the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, which has responsibility for Roman Catholic relations with other non-Christian faiths. Karl Barth's famous comment in 1951, "In the final analysis there is really just one main ecumenical issue: that of our relations with the Jewish people" offers pause for thought. In what sense is Barth here using the word "ecumenical"? However although this view of a "special relationship" is also welcome in many Jewish circles, there are some Jewish voices who would want to challenge it, suggesting that it is important that Christians take account of the difference between Judaism and Christianity as much as their common inheritance.

In the light of these and other questions what helpful guidance can be offered to individuals and groups working either in the field of interreligious dialogue, or inter church dialogue, or both?

This short booklet seeks to offer some useful definitions, then looks at the biblical and theological foundations for dialogue. It next offers some principles and goals, before moving into the question of methodologies and challenges, and concludes with some practical examples. Its intended audience is primarily Christian, although it is hoped that it may also prove informative to members of other religions working in the field of interreligious relations. More information about the process and group which produced the booklet is given in an Appendix.

## Definitions

We understand the need to clarify the language used in a document of this sort. Given the variety of meanings that familiar words like *dialogue*, *ecumenism*, *interreligious*, and *interfaith* evoke, we are aiming here to point to the diversity of these terms but also clarify in what sense these terms are employed in this document.

### Dialogue

Dialogue has been variously defined and understood and perceived both in the context of intra-Christian as well as interreligious engagement.

In the intra-Christian context, dialogue has often been understood more narrowly as bilateral and multilateral conversations between formal church representatives concerning church-dividing issues, such as disagreement on doctrine, morals, public prayer and the celebration of the sacraments, biblical interpretation, structures of ministry and governance. But dialogue properly understood encompasses the whole range of relationships with other Christians, not exclusively in formal ways but including prayer, missionary cooperation, solidarity and common witness in the world. In its broadest and deepest sense, dialogue in the intra-Christian context means moving beyond division toward full visible communion and common witness and service in charity and with humility.

By comparison, in the interreligious context dialogue has often been expansively understood beyond formal institutionalized conversations. The traditional four-fold model of interreligious dialogue speaks of the dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of theological exchange and the dialogue of religious experience (*Dialogue and Proclamation*, 9). Dialogue means positive and constructive inter-religious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths, directed to mutual understanding and enrichment, in obedience to truth, with respect for freedom. Dialogue is understood as shared communication for mutual understanding, to address divisions or conflicts, or to nurture solidarity for peace and justice or mutual empowerment (See *Ecumenical Considerations for Dialogue* 18, 19).

The wider definition of the term *dialogue* in interreligious contexts can be an important resource for those whose primary engagement is with intra-Christian dialogue. This booklet uses the word *dialogue* in the wider sense, although some of the methods and examples given below do relate specifically

to institutional and formal conversations, both intra-Christian and interreligious.

### **Ecumenism/Ecumenical**

The 1951 Central Committee of the World Council of Churches noted that the word *ecumenical*, which “comes from the Greek word for the whole inhabited earth [*oikoumene*], is properly used to describe everything that relates to the whole task of the whole church to bring the Gospel to the whole world. It therefore covers equally the missionary movement and the movement toward unity.” The introduction to the *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* describes various nuances of the term. It suggests that it is a search for unity in the truth found in Jesus; a search for the will of God in every area of life and work; a search to discern, proclaim and participate in the triune God’s purpose for humankind; and as the mission of God in the world. In contemporary thinking, the terms *ecumenism* and *ecumenical movement* refer to a multidimensional movement, including mission, social concerns and ethical questions, whose centre and goal however still remains “the visible unity of the churches in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship.”<sup>1</sup> However, given its etymological origin, it is legitimate to consider that ecumenical dialogue also includes an element of common responsibility for the household of life.

### **New/Wider/Whole world/Macro ecumenism**

Normatively therefore, the term *ecumenism/ecumenical* refers to intra-Christian or inter-church dialogue and engagement. In common speech the word *ecumenical* is currently used as a synonym for *inter-church/intra-Christian*.. For example, in most churches the role of “ecumenical officer” denotes the person responsible for inter-church relationships.

However, since the 1990s a variety of epithets have been applied to this term intended to suggest its application not only to intra-Christian but also to interreligious dialogue. These include “a new ecumenism,” “a wider ecumenism,” “macro-ecumenism,” and “whole world ecumenism.” The WCC document *Common Understanding and Vision of the WCC*, commended by its Central Committee in 1997, speaks as follows: “More recently, a growing number of voices from the churches, especially in Asia but also in Latin America, have spoken of the need for ‘a wider ecumenism’ or ‘macro-ecumenism’ – an understanding which would open the ecumenical movement

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<sup>1</sup> Unity Statement of 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Busan, Republic of Korea, November 2013.

to other religious and cultural traditions beyond the Christian community” (CUV 2.6).

