

THE  
*Episcopal*  
CHURCH



## Statement on Interreligious Relations

### I. Introduction

We affirm the foundational Gospel proclamation that "Jesus is Lord" (I Corinthians 12:3 NRSV here and hereafter), and therefore' Summary of God's Law: "love the Lord your God with all your hearts, with all your souls, and with all your minds, and to love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:29-31; BCP, Catechism, page 851). For this reason we reach out in love and genuine openness to know and to understand those of other religions.

Therefore, we commend to all our members: dialogue for building relationships, the sharing of information, religious education, and celebration with people of other religions as part of Christian life,

1. dialogue begins when people meet each other
2. dialogue depends upon mutual understanding, mutual respect and mutual trust
3. dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community
4. dialogue is a medium of authentic witness by all parties and not an opportunity for proselytizing.

We believe that such dialogue may be a contribution toward helping people of different religions grow in mutual understanding and making common cause in peacemaking, social justice, and religious liberty.

We further encourage dioceses, congregations, and other organizations of The Episcopal Church to initiate such dialogue in partnership with other Christian Churches and in consultation with other provinces of the Communion, where appropriate.

2. As we engage other religious traditions, our work must be grounded in thoughtful exploration of and reflection on the appropriate ways to profess Christianity in the context of other religious traditions. This document is an initial reflection on why we are participating in multi-religious relationships. It explores the contexts for doing so and seeks to discern the unique contribution of The Episcopal Church to such relationships. As Christians we celebrate and affirm our witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Colossians 1:15). We rejoice in our call to spread the good news of God's love and reconciliation through engaging in life-enhancing relationships with all of God's people.

### II. Historical Context

3. The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion have had a long interest and involvement in interreligious matters, which have historically been addressed in the context of mission. Prominent Episcopalians were involved in the first World Parliament of Religions in 1893. The Episcopal Church

and Anglican Communion were well represented at the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference, which was called to discuss cooperation in the global mission field and gave birth to the modern ecumenical movement. In the decades that followed, the Anglican Communion and The Episcopal Church were influenced by the important theologies of mission developed by John V. Taylor (Bishop of Winchester and General Secretary of the Church Mission Society) and Lesslie Newbigin (a minister of the Church of Scotland and later a Bishop in the Church of South India). In The Episcopal Church, engagement with Native American culture has resulted in the establishment of significant missionary presence in certain areas.

4. The groundbreaking 1965 document from Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate* (In Our Time), helped to inaugurate a new era of dialogue between Christians and those of other religions. In the Anglican Communion, the 1988 Lambeth Conference issued a major report commending dialogue with people of other faiths as part of Christian discipleship and mission. It also produced the first Anglican Communion document on dialogue with Abrahamic traditions, "Jews, Christians and Muslims: The Way of Dialogue." This document was recommended for study; and the Provinces were asked to initiate talks wherever possible on a tripartite basis with both Jews and Muslims. Other important resources we have used here include "Generous Love: the Truth of the Gospel and the Call to Dialogue," issued in 2008 by the Network for Interfaith Concerns (NIFCON) of the Anglican Communion; the Archbishop of Canterbury's 2007 reply to "A Common Word," an overture from Muslim scholars for dialogue with Christians; and "Relations with Other World Religions," Section F of the 2008 Lambeth Conference *Indaba Reflections*.

5. The Episcopal Church's primary participation in interreligious dialogue has taken several forms:

- Ecumenical efforts with other Christians, through the Interfaith Relations Commission of the National Council of Churches of Christ. The 1999 Assembly of the National Council of Churches unanimously approved a policy statement giving a theological rationale for participating in interreligious dialogue.
- International efforts through the Anglican Communion Office, including the Network for Interfaith Concerns.
- Particular initiatives taken by the Presiding Bishop as primate and chief pastor of the church.
- Task force initiatives, first the Presiding Bishop's Advisory Committee on Interfaith Relations (through 1997) and then the Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations (from 1997-2003).
- Diocesan, congregational and individual efforts in peace making and interreligious dialogue.

6. In addition, in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Episcopal Relief and Development funded the Interfaith Education Initiative, a three-year program in conjunction with the Office of Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations that surveyed the interfaith work of The Episcopal Church and developed educational resources for interreligious dialogue. This project culminated in a conference held at Washington National Cathedral in 2004, and in the publication of the "IEI Manual on Interfaith Dialogue."

