

## **Loving our Neighbors**

### **A Statement of the Wisconsin Council of Churches on Interfaith Relations**

#### **Introduction**

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This *is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’*” (cf. Mt 22:34-40, NRSV)

Wisconsin has been a place of religious diversity from the time of the indigenous peoples to the present. For much of their history, the residents of Wisconsin have represented the diverse traditions within the Christian faith, yet only a small portion of the non-Christian religions of the world. We now face a different social situation represented in terms such as post-modern and post-Christendom. The size and diversity of our religious minorities are increasing and people of faiths previously unknown to Wisconsin have become our neighbors. Interfaith dialogue and understanding have become more important to our common civil discourse than ever before. Attitudes toward other religions that are uninformed and disengaged are simply inadequate to our setting. As followers of Jesus Christ, how do we engage with people of other faiths? How do we proclaim the Gospel in a multi-religious setting while being sensitive to the spiritual traditions of others? What truth can we say in love to them, and what truth can they say in love to us? A first step is to examine the setting in which we live.

#### **Wisconsin’s Interfaith Context**

While Wisconsin remains predominantly Christian—two-thirds of religious adherents in the state self-identify as either Roman Catholic or Lutheran—there is a growing presence of other religious traditions. Jews and Muslims are the largest religious groups outside of the Christian community. The major branches of Judaism have congregations and social service agencies in both metropolitan Milwaukee and Madison along with smaller synagogues in other medium sized cities around the state. Muslims also have a large congregational presence in Madison and Milwaukee, with smaller Islamic Centers in Marshfield, the Fox Valley and Sheboygan. Both Madison and Milwaukee metropolitan areas include Unitarian, Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, Pagan, and Sikh communities as well. Native peoples with their distinctive spiritualities—including the Potawatomi, Ho Chunk, Ojibwa and Menominee tribes—are located throughout the state.

There are a number of interfaith initiatives in Wisconsin. The largest is the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee, which includes a variety of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Mormon and Unitarian communities. Local interfaith organizations that focus on cooperative social service ventures and/or advocacy include Madison area Urban Ministry, Waukesha Interfaith Council, Racine Interfaith Center, WISDOM and several others. The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Milwaukee has led the way in our state to create bilateral interfaith conversations, including Catholic-Jewish dialogue and Catholic-Muslim dialogue. Finally, the Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions at U.W. Madison brings world renowned scholars to Wisconsin in support of greater interfaith awareness and understanding.

## **Biblical and Theological Foundations: Love of God and Love of Neighbor**

From the outset it must be understood that, for Christians, the goal of interfaith relationships is different from ecumenical relationships. Ecumenical relationships are established in the hope of fostering Christian unity; interfaith relationships are entered into primarily for the purpose of living in community. Christians enter into dialogue with one another so that we can cherish our common bond in Christ; Christians enter into interfaith dialogue so that we might be good neighbors with everyone. Ecumenical relationships, therefore, are rooted in the second article of the Nicene Creed,<sup>i</sup> a common confession of Christ as God and Savior and the Trinitarian faith that binds Christians together:

[We believe] ...in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made...

For Christians, Interfaith relationships are rooted in the first article of the Nicene Creed, a common experience of our humanity and the struggles of daily life that binds humanity together:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

Although both interfaith and ecumenical relationships have dialogue as their basic activity, respect as their basic approach and mutual understanding as their basic hope, nevertheless, as noted above, the expectations of these relationships are quite different.

The biblical and theological foundation for this distinction in relationships is expressed in the two love commandments that Jesus presented as a summary of “all the law and the prophets.” Loosely quoted, the commandments are: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind... and love your neighbor as yourself” (cf. Mt 22:34-40, NRSV). It is helpful to focus on this text because of the favorable image it already has in interfaith dialogue. For example, in Christian-Muslim relationships, it is the primary text Islamic scholars used in their historic invitation to Christians to dialogue (“A Common Word between Us and You” - See Resources below). For our purposes, the text is important for the way it holds in tension two distinct but foundational principles central to interfaith relationships: freedom of conscience before God and unreserved respect of other persons.