However, as this same document then goes on to suggest, “These ambiguities surrounding the understanding of ‘ecumenical’ create the real danger of introducing competitive divisions into the ecumenical movement. What is the meaning and purpose of this movement? Who are its subjects? What are its goals and methods or forms of action? What is the source of the dynamic which warrants speaking of the ‘ecumenical movement’ beyond its institutional manifestations in the WCC and elsewhere?” (CUV 2.7).

There does seem to be almost inherent unclarity about the term *ecumenical* which has become more apparent precisely because of such use in relation to interreligious concerns. Perhaps we can put it like this. If indeed the term *ecumenical* means something broader than ecclesiastical intra-Christian or inter-church-focused dialogue, namely “an element of common responsibility for the household of life,” it could then be argued that to add adjectives such as *new* or *wider* in front of it when referring to interreligious engagement is actually misleading, because it then implicitly narrows the scope of the stand-alone word *ecumenism*, resulting among other things in the sense of competition which CUV 2.7 notes. Perhaps what we need to do is to recover a generous ambiguity for the simple word *ecumenism* by itself, and an acknowledgement that it is a word that speaks of vision as well as actuality. A recent reflection by Keith Clements puts it eloquently:

The *oikoumene* includes, because it is bigger than, other faiths. In this light, it would be ironic if our concern for interreligious dialogue in fact led to a narrowing of our understanding of the *oikoumene*. Equally, our vision of the redeemed *oikoumene*, however grand, will lack substance if it is not illuminated and sustained by our belief in and experience of the reconciling, unifying work of the Spirit tying us in the bonds of peace in the particular community of Christ... Christian ecumenism is distinctive because it unequivocally holds together the quest for one church and the hope for one world, until the reign of God comes in all its fullness and God is all in all.<sup>2</sup>

Because of this potential ambiguity relating to the term *ecumenical*, for the sake of clarity we have in this booklet chosen as far as possible to use the term

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<sup>2</sup> Keith Clements, “What Is Distinctive about Christian Ecumenism and Why Does It Matter?” *Current Dialogue* 56 (Dec. 2014), 20.

*intra-Christian* to describe dialogical engagement between different Christians and churches, although we have continued to use the word *ecumenical* when it appears in quotations from other material.

### **Abrahamic ecumenism**

*Abrahamic ecumenism* is a term which has sometimes been used specifically to describe dialogue and relationships between Christians, Jews and Muslims because of their shared scriptural traditions and common reverence for the figure of Abraham, particularly viewing him as foundational in the development of monotheism. The concept of linking together the three religions through the figure of Abraham can be traced via Vatican II to the French Roman Catholic scholar of Christian-Muslim relations, Louis Massignon. The actual term *Abrahamic ecumenism* was popularized in the 1990s by the German scholar Karl-Josef Kuschel and came at a time when long-standing dialogues between Jews and Christians were often being widened to include Islam in a triologue. Both the term and the concept have been challenged; the term, partly because the use of the word *ecumenism* feels misleading in this context, the concept for several reasons, but certainly including the fact that it tends to focus on the figure of Abraham from a western Christian viewpoint.

### **Intra-Christian and inter-church**

This document uses the term *intra-Christian* rather than *inter-church* so as not to confine engagement and dialogue between Christians to formal institutionalized church contexts. Usually the definition of *intra-Christian* would also encompass inter-church activity. However, we note in some situations and contexts the expression *inter-church* may be differentiated from *intra-Christian*, for example the use of the term *inter-church* to describe relationships with groups whose claimed Christian identity identity (e.g., the Church of the Latter Day Saints, commonly known as ‘Mormons’) may be contested by their Christian dialogue partners.

### **Interreligious and interfaith dialogue**

The swiftly developing interreligious and interfaith global scene has been accompanied by a developing fluidity of terminology. Both the expressions *interreligious* and *interfaith* relate to dialogue between different religions or different faiths, in other words, from the Christian perspective, dialogue between Christians and members of non-Christian religions. What, if anything, is the difference between the terms *interreligious dialogue* and *interfaith dialogue*? And what, if anything, is the difference implied if the word *interfaith* is spelled *inter-faith* or *inter faith*?

It is important first of all to note that this is mainly an issue for those whose primary language is English: a similar distinction is not normally made in many other languages. For example, the German word *interreligiöse* is regularly used to express or translate both the terms *interreligious* and *interfaith*. It is also the case that different parts of the English-speaking world tend to prefer one term or the other.