7. In 2003, the General Convention officially located oversight of the church's interreligious work with the Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations, which was renamed the Standing Commission on Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations (SCEIR).

### **III. Current Context**

8. As the Indaba Reflections from Lambeth note, "The contexts within which the Church ministers around the world vary widely and the potential for interfaith dialogue will vary accordingly" (193). The following paragraphs are an attempt to note some of the ways in which our context informs our approach to interreligious relations.

9. Today the picture of the world we have to carry is of the earth seen from space. Borders and boundaries are fluid, easily fractured, and unstable. The peoples of the earth will either survive together or perish together. Paradoxically our entire world is, at the same time, housed inside the flat screens of computers that provide immediate access to almost anyone or anything at anytime, anywhere on the planet. Crises and conflicts that were once local matters and seemed to be none of our concern are now global. Social strife, political upheaval and violence—predominantly fueled by greed and/or religious fanaticism—are not distant from us.

10. In the United States, the naive image of the world as a safe and stable place was shattered on September 11, 2001. Those killed in the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York came from many lands, prayed in many languages, called God by many names. They are a true microcosm of the shifting reality of who lives in the United States today, citizens and foreign nationals alike. For the first time in decades, people in the United States experienced what other people in other lands have experienced for generations: fear, grief and loss following from an assault on their homeland, the devastation of their people, and the shattering of a sense of well being. While grief and loss are certainly appropriate, fear is the opposite of truth, and fear has led some people of all religions to collude with, participate in, and justify political acts of violence and oppression which dishonor all concepts of the Sacred.

11. As Episcopalians, we recognize that our neighbors come from a variety of different beliefs and backgrounds, and we are unfamiliar with many of if not most of them. Christians continue to struggle to find common ground and mutual respect with Jews and Muslims who are fellow children of Abraham. Whether we intend to or not, we impact and are impacted in return—powerfully and profoundly—by each other's lives, cultures and beliefs. For each of us, the neighbor often seems to be the Other rather than the one whom Christ calls us to receive as a gift and to love as we would be loved ourselves.

12. In contemporary local and global contexts, The Episcopal Church faces crucial opportunities and challenges for developing new creative relationships with people of other religious heritages. Throughout the world, people of different religions can be seen searching for compatible if not common ways toward justice, peace and sustainable life. Our theological and ecclesial heritage offers significant resources for participating in this global quest.

### **IV. Scripture, Reason and Tradition as Resources in Interreligious Dialogue**

13. As part of the Anglican Communion, The Episcopal Church seeks to be a community living in obedience to the Word of God revealed through Scripture, and to identify the contemporary message of that Word through bringing the insights of tradition and reason, to theological reflection on interreligious relations.

#### **Scripture and Reason**

14. We understand the Holy Scriptures to be inspired by the Holy Spirit of God and at the same time the work of human authors, editors, and compilers. "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for

teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). The Scriptures "contain all things necessary for salvation" (BCP, 513). In the Scriptures we discover the nature of God, by their witness to Jesus Christ, in their record of his teaching, and through their proclamation of the Good News of God's Reign for all people. We believe the Holy Spirit continues to guide us in our growing understanding of the Scriptures, which are always to be interpreted in the widest possible context of God's redeeming love for all people. Throughout our history, Episcopalians have wrestled with varying interpretations of the Scriptures. Such differences are to be expected and appreciated as a direct consequence of our dynamic relationship with the Word of God and our experience of faith over time.

15. Christianity's Holy Scriptures reveal to us both the invitation and the direction to engage with people of other religions. In Genesis 1:26 we meet the loving God who created all people and all nations, and the awesome majesty of creation bids us humbly acknowledge that the fullness of God's intention is beyond the scope of our limited understanding; God's gracious love is not confined to the Christian community alone. Because of our faith in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, we expect to meet God in our neighbor, whom God commands us to love as we love ourselves (Mark 12:29-31).

16. The sixteenth-century Anglican theologian Richard Hooker helped form our tradition of Scriptural interpretation. In his major work, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Hooker argued that the Holy Spirit requires the church to use Reason to interpret scripture. For Hooker, the Scriptures reveal to us essential truths about God and ourselves that we cannot learn by any other means. In other matters of human life, God expects us to use our minds in order to reason together and thus discover, through conversation, debate, and argument, the right way forward. This requires respect for the opinions of other people of good will.

