



# Ecumenical considerations for dialogue and relations with people of other religions

## Taking stock of 30 years of dialogue and revisiting the 1979 Guidelines

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From its beginning, the Church has confessed that God is reconciling the world to Godself through Christ Jesus. Throughout history, the Church has been seeking to understand and apply the fundamentals of its faith to concrete situations in which it found itself. The early Church continuously had to rethink its self-understanding when it moved from being part of the Jewish tradition to becoming a church of Jews and Gentiles, and beyond its Greco-Roman setting into other cultures and regions of the world. Today the church is continually called upon to enable its members to relate to persons of other faith traditions and to live as witnesses with others.

2. True to this vision, the World Council of Churches developed the "Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies" in Chiang Mai in 1979. We affirm the values of these guidelines, which were widely shared and received by the churches. However, we now have thirty years of experience in interreligious relations and dialogue, making it possible to move forward by drawing on what we have achieved or attempted. Since the **1979 guidelines**, the ecumenical movement has taken significant steps toward facilitating interreligious relations and dialogue, but expectations for the fruits of our efforts have also risen.

3. In recent years, member churches have requested guidelines on interreligious relations and dialogue that address today's context. More than ever, we sense a growing need not just for dialogue with people of other faiths but for genuine relationships with them. Increased awareness of religious plurality, the potential role of religion in conflict, and the growing place of religion in public life present urgent challenges that require greater understanding and cooperation among people of diverse faiths.

4. From a global perspective, we speak as Christians of diverse traditions to the member churches. We hope local churches will study, discuss, and adapt these ecumenical considerations to address their own contexts. In this effort, Christians should seek to go further to produce, in collaboration with neighbours of other religious traditions, commonly agreed guidelines for relations and dialogue that would inform, instruct, and enable all to embrace the way of trust and community building.

### INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS AND DIALOGUE TODAY

5. Greater awareness of religious plurality has heightened the need for improved relations and dialogue among people of different faiths. Increased mobility, large-scale movement of refugees, and economic migrations have resulted in more people of diverse faiths living side-by-side. Where mechanisms for dialogue and encounter exist, there are opportunities to foster greater knowledge and awareness among people of different religions. Unfortunately, increased relations between communities have sometimes been marred by tension and fear. For many communities, this tension confirms the need to protect their individual identities and distinctiveness. Sometimes the difference between the legitimate search for identity and hostility towards neighbours of other religions and cultures is blurred. Throughout the world and among the followers of major religious traditions, there has been a rise in influence of movements and leaders mobilising their believers in the name of preserving a perceived threatened distinctive identity. Often such an understanding of identity is made into the exclusive basis for the creation of a new societal order, shaped by a selective retrieval of doctrines, beliefs and practises from a sacralized past.

6. Whenever religious plurality gives rise to communal tensions there is a possibility of religious sentiments being misused. Religion speaks for some of the deepest feelings and sensitivities of individuals and communities; it carries profound historical memories and often appeals to uncritical confessional solidarities. Religion is sometimes seen as the cause of conflict, while it is in fact more likely to be an intensifier of conflict. Interreligious relations and dialogue are meant to help free religion from such misuse, and to present opportunities for religious people to serve together as agents of healing and reconciliation.

7. Too often religious identities are drawn into conflict and violence. In some parts of the world, religion is increasingly identified with ethnicity, giving religious overtones to ethnic conflict. In other situations, religious identity becomes so closely related to power that the communities without power, or who are discriminated against, look to their religion as the force of mobilization of their dissent and protest. These conflicts tend to appear as, or are represented to be, conflict between religious communities, polarizing them along communal lines. Religious communities often inherit deep divisions, hatreds and enmities that are, in most cases, passed down through generations of conflict. When communities identify themselves or are identified exclusively by their religion, the situation becomes explosive, even able to tear apart communities that have lived in peace for centuries. It is the task of interreligious relations and dialogue to help prevent religion from becoming the fault line between communities.