Nonetheless, in spite of these caveats, the following observations may be helpful. The expression *interfaith* seems to be used in a more expansive and inclusive way than *interreligious* and is considered to encompass ideologies and systems of belief which transcend specific religious identification, including, for example, humanists and secularists. It is also a term regularly used in political and social circles, to speak about social cohesion, the importance of members of different faiths and religions working together for the common good, and the elusive search for peace between religions. For some people the term *interfaith* (particularly spelled in this way) seeks to emphasize the similarities between different faiths – what might negatively be called a syncretistic approach. So the terms *inter-faith* and *inter faith* may then be preferred because the hyphen or space between the two words speaks of religions in encounter which also takes seriously the differences between them.

Since publication of the Vatican II declaration *Nostra Aetate* in 1965, the Roman Catholic Church has normally used the expression *interreligious* to denote its engagement with representatives of other faiths and religions. This expression is used partly to differentiate the pastoral and theological work of the churches from the cohesion and security agenda of the public square. Following the lead of the Roman Catholic Church, other churches and Christian religious organizations, such as the World Council of Churches, have increasingly opted to use the word *interreligious* rather than *interfaith* to describe their own bilateral and multilateral dialogue and engagement with other religions.

In the context of this document, the term *interreligious* is preferred because we are referring explicitly to dialogue with those professing religions – who identify themselves explicitly with a religious tradition and whose work has a specific religious affiliation and is based on religious foundations.

## Biblical and Theological Foundations

There are many biblical passages which speak of the unity of God's people, and of the encounter between believers of different religious traditions. It is not our intention to provide a survey of the biblical material but rather to identify one key gospel text which speaks to us powerfully of the dynamic of dialogue. We hope this may act as a resource to enable people to reflect on the nature of dialogue, both intra-Christian and interreligious. We also look briefly at another part of the New Testament that provides a case study of intra-Christian and interreligious relations, and then identify our theological foundations in light of these texts.

### A biblical resource

#### John 4:4-42

Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar develops into a conversation, later drawing in his disciples and her fellow citizens, which is richly suggestive of theological foundations for dialogue. The whole passage is revelatory of a Trinitarian faith: Jesus speaks as Messiah (26) and Saviour (42); he points to worship of the Father (21, 23), and he promises the gift of the Spirit (23-24), also symbolized by the gift of living water (14).

We particularly note the following twelve points:

1. This encounter could be seen as a paradigm either for intra-Christian or for interreligious dialogue. The position of the Samaritans was a contested one: they could be seen as a separated part of the covenanted people of God; or they could be counted among the nations separate from Israel; or they could be placed in an intermediate category. The same dynamic of dialogue applies whatever the case.
2. The text describes a prime example of the dialogue of life. The conversation moves freely between addressing practical needs, building relations in the present, and exploring deep questions of truth. Characteristic of this and other dialogues are the offer and acceptance of hospitality, which involves taking risks, being willing to cross traditional boundaries and building trust.
3. The Gospel as John presents it gives a voice to somebody who would otherwise be excluded and silenced: the evangelist records the words of a person who is both a woman and a member of a community rejected by the authorities. Women and marginalized people need an assured place and voice in all our dialogues, whether intra-Christian or interreligious.

4. Jesus and the woman both display their own vulnerabilities. He is thirsty, tired and ill-equipped (without a bucket); she has her intimate relations exposed to view. Yet, far from holding them back, these things are offered to each other as resources to build a relationship. Dialogue is enabled by weakness more than by strength.
5. Running through the dialogue is a theme of mutual recognition, growing knowledge and deepened understanding – by the woman, by Jesus, by the disciples, and by the citizens of Sychar – but at several points this grows only through misunderstandings. Dialogue should not expect to proceed smoothly nor be afraid of embarrassment.
6. There is a strong element of proclamation in the text, initially from Jesus, then also from the woman, and then leading on to Jesus' commission to the disciples to share in the harvest of his mission. Dialogue both intra-Christian and interreligious cannot be divorced from the evangelizing mission to which Jesus calls those who follow him.
7. Jesus' words to the woman include a robust statement of the particular action of God among God's own chosen people: "Salvation is from the Jews." At the same time, Jesus acknowledges the reality of the worship of the same God on the part of others: "You worship what you do not know" (22 – according to Luke, Paul adopts much the same position at Athens, Acts 17). In dialogue we are called to be confident of the truth as we have received it, while also honouring the experience of others.
8. In the following verse (23), Jesus also points forward to a new dispensation, that of the Spirit. In the previous chapter, Jesus has spoken of the unboundedness, unpredictability and elusiveness of the sovereign action of the Spirit (3:5-8). Such is indeed the repeated and heart-warming experience of those involved in dialogue.
9. At the heart of this chapter is an individual meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. The disciples, whom we could take to represent the institutional church, are absent for the generative phase of this dialogue, and when they reappear they need further teaching to explain its significance. Life-giving encounters often happen on the edges, with the institutional church having to catch up later.
10. Through her direct encounter with Christ, the woman comes to belief (29) as she reaches a deeper level of meaning in her life. Later, her fellow citizens also will come to belief through her witness (39) and through his word (41). Dialogue opens up the prospect of transformation and conversion of life.
11. Dialogue between Jesus and the woman provokes dialogue among the disciples and also among the Samaritans themselves. Interreligious