What is striking about the first commandment concerning the love of God is its unconditional nature. But, here, care in interpretation must be taken. As the word of Christ, the commandment is not a demand that is being imposed on us, but an invitation that is being offered to us. The commandment teaches us about who God is. God is the One who can be loved absolutely, relied upon without reserve, and trusted with our whole being, sinful though we are. This God is the God revealed in Jesus Christ, who comes to a sinful, broken world not with new demands and accusations but with grace and mercy, carrying human sin and brokenness in his own body on the cross and conquering human sin and brokenness in his resurrection extending new life to all the world. The commandment is an invitation to love this God, teaching us, paradoxically, that the same God, who, through the law, condemns the world of sin, is the same God who, through the promises expressed by the prophets, redeems the world through Christ.

But the commandment also teaches that the act of loving this magnanimous God is a free act of conscience, a fruit of faith, a gift of the Holy Spirit. Any use of coercion – whether of a physical, social or psychological nature – to promote the love of God contradicts the commandment, the Christian understanding of God, and the nature of faith. Therefore, respect for religious freedom and the conscience or faith of others in religious matters is a foundational principle of Jesus' teaching on the love of God. While it is certainly appropriate for Christians to dialogue with others about the love of God in Christ and to invite them into that love as circumstances would have it, it is an offense to the love of God to present it as a demand or to inject a coercive element into it. This kind of admonition to respect religious freedom occurs in various denominational statements on interfaith relations, ranging from the Vatican II document, *Nostra Aetate* (1965) to the American Baptist document, *American Baptist Resolution on Interreligious Prejudice* (2003).

What is striking about the second commandment concerning the love of neighbor is the unreserved respect, indeed, the complete identification it calls forth between Christians and their neighbors. Again, care must be taken in the interpretation of the text. Who is the neighbor? A neighbor is someone who is related to us by virtue of our placement in the world, not by virtue of our relationship to Christ. The relationship called "neighbor" is defined by the first article of the Nicene Creed, the doctrine of Creation, not the second article, the doctrine of Christ<sup>ii</sup>. How are we as Christians to regard our neighbors? Answer: as ourselves, as fellow human beings created in the image of God and as co-stewards of God's creation, called to work together for the common good. Therefore, when the commandment urges us to love our neighbor as ourselves, it is urging us, above all, to work together with all people for the common good: my good, my neighbor's good, and the good of the whole creation.

To be sure, neighbors can certainly disagree on how they understand the common good. The commandment does not forbid such disagreement. Rather, what the commandment does is urge love, even in disagreement: love understood as unreserved respect for the other, even in disagreement, love understood as an exercise in civility in all things, even in disagreement. In addition, neither does the commandment forbid compromise in how we uphold the common good. It is certainly a basic part of civility and respect of others to make compromises with our neighbors. But compromise by its very nature must be a free choice, and made with a good conscience. Therefore, only those of equal standing in open dialogue are in a position to make compromise with integrity. For this reason, the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves presupposes a community of equals engaged in open dialogue. The commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves informs all aspects of human life together. In today's religiously diverse society, where religious disagreement is a given, unreserved respect for those of different religious traditions also needs to be a given. Treating neighbors who have differing religious outlooks as equal partners in a common human calling to promote the common good is a basic principle for governing interfaith relationships that is not only consistent with, but also commensurate with Christian belief.

From this reading of the love commandments, two basic principles emerge for understanding the relationship of the Christian Churches in the WCC to other religious traditions: freedom of religion and unreserved respect for the other as neighbor and equal. Working out the practical details of these principles can happen only in the context of respectful dialogue. Such dialogue takes place on many levels, from formal theological and scholarly dialogues at the institutional level to informal dialogues between neighbors at the local level. What follows are some guidelines for dialogue at the local level.

## **Dialogical Virtues**

The reality of creating a space for respectful dialogue does not always come easily. We must first begin with relationship. To come to a greater understanding of the faith of our neighbors, we must know our neighbors. Therefore, the opening to dialogue is fellowship. The building of relationship can take different forms; most common are those of serving together and eating together. When Jesus encountered a stranger he often responded by sitting down to a meal to build relationship in the sharing of food. We too can follow this example in shared table and fellowship. In serving together, we can build relationships around the work required to meet an identified need in our shared community.