17. This Biblically-based respect for the diversity of understandings that authentic, truth-seeking human beings have is essential for communal reasoning and faithful living. The revelation of God in Christ calls us therefore to participate in our relationship with God and one another in a manner that is at once faithful, loving, lively, and reasonable. This understanding continues to call Episcopalians to find our way as one body through various conflicts. It is not a unity of opinion or a sameness of vision that holds us together. Rather, it is the belief that we are called to walk together in Jesus' path of reconciliation not only through our love for the other, but also through our respect for the legitimacy of the reasoning of the other. Respect for reason empowers us to meet God's unfolding world as active participants in the building of the Kingdom and to greet God's diverse people with appropriate welcome and gracious hospitality.

#### Tradition

18. Tradition is also an important aspect of Anglican theological understanding. As Anglicans we have always understood ourselves to be in continuity with the Catholic faith reaching back to the ancient, patristic church; we therefore hold the church's tradition in high regard. Anglicans have used tradition to inform our common reasoning as the church responds to new challenges and developments, using accumulated wisdom to show how similar challenges have been met in the past. For example, the English Reformers allowed tradition to shape the reformation of the Christianity they had received. Similarly, the founders of The Episcopal Church also placed great emphasis in tradition by continuing important beliefs and practices of the Church of England, such as its liturgy and ministry, and adapting them to the new context of the American republic, as in the American revival of the ancient practice of electing bishops. Tradition informed and shaped how Anglicans in these contexts responded to new situations.

19. Historically, The Episcopal Church encountered religious pluralism and engaged in interreligious relations in the context of the foreign mission field. In many cases this work was the product of dedicated missionaries called to spread the Gospel in faithfulness to the Great Commission. We are also aware that in many cases this work went hand in hand with American expansionism in a combination of mission and empire. We need no better example than the ship sent to the newly-conquered Philippines that carried William Howard Taft as appointed governor and Charles Henry Brent as missionary bishop. We are shaped by these traditions: we are inspired by the energy, engagement, and faithfulness to the Gospel exhibited in the Anglican missionary engagement. Yet we recognize the need to be aware of the socio-religious implications of mission.

20. In turn, we hope that these examples from our history will help to shape future interreligious relationships. We pray for the same energy, engagement, and faithfulness to the Gospel that the Anglican missionary traditions display. We hope that these traditions will in turn shape our future relationships as missional ones of dialogue and companionship. "Companions in Transformation," the official Global Mission vision statement adopted at the 2003 General Convention, emphasizes the importance of dialogue and companionship in engagement with other religious traditions. We believe the theological principles articulated there are also part of creating new traditions in interreligious relations, informed in classic Anglican fashion by our past.

21. We believe that interreligious work will carry forth God's intention for God's creation. It will provide us the opportunity to reflect the love of God we know through our redemption through the Incarnation of Christ; and it will provide us with the opportunity to build faithful communities that live out the majesty of God's will for the earth with more depth and in more forms than we currently experience within the limitations of our own rich religious community. And we believe that Episcopalians find our best resources in our historic understandings of Scripture, reason, and tradition to engage in this work of transformation.

## **V. Salvation in Christ and Interreligious Relations**

22. The most sensitive aspects of interreligious relations concerns any religion's claims to unique or exclusive authority or revelation, including Christian traditions and teachings such as the incarnation, cross, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christians affirm that God "has created all men and women in his image, and he wishes all to enjoy that fullness of life in his presence which we know as salvation" (Generous Love, Section 1). We also recognize that our efforts toward this goal are futile without the assistance of God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. We are dependent on the grace of God—God's unconditional, undeserved love for those God has made. The source of salvation is God alone. Christians believe salvation comes through Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

23. As Christians "we are saved by grace through faith, and this is not our own doing, but the gift of God, not the result of works so that no one may boast. For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has prepared beforehand to be our way of life" (Ephesians 2: 8-10). In various ways, language of salvation refers to a form of deliverance from sin and the finiteness of this life as we experience it, with all its hardships and joys. Our hope of salvation expresses our expectation that we shall share in the life of God, and do so not only after death, but now.

24. The Christian scriptures proclaim that Jesus is "the Word made flesh" (John 1:14) and as such he is "the Way and the Truth and the Life" (John 14:6). As stated in our creeds (Apostles', and Nicene) and liturgy, Jesus Christ is the full revelation of God. Since God has chosen to share our life, we affirm that God is intensely concerned about every human life. Among Christians, Episcopalians have a particular

appreciation of this teaching, in that we believe that the coming of God in Christ has already begun to transform all of creation.