dialogue can pave the way for intra-religious and intra-Christian dialogue.

12. In verse 26, for the first time in this gospel, Jesus uses of himself the divine *ego eimi*, "I am," explicating this claim with the phrase "the one talking to you." Is the implication of this that it is the fundamental nature of God, as revealed in and through Jesus, to be dialogical and in communication with human beings?

### **Supplementary texts: 1 Corinthians<sup>3</sup>**

In Paul's correspondence with the church at Corinth, and particularly in 1 Corinthians, we can see some of these principles being worked out in practice in the life of a young Christian community. This is of special significance to us for two reasons. First, the Corinthian Christians were prone to dissension and division, so there was great need for dialogue within the Church. Second, in the port city of Corinth, the Christian community was set amidst, and doubtless drew its membership from, a society marked by great religious and cultic diversity. The following passages in particular have struck us, but there are many more, both in this letter and in 2 Corinthians:

1.10-25 – Paul reminds a church divided between adherents of different leaders that the one proclamation that counts is that of Christ crucified; to the Jews this is a stumbling-block and to Greeks it is foolishness. Unity in the church is the ground for interreligious witness.

8.1-13 – Possible involvement with other religions causes dissension among the Corinthian Christians, in the form of "food sacrificed to idols." Paul does not take a view on the question of a theology of religions but insists on the prior claim of unity within the body of believers. Interreligious arguments are channelled into an intra-Christian dialogue of love.

12.14-26 – Paul develops the idea of the church as a body united in its diversity as each member recognizes and honours the distinctive gifting of others in an internal dialogue.

### **A Trinitarian theology for dialogue**

Drawing on the encounter described in John 4:4-42, we see dialogue, both intra-Christian and interreligious, as grounded in the life and mission of the Triune God.

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<sup>3</sup> Amongst other texts which spoke to us powerfully of dialogue, both within the people of God and with others, are Gen 18, Jn1:1-14, Acts 10, 2 Cor 5:16-21, Gal 5:22-26, Eph 2:11-22. Each of these deserves fuller treatment than we can give here.

Jesus the Son, taking our vulnerability upon himself, is found in our human limitations as one who crosses boundaries, encouraging and enacting the removal of barriers without which dialogue cannot find a place.

The Spirit, acting with free and uncontrollable sovereignty in the world as in the church, enables us to be open in dialogue and engenders fruits of love, joy and peace in creative dialogue; and the same Spirit brings consolation and comfort to those who suffer from forces of division, hatred and oppression.

The Father is the one to whom all will turn in every place to worship in Spirit and in truth, and he is himself in a dialogue of salvation with humanity to seek worshippers such as this woman.

As Father, Son and Spirit, God the Holy Trinity lives in a pattern of interdependence, mutual giving and incessant dialogue in which we are invited and enabled to participate. In different ways, intra-Christian and inter-religious dialogue both share in this Trinitarian dialogue.

In intra-Christian dialogue, our ultimate goal, for which the Son prayed on the night before he died, is to restore within the body of his church the communion of vulnerable love which he mandated us to make real as his witnesses to the world.

In interreligious dialogue, our purpose is to enter further into the mystery of what God is doing in the lives of people of other religions as part of the dialogue of salvation and so to come to a greater understanding and honouring of one another which will build peace and community, through the God-wards transformation of humanity and the whole creation.

Participating in this way in the boundless dialogue which is the life of the Trinity through our limited dialogues with other Christians and with people of other religions, our own lives are gradually transformed as together we find ourselves walking with others on God's great pilgrimage for justice and peace.

