

## **Considerations for members of the United Church of Christ in interfaith dialogue**

The Study Resource was presented to General Synod and then commended to the churches for study and reflection in 2003. We offer here some additional consideration both for those already engaged in interfaith relations and those who wish to develop them.

### **Why engage in interfaith relations?**

The United Church of Christ from its beginning in 1957 has been a denomination committed to relationship and reconciliation. A “united and uniting” church, it has sought encounter with other Christians in an ongoing vocation to make visible the gift of unity that God gives the church. As a church committed to justice and the wholeness of all creation, the United Church of Christ has sought avenues of reconciliation among people whose relationships have been broken and called for healing for those whom society has pushed to the margins. As a church which testifies to the interrelationship of all of God’s creation, we know the mandate to care for the planet that provides us with shelter, sustenance, and beauty.

It is therefore entirely natural that the same vocation compelling us to reconciliation within the church and the world also drives us to reach out specifically to people who practice faith traditions different from our own. Our understanding of a God who made, knows, and loves all of creation urges us into relationship with others as we respond to God’s love for us. As a people who know, in the words of our forebear Rev. John Robinson, that there is more truth and light yet to break forth from God’s holy word, we keep awake to the leading of the Holy Spirit and what it will teach us in our day.

“*It’s all about relationship...*” The history of the church has demonstrated time and again that when doctrines appear to be irrevocably at odds with each other, allowing no channel for reconciliation, *people* in relationship to one another often find a path. So too with interfaith relations. Though for some it is also a scholarly and professional vocation, interreligious relations is first and foremost about people of faith relating to people of faith – not about beliefs relating to beliefs.

To engage in interreligious relations is not an abstract exercise where we can stand aloof and forensically examine the other as one does in a dissection. To engage in interfaith relations is to *encounter and engage* the person who embodies a tradition and a manner of relating to the holy, and to become vulnerable to see the God who we know, from the book of Genesis, created all people.

### **What qualifies as “engaging in” interreligious relations?**

*Engagement with interfaith partners.* There are limitless possibilities, and how you and your congregation participate in interfaith relationships should be dictated by your specific setting and its history. Engagement often takes one or both of two forms: cooperative activity in the community, and intentional dialogue with another community of faith.

It is tempting to proclaim the value of one of these options over another, but this is often a mistake. For example, some who have convened long-standing dialogue groups may see interfaith cooperative activity as important but “superficial,” because the “real” understanding only comes when you risk enough to discuss important issues. Others believe that dialogue should only be conducted as a tool to help us work together as partners in our communities. They see the differences and difficulties which often emerge in dialogue as unhelpful distractions to the collaborative community efforts where, often, there is no impediment to partnership.

Both dialogue and collaborative projects are important and contribute not only to understanding but to healthy community. And both have limitations. It is true that communities which have religious or ideological disagreements frequently find common cause in public policy or community development efforts. Collaborative efforts in those areas can soften long-standing or sometimes only imagined barriers. Obsessive focus on the religious or ideological differences among us can, over time, limit our imagination about what is possible for the health of our communities. Many describe their ability to weather political or religious crises to be a result of long-standing collaborative working relationships.

But time and again we have experienced that collaborative efforts alone can mask or avoid very serious differences which, if unattended, can fester and will perpetuate misconception. Sometimes when a crisis arises it is actually the absence of deeper understanding which causes apparently strong working relationships to falter. Partners suddenly discover they don't know as much about each other as they thought they did, and what were believed to be strong bonds are discovered to be far more fragile than imagined.

Crises such as the events of September 11, 2001, while often the precipitating factors, are not usually the best settings in which to develop interfaith relationships. In the context of a local, national, or international crisis the pressure is very high, stakes can feel daunting, and all communities are usually less willing to take risks. Inasmuch as it is possible, build relationships before a crisis. You will have more to lean on in a difficult time if you do.

