

Interfaith

The Presiding Bishop's Advisory Committee on Interfaith Relations

PRINCIPLES FOR INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Episcopal Churches across the country are finding themselves increasingly aware of religious diversity in their own communities. We now live side by side with organized groups representing many of the great religious traditions of the world who share our concern for peace, justice and the common good.

With them we have the need to affirm spiritual values in a materialistic society and we also have the duty to remove any supposed religious justification for discrimination based on prejudice and ignorance.*

DIALOGUE AS MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

(1). **Meet the people themselves and get to know their religious traditions.** In many communities there are places of worship of the world's great religions. Several of these religious communities have national and regional organizations, frequently with people who have responsibility for interfaith dialogue and cooperation. There are also bodies that have as their purpose the fostering of better relationships among people of different faith communities.

(2). **Whenever possible, engage in dialogue ecumenically.** Generally dialogue is best done with representatives of several Christian traditions at the same time. When we seek to explain ourselves to others, the differences between Christians are seen in a different light. An ecumenical approach to dialogue allows us to focus on those things which are essential in Christian teaching. While individual approaches need not be discouraged, a ministerial association or local council of churches might well be the more appropriate body to initiate dialogue.

(3). **Allow others to speak for themselves.** Too often stereotypes keep us apart from people of other faiths. One obvious way of avoiding this is to let the dialogue partners describe themselves, as we would expect to speak for ourselves. This is not to say that our listening must always be uncritical. Our questions will only be accepted as we show that we want to learn and understand. One way of ensuring this kind of balance is to plan the dialogue together.

(4). **Be aware of other loyalties.** We always bring into relationships a cluster of theological commitments and cultural loyalties. An awareness of this can help us avoid unrealistic expectations and help focus on central, rather than peripheral, issues. Acknowledgment of our own and others' loyalties can pave the way to deeper sharing.

(5). **Prepare carefully for dialogue.** Dialogue ventures will be most successful with mutual planning and preparation.

a. It is important to approach others with the same kind of respect we would wish to be accorded. They cherish their beliefs and practices as deeply as we do our own, however different they may appear to us.

b. Every religious tradition, including our own, has unworthy adherents and unpleasant episodes in its history. True dialogue is not possible if only the best of one tradition is contrasted with the worst of the others.

c. Issues of separation must be addressed as well as those of unity. Dialogue is not furthered when painful or difficult issues are glossed over. However, this should not be done with an attitude of superiority, or solely in an effort to air grievances. Dialogue should include an awareness of our own contribution to division and misunderstanding.

d. By engaging in dialogue we Christians are not being asked to compromise our faith that God was revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. Our understanding of our own faith should be clear, so that the Christian perspective can be fairly presented to dialogue partners. Dialogue, however, should not be a subtle form of proselytizing, but an occasion for mutual sharing.

DIALOGUE AS COMMON ACTION

(1) **Deal with issues related to living together as part of the human community.** This may well be the basis upon which the dialogue begins. Our planet is too small and the problems confronting it too great for people of faith to attempt to work in isolation or from a position of conflict. Some matter on which an interfaith approach is possible include:

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- a. Joint approaches to government on matters of economic, social, political, and cultural concern.
- b. Urging respect for human rights and religious freedom, not only for ourselves, but for others also.
- c. Coordinated efforts to deal with global issues such as world peace, the environment, or hunger.

(2). **Foster efforts at education and communication among people of different faiths.** Education is both a consequence of and a way into interfaith dialogue. The effort to learn and understand will bring us into closer contact. While that contact will lead us to want to share our learning with others.

- a. In our pluralistic society it is important that people have an appreciation of the rich religious heritage of those who make up our community. People are pleased, for example, when their major religious festivals are acknowledged. These can provide the occasion for learning more about the faith concerned.
- b. Sustained contact with people of other faiths can begin to break down false images with which many of us have grown up, and to which we are still often exposed. Efforts should be made to challenge such stereotypes wherever they may be encountered, including those in our own educational and liturgical material.
- c. Among the places where such educational efforts can be focused are schools, universities, seminaries, church schools, and other institutions for adult education.
- d. Inaccurate media coverage of minority religious groups can be detrimental. Positive relations should be developed with the media so that their potential for increasing public awareness about people of different faiths can be fully utilized.
- e. Efforts should be made to educate travelers about the religious traditions and sensibilities of the people in the countries they visit, and to encourage them to share their experiences on their return.
- f. Representatives of other faith groups should be consulted and, where possible, involved in the preparation of educational materials that portray their history, beliefs, and practices.

(3). **Share spiritual insights and approaches to worship that respect the integrity of each tradition.** There is much that religious people can share in an atmosphere of learning and openness. However, people of other traditions are no more anxious than we are to engage in acts of worship which blur very real differences of theology or world view. Neither do they relish the appropriation by others of their religious symbols or sacred texts.

- a. Attendance at another community's acts of worship should always be accompanied by careful preparation and an opportunity to ask questions afterward, preferably answered by members of that tradition.
- b. Christians who are present during the worship of another faith community may be unable to participate fully in everything that is said and done. Nonetheless they should attend with the attitude that the event is an important part of the spiritual life of the participants.
- c. Prayer for people of other religious traditions is valuable; especially during times of particular need or when it is for better relationships with them. Some Christians feel that they should pray for the conversion of others to Christ, while others would argue that this should not be done. In any event, it is God who converts people. Christians themselves are far from fully understanding or obeying God's will. It is inappropriate to single out any one religious group as being in particular need of conversion in a way that fosters prejudice.

*We are grateful for permission to quote extensively in this document from Guidelines for Interfaith Dialogue produced by the Ecumenical Office of the Anglican Church of Canada, Toronto, 1986.

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