## Principles and Goals

### The principles of dialogue

Grounded in the theological framework offered above, we believe that Christians who engage in either intra-Christian or interreligious dialogue need to bear in mind the following principles:

- Our Christian discipleship requires us to engage in honest and open relationships with other Christians and people of other religions/faiths as a way of imitating Jesus Christ. Mutual accountability is an important aspect of dialogue.
- Our belief in God's manifestation through Christ's incarnation as the self-communication of a God who desires to be in communion with humanity as *logos* (John 1) and also as a self-emptying God (Philippians 2) who embraces vulnerability can be fruitful and act as a model in both intra-Christian and interreligious dialogue.
- Building up communication in both intra-Christian and interreligious dialogue is an important principle of dialogue. Communication both within and outside religious boundaries is an act of resistance to violence and reaffirmation of the hope that conflict and violence can be overcome by communication and conversation.
- In a context where religious freedom and human rights are at stake, both intra-Christian and interreligious dialogue cannot be exclusively conversation and collaboration but must include respectful confrontation and mutual challenge whereby one does not condone the abusive actions of the other partner. Valid dialogue requires a commitment from the dialogue partners to fostering freedom of religion and belief.
- Dialogue demands that we actively seek to build bridges of understanding and break down walls of prejudice and hostility.
- Dialogue implies receptivity as well as active communication. Thus listening is one of the first characteristics of dialogue. It is also appropriate to ask questions for clarification and to better understand one's dialogue partner.
- Dialogue affirms and celebrates diversity and is willing to accept and respect difference.
- There is a missional thrust to dialogue, whether intra-Christian or interreligious. Founded on the Trinity and following the promptings of the Spirit, dialogue involves both responding to Christ's call to oneness as well as Christ's imperative to engage with the other.

- Dialogue, both intra-Christian and interreligious, is a way of bearing witness to Christ in which joyful proclamation of the gospel and the sharing of one's faith experiences can have a place. However, proselytism, by which we understand the deliberate use of dialogue as a means to convert the other, is not appropriate.

## **The goals of dialogue**

The goals of intra-Christian and interreligious dialogue are not the same – though at points they may overlap.

### **Goals of intra-Christian dialogue**

- The fundamental goal of intra-Christian dialogue is communion (*koinonia*), as a manifestation of the gift of oneness in Christ made visible in the One Church. A central aspect of this *koinonia* is the vision of an eventual sharing of a eucharistic fellowship in the mystical body of Christ. Yet we can already begin to live out this vision by praying together, by sharing in common reading and study of the Bible, and by offering common witness to our faith in the field of *diakonia*.
- Mature institutional dialogue between Christians representing different churches seeks to overcome past and present intra-Christian divisions and work together toward agreement on matters of church doctrine and practice. It requires of its participants spiritual generosity as well as theological acumen.
- At the same time, intra-Christian dialogue involves recognizing and honouring the diverse gifts of diverse traditions. It needs to be acknowledged that in the case of dialogue with Christians who represent churches which have not traditionally been part of the ecumenical movement, the recognition of legitimate diversity is an especially important aspect.
- Dialogue between Christians and churches also witnesses to the missionary nature of the church, namely our hope “that the world may believe” (John 17) through our common witness of Christian unity.
- In our intra-Christian dialogue we are seeking to ensure that the church also fulfils its role as the prophetic sign and first fruits of God's eschatological promise of the kingdom of justice and peace for the whole creation.

### **Goals of Interreligious dialogue**

- A valid goal of interreligious dialogue can be described as dialogue for dialogue's sake, namely, to be in conversation with our neighbours, both

to explore difference and also to deepen our understanding of our neighbour's faith on its own terms.

- Through serious conversations with the "other," we seek to learn about our own prejudices and blind spots and discover new insights about our own faith and religious tradition.
- Interreligious dialogue is intrinsically connected to our commitment to justice and peace. We strive to build bridges across barriers by dispelling prejudice and hate, and to face frankly tensions and conflicts, diffusing them by handling difficult issues with sensitivity and humility. We seek to become more humane and make the world a better place for living together.
- The affirmation of the ultimate interconnectedness of all creation and humanity is foundational for interreligious dialogue, as we work with partners of other faiths for justice, peace and the integrity of all creation. However it is also important to be clear that the creation of one universal religion is *not* an appropriate or intended goal of interreligious dialogue.
- Indeed, one undergirding goal of dialogue is that of confronting, and reflecting upon, the theological significance of the fact of a religious "other" or "others." Dialogue enables realistic consideration of a Christian theology of religions, or of religious diversity. Dialogue does not vitiate distinction: the other" remains other"". Yet we are called to account for this otherness and our relation to it, theologically. For even these others are within and part of God's creation.