*Study and discernment within your own congregation and with other Christian partners.* In addition to action and dialogue with interfaith partners, it is critical that you study your own biblical, theological and spiritual perspectives on interfaith relations – as an individual, as a congregation, and together with other Christians. Many congregations when faced, for example, with the arrival of international refugees whose religious tradition is not Christian find themselves with a problem they didn't know they had: they disagree among themselves as to the appropriate posture for relating to persons of other faiths. If you have never discussed this topic, or have assumed what your community believes without deeper consideration, you may find yourself in conflict that you are not prepared for. Take the time to discuss these matters as a regular aspect of your own biblical and theological study.

**What is the difference between interfaith and ecumenical relations – and is one more important than the other?**

Both ecumenical and interfaith relations are critical aspects of the UCC's vocation. The goals are different. Our witness and work to make visible the unity of the church is predicated on our

common life in and confession of Jesus Christ. We know we have already been given God's gift of unity, though we experience some significant division in the way we live our lives and have not yet been able to make that unity fully visible. Churches around the world express theological commitments in different ways, understand the role of doctrine differently, have divergent perspectives on the church's presence and mission in the world, order the life of the church and its leadership differently, and indeed have very diverse understandings even about what constitutes unity! But in the Preamble to our Constitution, we in the United Church of Christ have proclaimed together with brothers and sisters throughout the whole church that we believe Jesus to be the son of God, the head of the church, testify to the faith through the ages, hear God's word through the scriptures and know God's grace and presence through the sacraments. Though in some cases severely divided – and in other cases perhaps making more of our divisions than actually exist – we confess ourselves to be a part of the one church and seek to make visible that gift of unity.

The word “ecumenical” itself is derived from the Greek word “oikumene,” which can be translated “the whole inhabited earth.” When seeking relationship with brothers and sisters from other faith traditions, however, we make different assumptions. We begin with our belief that God created all people and things, and that therefore in all can God's image be seen. But in our interfaith relations we seek neither unity in belief or in institution, nor do we understand such unity to be a gift communicated to us from God in the same way as is our unity in Christ.

The very person of Christ, however, taught us a great deal about God's love and our mandate to live for love with our neighbor as a reflection of what we understand to be God's love for us. Jesus constantly crossed boundaries in relating to people whom society dictated were “off limits,” “unclean,” or just plain wrong in belief or practice. In so doing, he lived a life embodying reconciliation and relationship.

Finally, the United Church of Christ has repeatedly expressed commitment to peace with justice throughout the world, and has acknowledged that commitment to such a vision is not only impossible but even inappropriate in isolation from others around the world, most of whom are members of other faith traditions. To pursue those commitments together, we must build strong bridges of understanding and care.

Our UCC vocation of reconciliation, then, extends not only to the whole church in the whole world but to all of God's creation, and compels us to hold all aspects of this vocation in proximity.

**When I talk to other Christians, and when I read parts of the Bible, I see evidence that points to Christ as the only way to salvation, and a mandate for Christians to convert the whole world to Christ – to “make disciples of all the nations.” Does this mean that our goal in any interfaith relationship should ultimately be conversion?**

This question begins to get at one of the thorniest issues for many Christians today, and a great deal of scholarly writing has been produced on the subject. It is a very complex topic about which scholars have disagreed for centuries, and members of the United Church of Christ are not of one mind on the subject either! At the end of this section we have listed some resources for

further reading to give depth to this very large topic, and some basic elements offered below might be of help as you discern what you hear God saying.

*First*, don't "proof-text." Said another way, don't let just one or two verses from the Bible shape the entirety of your belief. While passages such as John 14:5-6, Matthew 28:18-20, 1 John 5:11-12, and Acts 4:10-12 can lead you to one perspective on what should be our attitude toward other faiths (and therefore guide our relationships to people who follow them), other passages give a different perspective – for example, Matthew 8:5-13, Luke 9:49-50; and some Hebrew scripture texts: Genesis 9:8-17 and Isaiah 19:19-25. Some Christians turn to texts like the creation stories, where we see that God makes all people in God's image, and to texts such as the first verses of Psalm 24, which proclaims the whole world to be God's, and that God is to be found in all of it. Even others see John 14:2 as almost a contradiction of the verses which follow. In other words, it is difficult to get one clear and consistent message from the Bible on this subject.