8. Efforts to prevent polarization between religious communities at the world level are more important than ever. Through media, people tend to perceive conflict in one place as part of a conflict in another causing enmities in one part of the world to spill over into other regions. An act of violence in one place is used to confirm the stereotype of the "enemy" in another place, or even to provoke revenge attacks elsewhere in the world. There is a need therefore to de-globalise situations of conflict and to analyse each one within its own context. The emphasis on the specificity of every context should not prevent people of faith in other parts of the world from being both concerned and involved. An interreligious engagement in one place may in fact be an essential contribution to peace building and reconciliation in another place.

9. There is in many countries a growing role of religion in public life that requires greater understanding and cooperation among religions. Religious leaders are being called by governmental and non-governmental agencies to address public issues of moral concern. However to speak collectively and with moral authority, religious communities must discern their common values, decide to what extent they can express themselves with one voice, and discuss how they can avoid being manipulated by political forces.

## APPROACHING RELIGIOUS PLURALITY

10. In their encounters with neighbours of other religious traditions, many Christians have come to experience the meaning of a "common humanity" before God. This experience is rooted in the biblical affirmation that God is the creator and sustainer of *all* creation. "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it" (Ps.24.1). God called the people of Israel to be witnesses among the nations while, at the same time, affirming that God is the God of all nations (Ex.19: 5-6). The eschatological visions in the Bible anticipate all nations coming together and the creation being restored to the fullness that God intends for all. This conviction is reflected in the affirmation that God is not without witness among any people or at any time (Acts 14.17).

11. When relating to people of other faiths, Christians must be aware of the ambiguities of religious expressions. While religious traditions reflect wisdom, love, compassion, and saintly lives, they are not immune to folly, wickedness and sin. Religious traditions and institutions sometimes support, or function as, systems of oppression and exclusion. Any adequate assessment of religious traditions must deal with their failure to live in accordance with their highest ideals. Christians are particularly aware that history testifies that our own religious tradition has sometimes been used to distort the very meaning of the gospel we are called to proclaim.

12. As witnesses, we approach interreligious relations and dialogue in commitment to our faith. At the heart of Christian belief is faith in the triune God. We affirm that God, the Father, is creator and sustainer of all creation. We hold the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the centre of God's redeeming work for us and for the world. The Holy Spirit confirms us in this faith, renewing our lives and leading us into all truth.

13. We are convinced that we have been called to witness in the world to God's healing and reconciling work in Christ. We do this humbly acknowledging that we are not fully aware of the ways in which God's redeeming work will be brought to its completion. We now see only dimly, as in a mirror, for we now know only in part and do not have the full knowledge of what God has in store (cf. 1 Cor. 13.12-13).

14. Many Christians have found it difficult to make sense of, or relate creatively to, the reality of other religious traditions. However, as Christians we believe that the Spirit of God is at work in ways beyond our understanding (cf. John 3. 8). The activity of the Spirit is beyond our definitions, descriptions and limitations. We should seek to discern the Spirit's presence where there is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal. 5. 22-23). The Spirit of God is groaning with our spirit. The Spirit is at work to bring about the redemption of the whole created order (Rom. 8. 18 - 27).

15. We are witnesses in a world where God has not been absent and to people who do have something to say about God. We meet people who already live by faiths that rule their lives and with which they are at home. We witness among them in a spirit and spirituality informed by our Christian faith. Christians need to open themselves to the witness of others, which is made not just in words but also in faithful deeds, in devotion to God, in selfless service and in commitment to love and non-violence.

16. Our witness is marked by repentance, humility, integrity and hope. We know how easily we misconstrue God's revelation in Jesus Christ, betraying it in our actions and posturing as owners of God's truth rather than as undeserving recipients of grace. The spirituality, dedication, compassion and wisdom we see in others leave us little room for claiming moral superiority. A waiting the freedom God wills for all creation (Rom. 8. 19-21), we cannot but make known to others our own experience and witness and at the same time listen to them expressing their deepest convictions and insights.

17. In dialogue and relationships with people of other faiths, we have come to recognize that the mystery of God's salvation is not exhausted by our theological affirmations.

*Salvation belongs to God.* We therefore dare not stand in judgement of others. While witnessing to our own faith, we seek to understand the ways in which God intends to bring God's purposes to their fulfilment.

*Salvation belongs to God.* We therefore feel able to assure our partners in dialogue that we are sincere and open in our wish to walk together towards the fullness of truth.