In both intra-Christian and interreligious dialogue, the building up of relationships can pave the way for mutual or joint diaconal service. Any church which refuses to engage in dialogue should justify theologically the reasons for their refusal to engage with the other.

## Methods and Practical Issues

The following are a number of key questions and concerns that will need to be addressed by those responsible for interreligious and/or intra-Christian dialogue, particularly of a formal nature. The answers to the questions may differ depending on the nature of the dialogue. The suggestions are particularly designed for Christians who may have had previous experience of intra-Christian dialogue but who now find themselves responsible for, or engaged in, interreligious concerns as well.

### Who comes to the table for dialogue?

- A particular issue for those involved in interreligious dialogue is the need for sensitivity as to who can be considered authentic representatives of a particular religion. For example most members of the Muslim community would not be willing to consider members of the Ahmadiyya community as authentic representatives of Islam. In a similar way many Christians would be unhappy if members of the Church of the Latter Day Saints (Mormons) were invited to dialogues as full representatives of Christianity.
- How is the invitation list developed? If Christians are initiating a dialogue with people of other faiths, do they invite the “other faith” representatives, or do they find a way to ensure that the “other faith” chooses its own representatives? The latter is probably the ideal, but given that not all religions have formal structures as developed as Christianity this can prove difficult. How does this differ from the intra-Christian experience?
- How far should the concerns and sensitivities of the relevant local Christian community be kept in mind when inviting other faith representatives to an international or regional interreligious dialogue?
- Should converts from/to a particular religion be included round the table? This is a particular issue in the case of interreligious dialogue – but can also affect intra-Christian dialogue.
- How can we ensure adequate representation of lay people, women and young people at the table of interreligious dialogue? How far should the Christian desire to affirm the right of such groups to be fully partners in the table of faith, be insisted upon as they engage with potential partners of another religion?

- How can we ensure that those invited to participate bring with them a substantial religious constituency, and are not simply using the opportunity for visibility and self-promotion?

### **Our expectations of the process**

- How do we ensure that the running and progression of the dialogue are not simply left to Christians?
- How can we ensure that dialogue, particularly interreligious dialogue, does not simply remain a series of disconnected photo opportunities?
- In the case of interreligious dialogue it may be that governments wish to be involved in some way, for a variety of reasons. This can be helpful – but it can also be constricting or even dangerous. How do we take account of the political dimension of interreligious dialogue?
- Dialogue, particularly interreligious dialogue, can place its participants in vulnerable situations. It can be dangerous for it to be known that individuals have met with others who would be considered “enemies.” Agreed ground rules regarding confidentiality need to be established very early in the process.
- The issue of unequal power relations can impinge upon both interreligious and intra-Christian dialogues.
- In the case of some forms of intra-Christian dialogue, are our expectations of the process when we are dealing with “new” Christian groups sometimes unhelpfully coloured by the experience of mature dialogues within the ecumenical movement?
- The question of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism may affect process in dialogue. It is a sensitive issue, both from a Christian and a Jewish standpoint, as to whether Christianity and Judaism have a special relationship within the wider spectrum of global religions, based partly on their shared scripture. This is of course not only a question to be considered by Christians: it is an issue about which representatives of Judaism may feel strongly, even disagreeing among themselves. *Dabru Emet* (an influential document produced in 2001 by a range of Jewish voices) comments: “We respect Christianity as a faith that originated within Judaism and that still has significant contacts with it. We do not see it as an extension of Judaism. Only if we cherish our own traditions can we pursue this relationship with integrity.”

## Practical issues to bear in mind

- It is vital that those responsible for dialogues have a knowledge of the fundamental beliefs of their dialogue partners and that there is careful advance preparation, both practical and theological.
- The media can get “excited” by interreligious dialogue, and it is important to be able to control the process rather than allow representatives of the media to dictate the situation.
- Those responsible for dialogue, both intra-Christian and interreligious, need to have a good grasp of the variety and extent of Christian viewpoints. At the same time, particularly in the case of interreligious dialogue, they need to be able to articulate a coherent position, particularly as regards Christian doctrines and practices (for example, baptism) about which there are a range of different views.
- Questions relating to prayer are a particular concern for interreligious dialogue. It is important to have established ground rules relating to this and to ensure that participants in the dialogue, whether Christians or representatives of another religion, are not placed unexpectedly in a difficult position or one that could prove problematic to them with regard to their own faith community in the future. One view widely held particularly within Roman Catholic circles is that Christians and members of other faith communities, “cannot ‘pray together,’ that is, engage in a common prayer, but we can be present while others pray. In this way we manifest our respect for the prayer of others and for the attitude of others and for the attitude of others before the Divinity; at the same time we offer them the humble and sincere witness of our faith in Christ, Lord of the universe” (Pope John Paul II, 1986). The value of shared silence in interreligious gatherings is also worth exploring. It is important to bear in mind that what may be appropriate or acceptable in one religious context may not be suitable in another.
- It is essential to bear in mind the religious calendar, taking into account special days belonging to all religions in organizing meetings and events. Much offence can be caused by accidentally choosing a particular day or period which would mean that members of one or more religions would find it difficult or impossible to participate. It is important to bear in mind that in some religions a “day” begins at sundown the evening before – and that sometimes a period of preparation before this time is also required. It would not be usual to organize significant or extended conferences and meetings that require active Muslim participation during the entire month of