When we establish relationships of friendship with our neighbors we open a door to further conversation. This open door is often ignored as we seek to serve our communities and build upon our friendships. In order for true respectful dialogue to be achieved we must be willing to enter into a deeper relationship. This requires three primary virtues from all participants: humble listening, prophetic witness, and compassionate collaboration.<sup>iii</sup>

The first of these virtues is humble listening: true dialogue requires that we listen. And to listen well requires humility. Humility calls us to focus on others as they share their own faith experiences and to listen attentively, seeking to set aside previous misconceptions or prejudices about their traditions. Humility reminds us also that we do not know all of God's revelations. While we may understand the truth of our own Christian beliefs, we cannot assume that we fully understand the actions of God, or the ways in which other people of faith may experience the divine. In humble listening we are ready to be surprised.

The second of these virtues is prophetic witness: true dialogue requires that we hear the truth of the other and that we share our understanding of the truth. As Christians, we are called by Christ to go out and share the Gospel. It does nothing for dialogue to sit and listen and not take the opportunity also to share our own experiences of God and the hope we know through Christ. Yet, there are two cautions to this virtue. Sharing our experience of God's love is not the same as seeking to convert our neighbor to a shared belief. Dialogue is not a space for conversion, but a space for witness. The second caution is that in informal dialogue we are not necessarily called to speak for our full tradition, denomination, or even congregation, but only for ourselves. While fairness to our partners and our own traditions require that we be well-grounded in our faith, too often Christians feel that we are not qualified to speak if we do not know proper theological terms or Biblical references. Informal dialogue provides the opportunity to share our own witness and personal experience and builds toward deeper understanding.

The third of these virtues is compassionate collaboration: true dialogue requires that we act on a foundation of mutual understanding, respecting the beliefs of all participants. Coming together to listen and to share often leads to a strengthened call for collaboration as people of faith seek to respond to the suffering in our world. This differs from the initial attempts of service projects that may build fellowship. By drawing on our common understanding of one another we are able to act in a manner that encourages full collaboration and builds solidarity.

## Invitation to Action

The Wisconsin Council of Churches invites its member churches to take the following steps:

- (1) To give high priority to better understanding and appreciating both our own and other religious traditions in our state, with the goal of fostering deeper interfaith relationships by creating safe spaces for dialogue, that we might learn from one another and deepen our own faith commitments;
- (2) To examine and uproot all that might contribute to prejudice in our teaching, life and ministries; including both disrespect toward Christians and Christian disrespect of others;
- (3) To be compassionate neighbors, bearing witness to the love and justice of Jesus Christ when those of other faith traditions experience prejudice;
- (4) To encourage dialogue with Americans of other religions to promote peace and justice in the U.S. and around the world; and in particular with American Jews and Muslims as integral to the church's efforts for peace in the Middle East; encourage interreligious dialogue in other situations in which religion is identified as a factor in conflict situations;
- (5) To condemn all forms of intolerance which turn religious differences into excuses for defamations, stereotyping, and violence; to defend their victims; to challenge and rebut statements about other faith groups or individuals that embody religious stereotyping, prejudice and bigotry;
- (6) To uphold religious freedom for all persons, defending the rights and liberties of cultural, racial and religious minorities in the same manner that we defend our own;
- (7) To support ongoing work with related organizations and people of other religions in public policy advocacy and to initiate work in other program areas of common concern.

## Resources for Further Study

### Foundational Documents

*Nostra Aetate: Declaration of the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* is a foundational theological document from the Roman Catholic Church that has informed Christian reflection on interfaith relationships since the 1960's.

[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html)

### *A Common Word Between Us and You*

Written as a letter from a group of Muslim scholars to the Christian community in 2009, "A Common Word" seeks to find common theological ground between Christians and Muslims. The website also includes Christian responses to it: <http://www.acommonword.com/>

### *A Time for Recommitment*

The International Council of Christians and Jews published this text. The document has three sections: A Call to Christians and Christian Communities, A Call to Jews and Jewish Communities, and A Call to Both Christian and Jewish Communities and Others. You can find it online at

<http://www.iccj.org/A-Time-for-Recommitment-The-Twelve-Points-of-Berlin.184.0.html>

### *Dabru Emet – a Jewish response to changing attitudes of Christians toward Jews and Judaism*

A group of Jewish scholars sent out a letter in 2000 to Christians affirming dialogue and mutual understanding in: [http://www.jcrelations.net/Dabru\\_Emet\\_-\\_A\\_Jewish\\_Statement\\_on\\_Christians\\_and\\_Christianity.2395.0.html](http://www.jcrelations.net/Dabru_Emet_-_A_Jewish_Statement_on_Christians_and_Christianity.2395.0.html)