*Salvation belongs to God.* We therefore claim this hope with confidence, always prepared to give reason for it, as we struggle and work together with others in a world torn apart by rivalries and wars, social disparities and economic injustices.

## **GUIDING PRINCIPLES**

18. Dialogue must be a process of mutual empowerment, not a negotiation between parties who have conflicting interests and claims. Rather than being bound by the constraints of power relations, partners in dialogue should be empowered to join in a common pursuit of justice, peace and constructive action for the good of all people.

19. In dialogue we grow in faith. For Christians, involvement in dialogue produces constant reappraisal of our understanding of the Biblical and theological tradition. Dialogue drives all communities to self-criticism and to re-thinking the ways in which they have interpreted their faith traditions. Dialogue brings about change in the experience of faith, helping people to deepen and grow in their faith in unexpected ways.

20. In dialogue we affirm hope. In the midst of the many divisions, conflicts and violence there is hope that it is possible to create a human community that lives in justice and peace. Dialogue is not an end in itself. It is a means of building bridges of respect and understanding. It is a joyful affirmation of life for all.

21. In dialogue we nurture relations. Building bonds of relationship with those considered "the other" is the goal of all dialogues. Such bonds however are not built easily or quickly. Therefore patience and perseverance are crucial in the practice of dialogue. The tenacity to go on, even when the fruits are not obvious, is one of the basic disciplines of dialogue.

22. In dialogue we must be informed by the context. Dialogue takes place in concrete settings. Awareness of such realities as historical experience, economic background and political ideologies is essential. Further, differences in culture, gender, generation, race, and ethnicity also have an important impact on the nature and style of interaction. The purpose of dialogue, once the context is taken seriously, is not to remove or run away from differences but to build confidence and trust across them.

23. In dialogue we strive towards mutual respect. Dialogue partners are responsible for hearing and listening to the self-understanding of each other's faith. Trust and confidence comes from allowing partners to define themselves, refraining from proselytism, and providing an opportunity for mutual questioning, and if appropriate justified criticism. Such practices promote an informed understanding of each other, which becomes the basis for all other relationships.

24. In dialogue it is important to respect the integrity of religious traditions in the variety of their structures and organisations. Equally important is to recognise the way that participants in dialogue define their relation with their community. Some affirm their right and obligation to speak for their community. Others would choose to speak from their own experience.

25. Dialogue is a co-operative and collaborative activity. All partners involved need to be included in the planning process from the very beginning. The strength of setting the agenda together lies in the fact that all partners own the agenda and become committed to making it work. For the conduct of dialogue clear objectives and commonly agreed criteria for participation and regular assessment are essential.

26. In dialogue we strive to be inclusive, since dialogue can easily become an elitist activity and be confined to certain strata of society. Care should be taken to ensure that dialogue takes place at different levels, between different groups and on subjects that affect the lives of all sections of the community.

## SOME PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

27. Individuals and communities may, even with the best of intentions, encounter problems and difficulties in interreligious relations and dialogue. Sometimes the call for dialogue is met with hesitation, suspicion, indifference or opposition both from within one's own community and from other religious communities. Sometimes interreligious relations communicate attitudes that contrast with the values upheld by the culture and ethics of dialogue. Sometimes the possible outcome of dialogue does not seem enough to really justify participation. In addition, other problems invite careful consideration, some of them emerging in recent discussions.

28. There are often expectations that dialogue can significantly contribute towards resolving political or communal conflicts and restoring peace, in situations where religion seems to be implicated. In a number of countries there are dialogue partners who are able to cooperate, across the religious divide, in concrete efforts of peace making. There are also cases where religious leaders are invited to play a visible role in state-sponsored peace initiatives. The impact of dialogue in the context of conflicts may disappoint high expectations. When it is unable to quell conflict, its relevance is questioned. However, by its very nature, interreligious dialogue is not an instrument to instantly resolve problems in emergency situations. Contacts and relations of precious trust and friendship between people of different religions, built quietly by patient dialogue during peacetime, may in times of conflict prevent religion from being used as a weapon. In many cases, such relations may pave the way for mediation and reconciliation initiatives. At times of communal tension or at the peak of a crisis, contacts across the communal divide may prove to be invaluable in the construction of peace.