Ramadan. Sensitivity to the Jewish observance of the Sabbath (Shabbat) is also vital to bear in mind.

- There may be times when the enthusiasm of some Christians to engage with the religious traditions of other faiths can feel insensitive to those others. For example, the increasing use by Christians of a version of the Jewish Seder during Holy Week, even if well intentioned, can feel to Jews like an imposition of Christian hegemony. It is particularly painful to many Jews if Christians see this as a form of positive dialogical engagement with Judaism.
- Practicalities of hospitality to make dialogue partners comfortable are important, e.g., appropriate food, consideration of traditional times of prayer, the need for ablutions before prayer and before eating, a willingness to be reticent about the display and consumption of alcohol. Although many Christians assume that Muslim rules about *halal* food and Jewish *kosher* rules are the same, that is not the case. Sometimes it is helpful at interreligious gatherings to provide vegan food, as observant people from most religious traditions are willing to eat this.
- The question of space in interreligious meetings is important. If dialogue is to be held on Christian premises, it may be necessary to find ways to enable partners of another religion to feel as comfortable as possible. Equally the issue of segregation by gender practiced in the religious buildings of certain religions can cause discomfort to some Christians. In an overtly interreligious event, it may be appropriate to discover in advance if the partner community is willing to sit more lightly to their normal practice of separating the sexes.
- Dress codes are also important to resolve and be clear about in advance, in both intra-Christian and interreligious dialogue. It is a particular issue for women, although not exclusively so, given the different religious conventions regarding whether or not men should have their head covered, particularly in a religious building.

## Reflections and Examples of Good Practice

The following examples illustrate some of the variety of ways that interreligious and intra-Christian dialogue may interface with each other, often to the positive benefit of both.

- A meeting in Canada was called to discuss the document “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct.” This document had been produced by representatives of the World Council of Churches, the Vatican, and the World Evangelical Alliance who worked in the area of interreligious dialogue. The meeting in Canada included people from all these Christian perspectives, as well as some representatives of other religions. The meeting led to a very constructive engagement across traditional Christian demarcation lines on a subject that was of interest to all present. So in this case an issue of interreligious concern led to a deepening experience of intra-Christian and genuinely ecumenical engagement.
- Until recently, the assumption in most institutional intra-Christian dialogue at the local level was that the dialogue partners were culturally homogeneous. This was seen as different from interreligious dialogue in which the expectation, certainly in Western Europe and North America, was that those meeting each other would be from different cultures. These assumptions are no longer tenable. The presence of large scale migrant churches in Europe has meant that intra-Christian dialogue needs to take account of cultural differences. Equally there is more acknowledgment of, and desire to learn from, the experience of Christians in those parts of the world, such as the Middle East, where the indigenous Christian community has lived for many centuries alongside adherents of other religions and is very much part of the same culture.
- At a point in Brazil’s recent history, churches in that country linked to the WCC found themselves situated uncomfortably between a very right-wing Christian group and a religious community who identified with African traditional religious expression. In this context the Brazilian churches linked to the WCC found themselves in the position of needing to affirm interreligious diversity in the face of pressures for intolerance.
- The rise of so-called Islamic State, the violence linked to the French publication *Charlie Hebdo* and similar incidents have all had an impact upon the churches (in some contexts), and they have,

together, reflected upon interreligious relations. At a time when ecumenical bodies are widening their membership to include churches of evangelical or Pentecostal traditions, anxiety is expressed at conversion from Christianity to Islam by young people and their subsequent radicalization, and what the collective Christian response should be, while at the same time maintaining and developing good relations with Muslims and other faiths too. Ecumenical space then becomes a “safe place” where the churches together can name some of their fears, anxieties, hopes and aspirations, which might enable a more relevant approach to contemporary interreligious challenges.