*Second*, the question raised especially in Matthew 28 – that we should make disciples of all nations – does not give Christians a blueprint for what that should look like. Even our UCC motto, taken from John 17:21, while often truncated to read "that they may all be one," actually finishes by saying "...that the world might believe that you sent me." Many Christians read in that verse an implicit mandate for Christians to create believers throughout the world. In some eras of the church's life that has taken a clear and often deadly form of forcible conversions – both across the globe and right here in North America. At other times, Christian communities have felt that living consistent and public lives of faith is the best witness to the gospel and whether others come to that faith or not is not the job of the Christian to control or dictate. For those communities, it has felt important to distinguish between *offering witness to one's faith* on the one hand and *building relationships for the purpose of conversion* on the other. Other Christians believe that it is in fact *our* job to proclaim the gospel to all we meet, but that only *God* will know whether the people we encounter will hear our proclamation in such a way that will result in Christian belief. For still others, it is the task of any baptized Christian to actively persuade those who are not Christian to convert.

*Finally*, it is helpful to remember that the United Church of Christ's history and heritage gives evidence of a persistent and consistent engagement in community with Holy Scripture. Our forebears from the traditions comprising the United Church of Christ, especially those coming from Europe, wrestled long and hard with texts as immigrants in a new home, citing as a primary freedom the ability to interpret texts both in context and without the state dictating what they were required to believe. They took the Bible so seriously that children were taught that ongoing engagement with the scripture and discerning matters of the faith was a fundamental aspect of Christian life. Many were taught to read for this reason alone. From the beginning, communities of faith have sought to interpret scripture in the context in which they lived. There are no easy answers, and sometimes even scholarship, enlightening as it is, doesn't quite "speak" to the situation in which a faith community finds itself. Our foremothers and fathers who were sent by our congregations and schools as missionaries knew this, often arriving with an expectation of how they would relate to those who were not Christian, and encountering a reality that completely changed their approach and perspective. We know the same today. God's voice does not speak to us in the abstract, but through our joys and struggles in community. Our task is to

engage God's holy word as it speaks to us today, in the context of the relationships and commitments that face us.

Questions of scriptural interpretation related to christology and salvation are extremely important areas of study which require further work both within the United Church of Christ and with our ecumenical and interfaith partners.

**Our history, both in the United States with indigenous peoples and abroad through missionary encounters, seems to carry a great deal of negative history related to forced, or at least coerced, conversions, and we are aware of the damage and even destruction that proselytism has inflicted on entire communities. Is it possible to reconcile the Biblical texts that send us to “make disciples to all the nations” with a history filled with mistakes which have been damaging to many communities?**

It is true that the history of the church's understanding – and implementation – of what is often called “the Great Commission” is filled with oppression, injustice, and sometimes deadly mistakes. For some, this has rendered the mandate to make disciples of all the nations irredeemable. It is critical that we not discount the theological perspective of people in those communities for whom history has taken too devastating a toll to allow any legitimate reading of this biblical text. Our faith is lived in concrete settings and sometimes experience produces lasting, and devastating, impact.

It is also true, however, that there have been settings where Christians have taught the faith and where that witness has been offered in such a way as to produce healthy, vibrant partnerships resulting in a voluntary growth of new church communities. In those settings Christians acted in accord with what they understood to be their baptismal responsibility and did so with respect for life and existing communities, producing good results. Many Christians in churches emerging from missionary activity speak, yes, of the mistakes, but also of the blessings of the church.

Both experiences are legitimate, and neither negates the other. It is a part of the complexity of the church, and to try to impose one perspective by discounting the other is dishonest and disrespectful. Members of local UCC churches should become aware of the many different ways the church through the ages has proclaimed the faith and what have been the impact of those activities on the world, religious traditions, and the communities it encountered.

**Although our society seems suddenly much more conscious of the presence of people of other faith traditions, my UCC congregation has had an open posture to interfaith relations for a long time. What more is there for us to learn, and why should we engage in study?**

It is true that many, though not all, UCC congregations have engaged in one aspect or another of interfaith relationships and activity for a very long time. For some, this engagement has meant joint participation in community social services or witness on important social issues. For others, it has taken the form of “congregational exchanges” and dialogue where communities come to know one another's religious traditions and commitments. For those congregations, a discussion of the theological bases for engaging in interreligious relations may feel like “old news.” Four elements, however, are worth considering.