## Ecumenical Resource Links

National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA

Policy Statement “Interfaith Relations and the Churches”

<http://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/common-witness/1999/interfaith.php>

World Council of Churches

Documents related to the WCC program on Interreligious dialogue and cooperation:

<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation>

WCC Study Document: “Christian Witness in a Multi-Faith World”

<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/christian-identity-in-pluralistic-societies/christian-witness-in-a-multi-religious-world>

## Denominational Resource Links

American Baptist Churches in the USA

Resolution in Interreligious Prejudice:

<http://www.abc-usa.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Interreligious-Prejudice.pdf>

Church of the Brethren

Resources for Interfaith Dialogue:

<http://www.brethren.org/peace/documents/resources-for-interfaith-dialogue.pdf>

Episcopal Church

Statement on interreligious relations "Towards our Mutual Flourishing"

<http://library.episcopalchurch.org/document/toward-our-mutual-flourishing>

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Downloadable Resources on Interreligious Relations:

<http://www.elca.org/Resources/Ecumenical-and-Inter-Religious-Relations>

Moravian Church

A compelling story of Moravian interfaith engagement:

<http://www.moravian.org/the-moravian-magazine/moravian-may-2012/a-moravian-and-muslim-answer-to-an-imam-s-request/>

Orthodox Traditions

A concise discussion of Orthodox views on interreligious relationships is contained in:

[Steps Towards A Reunited Church: A Sketch Of An Orthodox-Catholic Vision For The Future](#)

(October 2, 2010)

Website with all Orthodox papers on faith and order issues:

[Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation](#)

Presbyterian Church (USA)

Interreligious Stance of the Presbyterian Church (USA):

[http://www.presbyterianmission.org/site\\_media/media/uploads/theologyandworship/interfaith/the\\_interreligious\\_stance\\_pc%28usa%291.pdf](http://www.presbyterianmission.org/site_media/media/uploads/theologyandworship/interfaith/the_interreligious_stance_pc%28usa%291.pdf)

Reformed Church in America

Resources on Christian-Muslim dialogue and cooperation:

<https://www.rca.org/sslpage.aspx?pid=2656>

Roman Catholic

From the US Catholic Conference:

<http://uscgb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/ecumenical-and-interreligious/interreligious/index.cfm>

Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue:

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/interelg/documents/rc\\_pc\\_interelg\\_pro\\_2005\\_1996\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_pro_2005_1996_en.html)

Declaration on Human Dignity (*Dignitatis Humanae*, 1965)

[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651207\\_dignitatis-humanae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html)

United Church of Christ

A study resource for interreligious relations in the United Church of Christ

[https://www.google.com/url?q=http://www.ucc.org/education/polity/pdf-folder/a-study-resource-on-interreligious-relations-for-the-ucc-2005.pdf&sa=U&ei=LUqcVLOZMJS3yATR9oGQAQ&ved=0CAUQFjAA&client=internal-uds-cse&usg=AFQjCNGUonEusrsXpdu\\_3Y79maPyqECedQ](https://www.google.com/url?q=http://www.ucc.org/education/polity/pdf-folder/a-study-resource-on-interreligious-relations-for-the-ucc-2005.pdf&sa=U&ei=LUqcVLOZMJS3yATR9oGQAQ&ved=0CAUQFjAA&client=internal-uds-cse&usg=AFQjCNGUonEusrsXpdu_3Y79maPyqECedQ)

United Methodist Church

Called to Be Neighbors and Witnesses: Guidelines for Interreligious Relationships

<http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/called-to-be-neighbors-and-witnesses-guidelines-for-interreligious-relation>

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<sup>i</sup> The Nicene Creed (ICEL Text)

We believe in one God,  
the Father almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all things visible and invisible.

We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,  
the Only Begotten Son of God,  
born of the Father before all ages.  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;  
through him all things were made.  
For us men and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven,  
and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary,  
and became man.  
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate,  
he suffered death and was buried,  
and rose again on the third day  
in accordance with the Scriptures.  
He ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory  
to judge the living and the dead  
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father [and the Son],  
who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified,  
who has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.  
We confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins  
and we look forward to the resurrection of the dead  
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

<sup>ii</sup> see endnote i for full text of the Nicene Creed

<sup>iii</sup> For a full description of these virtues, see Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, Crossroads, 2008.