29. Although dialogue by its very nature is direct encounter, there are invisible participants on each side in every dialogue. Our dialogue partners will every so often hold us responsible for what fellow Christians have done or neglected to do, said or not said. While this in some ways is inevitable and even sometimes understandable, we are well aware of deep disagreements within religions and we know that the dividing lines do not always go between religious communities but often within religious communities. The differences may be not only theological, but relate to social, political, and moral issues. We may for various reasons find ourselves in opposition to some of those with whom we share a common faith. We learn that religious communities are not monolithic blocks confronting each other. Plurality of positions on each side should not be ignored or suppressed while defending what is perceived to be the interest of one's community. Commitment to a faith does not entail identification with what is done or not done in its name. Therefore, we should not be defensive, but remain confident of the potential of dialogue to change deeply held opinions or prejudices.

30. Among many religious communities, we come across people who seem to be primarily interested in the growth of their own community through various forms of mission including proselytism. They seem to have little interest in dialogue or may make use of it to further their missionary design. Such situations can be discouraging for people willing to engage in dialogue. Their disappointment often overshadows the possibility of identifying partners critical of those attitudes in their community. It is essential that we intentionally seek such partners and explore ways of rebuilding the credibility of dialogue enabling people of divergent positions to enter a relationship of mutual respect and openness in discussing divisive issues.

31. There are several expressions of dialogue, reflecting the various aspects of life itself. There is not one expression better than the other and our engagement therein should not conform to any pre-set model or hierarchy of dialogue but respond to the need, doing what is possible. In some contexts, we may discuss "cultural" differences more readily than "religious" ones, even as issues of religious concern and practice are considered in such a discussion. Similarly, co-operation about "social" concerns may be possible and even strongly supported, where there is hesitancy to consider dialogue on theological issues.

32. Motivations for dialogue can sometimes be conditioned by power relations between religious communities and by the importance, objective and subjective, of numerical disparities. In many countries, these communities share the same language and often the same culture. Often their members are said to be granted by law equal civil and political rights. But discriminatory practices exacerbate distrust and division. The intermingling of state policies and confessional identities rooted in communal traditions may lead communities to look at each other as a threat. This is particularly true in times of uncertainty or political and constitutional changes involving a redefinition of state-religion relationships. Interreligious dialogue cannot shy away from recognising the effects of uneven power relations and the impact of mutual perceptions, no matter how distorted they are. The relevance of

dialogue initiatives depends largely on their intentional and concentrated effort to dispel fears and suspicions between those who are seen to represent religious communities. Equally, it is essential that interreligious dialogue creates an opportunity for strengthening cross-confessional loyalties, always upholding, in discussion and joint action, the centrality of the common good and inclusive political participation.

33. Participation in multireligious prayer has become increasingly common among a large number of Christians. Concrete situations of everyday life provide opportunities for encounter with people of different religions. These include interreligious marriages, personal friendship, praying together for a common purpose, for peace or in a particular crisis situation. But the occasion can also be a national holiday, a religious festival, a school assembly, and other gatherings in the context of interreligious relations and dialogue. There are various forms of prayer among people of different religions. Christians may be invited to other places of worship, where they should be respectful of the practices of that tradition. Christians may invite guests of another religion to a church service and should ensure a welcoming hospitality. Multi-religious prayer juxtaposes the prayer of different traditions. The advantage is that the variety and integrity of each tradition is honoured and that we are praying in the presence of each other. The disadvantage may be that one remains a bystander. United interreligious prayer is an occasion where people of different religions plan, prepare and participate together in a common prayer. There are those who feel that this risks reducing prayer to the lowest common denominator and that it can take away from the unique spirituality of prayer of each religion. For others such prayer is not at all possible. Yet for some, praying together could be a spiritually enriching occasion. All these different responses indicate that serene conversations among Christians on this issue are not a finished task.

## **CONCLUSION**

34. In the many pluralist societies where they live, Christians and people of other religions are bound together in a dialogue of life, with all its difficulties but also its riches and promises. They gain new insights about their own faith and that of others. They discover afresh resources, which will help them become more humane and make the world a better place for living together. They learn how to be more sensitive to the needs and aspirations of others and more obedient to God's will for all creation.