*First*, every year most congregations in the UCC receive new members, some of whom may come from Christian settings which are very different from the UCC, and some of whom may have known no previous religious experience at all. It is important not to assume that all new members will understand why your congregation engages in interfaith relationships. If not ever addressed, it will be easy for members to assume the rationale for your congregation's commitments – and some of those assumptions may not be accurate.

Like many other denominations in the United States, the UCC is a very diverse church comprised of communities with widely varying perspectives on Christian faith and what the church's posture toward other religions should be. Our personal history is a deep part of each of us and informs how we respond to our congregation's activities and commitments. We are even sometimes unaware of our feelings until an activity triggers a response.

*Second*, even longtime members should be urged to ask the deeper questions on a regular basis. Perhaps *especially* those congregations which have long histories of interfaith activity can lose sight of the theological and biblical underpinnings for their activity and relationships over many years. Our relationships will be stronger if we can have regular conversation about why we do what we do, and how our activity relates to God's word in scripture and our Christian discipleship.

*Third*, our societal context is always changing. Once it was assumed that the only place to encounter religious diversity was in large cities or outside the United States. Now such pluralism is to be found in almost every setting in the country. Local, national and world events constantly bring a changing perspective to urgent social and religious issues. What was "front burner" when your congregation first began its relationships and dialogues some years ago may be very different from what you – and the world – face today.

Our UCC testimony to the historic faith of the ages, passed down to us from our forefathers and foremothers, is given witness in the Preamble to our UCC Constitution. But that same Preamble summons us to make the faith of our ancestors our own in our age. This means taking seriously the context in which we find ourselves and, as our forebears did, listening to hear what God's word is saying to us today.

*Finally*, as noted in Paragraph 21 of the Study Resource there are, in almost every local church, pastoral questions which are not answered simply by collaborative interfaith activity or even congregational exchanges and dialogue. Few families remain untouched in some way by interfaith relations, either through a member who is married to a person of another faith, or through children and siblings who have chosen to follow the path of another tradition. In contexts where issues of our Christian faith and its relationship to neighbors of other traditions are discussed openly and with respect, those members for whom this is a living, daily reality will have somewhere to share their experiences, their questions, their doubts, and their celebrations.

Don't assume that members of your congregation will feel that permission if serious theological and biblical questions related to interfaith relations are never discussed. It is surprising how

often people express feeling unsafe in broaching this subject for fear of being misunderstood or “wrong,” and therefore risk becoming alienated from their own community of faith.

### **How is it best to manage serious difference once interfaith dialogue has begun?**

Any relationship of length and depth will inevitably begin to surface difference and disagreement. This is often experienced when communities which have engaged in collaborative activity together decide it is time to enter into more formal, intentional dialogue for understanding. Suddenly people who have seemed comfortable and familiar colleagues might become dialogue partners with whom you encounter significant and sometimes discomfiting difference. As with any relationship, a dialogue relationship requires time to mature and for commitment to deepen. There are some important, tried-and-true “basics” to keep in mind.

*First*, before you begin, identify your motivation for entering into dialogue. There is usually more than one if you think about it. Sometimes it is because you seek religious understanding. Sometimes there are community tensions of which you are already aware which require a process of reconciliation. At other times it may simply be that common activities have given all of you the desire to go deeper in relationship. Being aware of what draws you to dialogue in the first place will make you a better dialogue participant because you will know what motivates you and you will be, even without trying, a more transparent partner. When significant differences arise (and if you go deep enough they will), you will be on more solid ground if you have already established with your partners what brings you to the table.

*Second*, know that your specific identity as a Christian is important both to you and to your partner. It is tempting, when a relationship has developed enough to expose difference or disagreement, for partners to want to minimize or even eliminate these differences for the sake of a comfortable conversation.