25. The human response to God's incarnate love was "to crucify the Lord of Glory" (1 Corinthians 2:8). The cross is the Christian symbol and act of self-emptying, humility, redemptive suffering, sacrificial self-giving, and unvanquished love. We believe that we have been reconciled to God through the cross.

26. In the resurrection we believe "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and giving life to those in the tomb" (BCP, p. 483). By our baptism into Christ's death and resurrection we enjoy new life as members of the Body of Christ, called therefore to become ourselves ambassadors of reconciliation (Romans 6:4; 2 Corinthians 5:14-20).

27. Professing salvation in Christ is not a matter of competing with other religious traditions with the imperative of converting one another. Each tradition brings its own understanding of the goal of human life to the interreligious conversation. Christians bring their particular profession of confidence in God's intentions as they are seen in and through the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As the bishops at Lambeth 2008 noted, "The purpose of dialogue is not compromise, but growth in trust and understanding of each other's faith and traditions. Effective and meaningful dialogue will only take place where there is gentleness, honesty and integrity. In all of this, we affirm that Christianity needs to be lived and presented as 'a way of life', rather than a static set of beliefs (89)."

28. Claiming Jesus as the Way, therefore, requires us to "respect the dignity of every human being" (BCP, p. 305). This grounds our expectation that we shall discover new insights and develop new relationships through interreligious dialogue. In mutual encounters and shared ascetic, devotional, ethical, and prophetic witness, we dare to hope that God will reveal new and enriching glimpses of a reconciled humanity.

## **VI. Mission and Evangelism**

29. Another sensitive and important aspect of interreligious relations concerns how we as Christians are called to offer life abundant (John 10:10) and to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:16-20). Christianity (including Anglicanism) is an actively evangelical religion. As we consider mission and evangelism in a pluralistic, globalized world, we are mindful of our particular cultural contexts. We are aware that The Episcopal Church is an international church, with congregations in over sixteen different nations. We are also part of the larger Anglican Communion. We should always be mindful of how encounters with people of other religions in the United States may have differences as well as similarities with encounters in different contexts outside the US. We seek to be informed by the experience and reflection of our sisters and brothers living among men and women of many religious traditions in many nations. We stand in solidarity with each other, each seeking in our own circumstances to be faithful to the gospel.

30. We have spoken in this statement of the need to love one's neighbor. We see that love taking a variety of forms. Commitment to justice and mutual respect is the paramount consideration for some, for whom the practice of Christian love is the most powerful witness to the truth of the Gospel. Others, while not denying the witness of faithful lives, believe that love demands the verbal proclamation of the Gospel and an open invitation to all people to be reconciled to God in Christ. Still others understand evangelization as our participation in God's transformation of human society. The love of God that Jesus expressed in presence, compassion, healing, and justice: this we are called to live in mission. The reconciliation that God offers a sinful and broken world in Jesus' death and resurrection: this is the hope we offer the world

in mission. As we seek to respond to God's call to love our neighbor, we all must seek to avoid ways of interaction which do violence to the integrity of human persons and communities.

31. We look for a way forward in the theology of companionship, as articulated in *Companions in Transformation*. This statement, produced by the Standing Commission on World Mission, reflects important developments in The Episcopal Church's understanding of how we participate in global mission; it is currently in a process of reception and review by the Church. *Companions in Transformation* outlines different ways in which Episcopalians are called to engage in mission and witness, and we believe these ways are also important in the service of interreligious dialogue. *Companions* states that a church participating in God's mission may not be able to solve the anguish, violence, and injustice suffered by companion churches. Even so, simply being present in the place of fear, loss and isolation expresses the love of Christ. We seek to be in companionship with our interreligious partners as we present ourselves in a variety of ways:

- **Witness:** "You are witnesses of these things," said Jesus to his disciples (Luke 24:48). Witness in word means sharing the story of what God has done with us in light of the story of what God has done in Christ Jesus. Such witness is a natural and inevitable fruit of life in Christ, and it is the heart of evangelism as a mission imperative. Sharing the story with those who have never heard it is a crucial gift. Sharing our story with others must be part of a dialogue in which we listen to the stories others share with us, whether from places of little faith or from other religious paths. The religious diversity of the 21st century, like that of the early centuries of Christianity, calls us to hold together the multiple tasks of listening, learning, and bearing witness to Christ.
- **Pilgrim:** Pilgrims grow in their knowledge of God, learning as much as they share, receiving as much as they give. The humility of this orientation and the eagerness to learn from companions nurtures deep and lasting relationships. The pilgrim motif opens the door to true mutuality, where, as the 1966 Anglican Congress said about partnership, "all are givers and all are receivers."
- **Servant:** Servanthood means that we listen to the stated needs of our companions and look for signs of God's work in them. It means that we seek to meet Christ in all situations. For Episcopalians, authentic servanthood is a crucial counter to the assumptions we develop on the basis of our extraordinary access to the power of information, technology, and money. Servanthood is a key mark for our church as a whole, though it is sometimes perceived as a domineering church in a superpower nation.
- **Prophet:** In companionship we often find our views of political, racial and economic relationships in the world challenged and transformed. Episcopalians in the 21st century are called to prophesy both to our own church and to the world church that the Body of Christ may be a mustard seed of God's Jubilee in the world, working justice for the whole human family from all faiths.
- **Ambassador:** In addition to witnessing in word and deed as ambassadors of Christ, in companionship with interfaith partners we are ambassadors of our own church. As Episcopalians in dialogue, we must be aware always that companions are experiencing the vision, faithfulness, and integrity of The Episcopal Church through our conversation, conduct, and life. The role of ambassador also entails a commitment to represent fairly the life of The Episcopal Church. We should not be hesitant in being Episcopalian Christians, just as our interreligious partners are not

hesitant in being faithful Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, Bahai, or other faiths, as we are in dialogue with each other.

- **Host:** "Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet," said Abraham to the three strangers who appeared at Mamre (Genesis 18:4). "Let it be to me according to your word," said Mary to the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:38). God is not forcible but invites a response of hospitality. As we engage in interreligious dialogue, hospitality must be central in our response. Hospitality means that we listen to what our companions say, offer them opportunities to experience the breadth of our church, and care for one another. We are likewise called to be generous and hospitable with those whom God brings to us, always respecting the practices and customs of our partners.
- **Sacrament:** As the body of Christ, the church is a sacrament of Christ, an outward and visible sign of Christ's inward and spiritual grace. We are called to be signs of God's mission to reconcile all people with one another and with God in Christ. The people and communities we meet are likewise sacramental signs of God's global presence. This sacramental emphasis helps us to retain an incarnational focus on people, relationships, and community, where God truly lives and where the most lasting impacts are made.

32. We are called and committed to be in companionship and partnership in interreligious dialogue in these different ways. We believe that religions must stand together in solidarity with all who are suffering and witness to the dignity of every human being. In these ways, presence in mission becomes a courageous mode of peace-making in a violent world. With ecumenical and interreligious groups, initiatives to encourage contact and dialogue and to advocate for religious freedom are imperative for reconciliation amid today's heightened tensions among religions. God is calling us to join hands with all, and to speak out when religious freedom is curtailed and when the social, environmental, economic, or political welfare of communities is damaged. We believe that authentic Christian witness and evangelism that serve God's mission are compatible with authentic interreligious dialogue.

33. At the outset of this statement, we recalled that one hundred and twenty years ago in the Chicago Quadrilateral, The Episcopal Church formulated a definition of what it considered essential to engage in ecumenical relations. Today Christianity lives and serves in a global setting in which all of God's human creation is challenged to find common ground for our mutual flourishing. Interreligious relations are vital to this. In seeking to articulate for this century the principles to be considered for authentic interreligious relations and dialogue, we offer three gifts from The Episcopal Church and the Anglican way:

- Our comprehensive way of thinking by which we balance Scripture, reason, and tradition in relationship building;
- Our belief system that centers on the incarnation of God in Christ, and on the Crucified One who leads us to self-emptying, forgiveness, and reconciliation; and
- Our practice of focusing mission in terms of service, companionship, and partnership between people as demonstrative of God's embrace of human life.

34. These gifts are especially suited for our time. The late Martin Luther King, Jr., celebrated in Lesser Feasts and Fasts, foresaw a time when as one all human beings of every religion would have to learn to choose "a non-violent coexistence" over a "violent co-annihilation", and to seek community over chaos. Interreligious relations are no longer about competing religions but about mutual demonstrations of Love Incarnate. We close this statement encouraged by Dr. King's word: "Love is the key that unlocks the door

which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Muslim-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about human reality is beautifully summed up in the first Epistle of St John: 'Let us love one another; for love is of God; and everyone that loves is born of God and knows God. The one who loves not does not know God, for God is love. If we love one another God dwells in us, and God's love is perfected in us.'"