- Recent developments in various parts of the world have also highlighted the inner diversity of the Muslim community, and in particular have increased tensions between Sunni and Shia expressions of Islam. Christians are becoming increasingly aware that the challenge of negotiating the relationship between intra-faith and interfaith (interreligious) dialogue is not simply a Christian one. Other faith communities experience it as well. Given the current tensions in parts of the Middle East, there have been several instances in which representatives of various Christian traditions have worked together to provide a context in which groups of both Sunni and Shia Muslims can meet together in ways that might not be easy without the involvement of Christians, acting partly in a host role.
- Current events in the Middle East have affected quite strongly the *modus vivendi* that has existed there between Christians and Muslims, at least since Ottoman times, as well as affecting relationships, whether positively or negatively, between the Christian communities themselves. In this context, intra-Christian and interreligious dialogue may mutually influence each other. Interreligious pressures may often lead to closer cooperation between Christians, and such cooperation may in turn result in exploring new ways of engaging with representatives of other religions.
- The variety of Christian attitudes toward Israel and the current situation in Israel/Palestine has led to a situation in which a number of Christians may find it easier to have closer relations either with Jews or with Muslims, rather than with their fellow Christians who may not share their viewpoint. In a rather similar fashion, the power of caste-based attitudes in India, even within the Christian churches, may well mean that Dalit Christians and Dalit Hindus find it easier and more fruitful to engage with each other rather than with the

respective caste members of their own faith. The empowerment that comes through such interreligious engagement may then enable Dalit Christians to address the issue of caste within the churches.

- The widely respected organization PROCMURA (Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa) works in a way that enables positive interaction between intra-Christian and interreligious dialogue. PROCMURA's vital role of engaging with and witnessing to Muslims has encouraged the growth of collaborative working between different Christian churches in many parts of Africa: correspondingly the increased resources and sharing of expertise made possible by intra-Christian ecumenical working has allowed PROCMURA to make more of an impact across the region, particularly in areas where Christian-Muslim relations are problematic.
- A few years ago Peter Colwell, Deputy General Secretary of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, during one Week of Prayer for Christian Unity raised the question as to whether the primary task for today was to work and pray for Christian unity or rather for peaceful co-existence between Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and others. He then continued by recalling Archbishop Desmond Tutu's comment that "Apartheid is too strong for a divided church" and noted how the general secretary of the World Council of Churches, Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, had recently added, "The needs of the world for reconciliation with God, with one another, and with nature are too big for a divided church."

With these considerations in mind, perhaps we can envision further horizons and fruitfulness for both kinds of dialogue. Increased clarity about our intra-Christian efforts, especially as they also relate to our interreligious dialogues, can not only deepen but also broaden Christian engagement today. Each endeavour can be enriched by the other. As intra-Christian dialogue can strengthen our faith and our bonds as Christians, so it can open us up to authentic encounter with the religious life and practices of others as well. Enhanced understanding, fellowship, and solidarity among Christians and with followers of other religions can offer us hope for more profound encounter with God and with the world's search for meaning, peace, and justice.

## Appendix

### **The process of the document**

The composition of this document began as a result of discussions between staff colleagues working at the World Council of Churches in Faith and Order and Interreligious Dialogue. They were concerned that the confusion of terms, and linked value judgments, was not helpful for their respective work. They are grateful to the Council of Churches in Britain and Ireland (CTBI), who sponsored a conference *In Our Time: The Dynamic Relationship between Christian Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue* in London in September 2013, and then organized a Madang workshop on the topic at the Tenth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Busan, Republic of Korea, November 2013. Following on the clear interest expressed in the topic by participants at the Madang workshop, the then-Director of Faith and Order, Canon Dr John Gibaut, and the Coordinator of the WCC's Interreligious Dialogue Office, Dr Clare Amos, then organized a brainstorming meeting in May 2014 at the Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, Switzerland. It brought together 16 people from a variety of geographical and ecclesiastical contexts to reflect on what would be helpful to provide. As a result of the discussions at that meeting, it was decided to seek to provide a short booklet addressing some of the key issues. A further group (overlapping in membership) then met to work on the document in March 2015. The initial fruit of their work was then shared with a wider range of interested groups and through a process of revision has resulted in this booklet.

The document deliberately uses the expression "we/us" at a number of points. Except where these words are used in quotes from other sources, the expression "we/us" primarily refers corporately to the group of people who worked on the document during the two meetings organized by the WCC in 2014 and 2015. The group was composed of Christians from a range of churches and Christian traditions who were either specialists in Faith and Order concerns or Interreligious Dialogue or both.

## Resources and Further Reading

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