In addition, many in the United Church of Christ have an appropriate anxiety about proselytizing or heavy-handed, manipulative testimony to the faith. This same instinct, however, sometimes also leads us to want to disguise our particularity – that is, our understanding of who Jesus is and what we believe about the faith – from interfaith dialogue altogether. As understandable as that impulse is, it often confuses our dialogue partners who bring their particularity to the table with full integrity, expecting that we will as well. It is not uncommon in dialogue circles for a partner of another faith tradition to ask why Jesus has not been mentioned by the Christian partner long into the dialogue. Often this is the case because the Christian is acutely aware of the harmful ways “Jesus” and the message of the gospel has been used to coercively convert. But our partners are not helped to understand the God of love that Christians know incarnate in Jesus if we never speak of him, and are not helped to understand the Christianity we embrace if we focus only on those things about which we have no difference or disagreement as people of faith.

*Third*, assume that your dialogue partner is as able as you are to think clearly and carefully. This is a critical posture for those moments when differences or disagreements surface. If your partners believe you respect their ability to state positions and perspectives with care and maturity, navigating the waters of disagreement will be immeasurably easier. If, on the other hand, you respond to disagreement with an attitude, even implicit, that communicates “you

wouldn't be saying that if you were more educated, mature, or rational," the dialogue will be over before it begins, and the relationship will be hard to maintain.

There is a *very* fine line between on the one hand presenting information you feel will clarify your perspective and enhance the dialogue, and on the other hand implicitly communicating an assumption that your disagreements are a result of your partner's ignorance or lack of education. That posture will make the partner less willing to take risks of honesty. Any strong relationship experiences serious disagreement, and it cannot be a healthy one if your partner does not feel able to state disagreement without being told, explicitly or implicitly, that if they simply had better or more sophisticated information they would see it like you do. That creates more than poor dialogue. It creates, over time, anger and resentment that blocks relationship. As partners you come from different places and those places inform your perspectives. Hammering people with "information" does not guarantee a change in perspective or elimination of disagreement, but will nearly *always* guarantee feelings of disrespect and distrust.

*Fourth*, resist comparing another's "worst" to your "best." This principle which is critical for ecumenical dialogue is also vital for interreligious relations. All of our traditions present both historical and current examples of mistakes, flawed leadership, and inconsistency, and these exist in different places. It is very tempting, especially when you encounter disagreement, to place another's failings under a microscope and compare them unfavorably to the settings in which "your" tradition does better. It is a human but not helpful impulse in any dialogue context.

*Fifth*, listen. It is so easy for a dialogue participant to spend the time during which another is speaking to formulate his or her own answer to the question, or even response or "rebuttal" to the speaker. It is easy to miss, through poor listening, many opportunities to draw connections which can make disagreements and differences easier to understand. In some cases it will even make what appeared to be differences no more than misunderstandings. And in those inevitable instances where differences and disagreements will remain no matter how long you dialogue, deep listening can enable insights to help both of you learn to live with it.

*Finally*, keep an open mind. No matter how hard we try, each of us comes to a relationship with some preconceived notions. This is inevitable and natural. It is best, though, to work hard at being open to what the other has to say and avoid even an unconscious assumption that you know the answer – or what you feel about something – before you begin the conversation. Sometimes Christians fear that if they "change" through the course of a relationship they will suddenly find their Christian commitment compromised. The vast majority of evidence does not bear this out. When we seek honest relationship and understanding, it is very often the case that we come to a deeper understanding of ourselves and a stronger commitment to our own faith. Deep commitment to one's own tradition and strong appreciation of another's are not mutually exclusive.

**Though my congregation has maintained relationships with people of other faiths for some time, world events and our various perspectives on them can put a strain on even the strongest ties. How do we manage this?**



This is seen in the United States most clearly right now in the context of bilateral or trilateral dialogue among people of the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The ongoing crisis in the Middle East is inescapable and extremely difficult. It is often the case that everyone feels they have the best perspective on the situation and its solutions, and that the partner does not adequately understand the situation. Partnerships which once felt strong may suddenly appear quite fragile in the context of a crisis about which all parties feel very strongly.

There are other settings where world events and historic relationships present difference or even tension when it comes to an approach to interreligious relations. Increasingly, immigration will introduce to our UCC congregations people whose original contexts frame interfaith relationships in very different ways than you might, and whose history and earlier experiences with people of other faith traditions might lead them to very different conclusions about the viability of dialogue or even collaborative activity. It is critical to listen carefully to each other so as not to recreate marginalization by implying that the perspectives of those more newly come to the congregation are irrelevant or even just “wrong” because they are different.

While these differences are often very creative, sometimes they are painful to the point where dialogue feels impossible. There is no “generic fix” to the difficulties presented by our different backgrounds and the convictions we carry as a result of them. It is important for dialogue partners who may be experiencing tension for the first time to know that such tensions have arisen before, will again, and that relationships have more often than not found ways to survive them. It is vital that you know your specific context, because that, and the relationships you have developed, are the best indicators for how to proceed in times of serious crisis. Some dialogues – or even collaborative projects – choose to take a “break” to give people room to breathe. This is exactly the right response for some settings; exactly the wrong one for others. In some contexts, where there may be a tendency to seek an excuse for the relationship to “fade away,” the best path may in fact be to continue the discussion even through the difficulty so as not to make a dissipation of the relationship easy.

In *all* cases, however, maintaining communication of some kind is critical. When one faith community does something that hurts or angers the other, it is easy for the party labeled as the “offender” or “offensive” to feel anxious about reaching out to the other for fear of rejection. While understandable, this is often the wrong impulse. It is critical that both partners make the decision about the future of their relationship, dialogue or collaborative activity *together*. This common agreement itself can serve as a “bridge” to keep the relationship alive even if the pattern of relating changes for a while.

**Are there some relationships we should cultivate more intentionally than others? And if we have not developed relationships in the past, how do we get started?**

Thirty years ago, for most Christians in the United States the phrase “interfaith relations,” if it meant anything at all, usually referred to dialogue, congregational exchanges, and cooperative activity with the Jewish community. A great deal of good work in local, regional and national settings was done to establish and maintain relationships and collaborative projects. This is why, in many settings of the United Church of Christ, there are very long-standing and cherished relationships with members and leaders of synagogues, rabbinic associations, and Jewish

schools. The United Church of Christ, through General Synod, has also affirmed its understanding that God's covenant with the Jewish people which we know from the Hebrew scriptures is enduring and unbroken, and not negated by the Christian belief that Jesus is the messiah. Relationships with the Jewish community remain vitally important for all Christians.

The events of September 11, 2001, among other factors, have lent urgency to the development of Muslim-Christian relationships in those communities where there were previously few or none, and the General Synod has also called on members of the United Church of Christ to develop and maintain ties to members of the various Muslim communities in the United States. The ongoing crisis in the Middle East can create confusion for many Christians who are uncertain about how best to maintain relationship across multiple communities, commitments, and sometimes what feel like conflicting expectations. The United Church of Christ, with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) also has mission partners, and missionaries, who live and work in settings where the Muslim community is large, like the Middle East, and Southern and Southeast Asia. Our relationships with Muslim colleagues are therefore also vital.

Whatever the initial motivation, it is urgent that Christians develop and maintain relationships with people of other faith traditions. If you haven't already, the best place to start is where you live. Who are your neighbors? With which communities has your congregation not yet extended an invitation to relationship? What are the issues in your local setting which would benefit from your increased interaction? Often the simplest things are the most effective. Taking the initiative to invite another community into relationship – whether one of exchange, collaborative community project, or a dialogue for understanding – is a good first step. Don't wait for the other to take the initiative. Often immigrant communities coming to the United States are arriving from a setting where their religious tradition has been the majority tradition; coming to another context where this may no longer be the case can be disorienting. Be sensitive to the dynamics they experience in the community when you seek a conversation.

Use the existing energy and established commitments of your congregation to guide you as you begin. There may be relationships present through members of the church which will offer a natural opportunity for discussion or collaboration. Remember first to consider your own goals, and then discuss them with your partners so you are both clear about hopes and expectations. Seek to know your partner's expectations prior to beginning the dialogue as well. Then, shape your common goals together, and determine a timeline for your initial engagement – something that has a natural "closure" date so that if you need to adjust your approach, you can do so without damaging the relationship or embarrassing participants. Build in time for reflection on the future, and don't let your activity become too dependent on or identified with just one or two people over a long period of time. The more broad-based the leadership and commitment, the easier it will be for the relationship to be sustained through periods of leadership transition.

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