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# ECU-DIALOGUE

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The newsletter of the offices of ecumenical and interfaith formation  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)



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## Help Launch the Presbyterian Ecumenical and Interfaith Networks

***The invitation is broad. Ecumenical and interfaith work requires a network of people who have built relationships, can teach, can be bridges, or are simply interested in meeting their neighbors.***

*Jay Rock, Coordinator for Interfaith Relations, and Kathy Reeves, Associate for Ecumenical and Mission Partnerships*

The inaugural meeting of the Presbyterian Ecumenical and Interfaith Networks will take place in Louisville, Kentucky, on December 8-10, 2005, at the Marriott Hotel. These two networks, which will be related to the Worldwide Ministries Division, will share some plenary sessions and social time and will also meet separately to discuss particular issues and organization.

### ***What is the purpose?***

The networks can provide a way to be in more regular contact about events, activities, new resources. They allow all of us to discover workshop leaders and individuals or groups involved in various kinds of interfaith or ecumenical activities. We hope that the networks will also become a forum for sharing insights into interfaith and ecumenical issues, new models for community building and dialogue, and theological reflection. Over time these networks may help to shape the ecumenical and interfaith vision and work of the church.

The Ecumenical and Interfaith Networks will gather together PC(USA) members who are actively engaged in ecumenical and/or interfaith relations to

- share information, experience, and wisdom
- discuss common strategies
- invite coordination of effort
- hold common work accountable to the gathered community
- provide the opportunity to coordinate with GAC/GA-level goals and programs
- seek and invite new participants
- provide spiritual support for all members of the PC(USA) who are engaged in ecumenical and interfaith ministries

### ***Who can join?***

Any PC(USA) entity, governing body or association, or individual related to such bodies and engaged in ecumenical and interfaith relations, is eligible to be part of the network.

Ecumenical and interfaith work requires a network of people: those who have built relationships and lived with people of different Christian families or of a different faith and culture; those who can teach others about other faiths or the skills of interfaith and ecumenical engagement; those who can be bridges between faith communities; and those who are simply interested in meeting and understanding their neighbors.

***Who is invited to the organizing meeting of the networks?***

You are invited! If you are engaged in, or interested in, interfaith work or ecumenical activities and eligible to join, please consider coming to Louisville on Thursday, December 8, 2005. The Interfaith Relations and Ecumenical Formation offices of Worldwide Ministries' Ecumenical Partnerships office will provide hotel accommodation, meals, and hospitality.

Meetings will begin with a reception and introductions on the night of December 8th, continue through the 9th, and conclude with lunch on Saturday, the 10th. In addition to taking time to give shape to the networks and select initial leadership, the gathering will include the opportunity for sharing resources, participating in workshops on particular issues, and holding a conversation on ecumenical and interfaith relations with Stated Clerk Clifton Kirkpatrick.

**To Do:**

- If you are an eligible for membership, express initial interest in becoming a network member or get further information and registration materials for the meeting by contacting Susan Abraham at <sabraham@ctr.pcusa.org.>

## **A Challenge to Hear Voices**

***People who steep themselves in a single viewpoint contribute to polarization and are a challenge to the hope for peace and reconciliation.***

*Annie Rawlings, Interim Associate Executive Presbyter for Social Witness, New York City Presbytery*



Representatives from presbyteries throughout the church gathered in Louisville on February 10-12 for a briefing on “Steps toward Peace in Israel and Palestine.” Organized jointly by the PC(USA) offices of the General Assembly and the General Assembly Council, it was designed to equip members of presbyteries and synods to engage the ongoing discussion about our church’s actions on Israel / Palestine in an informed manner.

### ***Presentations***

Plenary presentations provided both background information and contemporary witness.

Gary Burge, Professor of New Testament at Wheaton College, provided a historical overview of the conflict in Israel / Palestine from the demise of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I. (Dr. Burge’s books include *Whose Land? Whose Promise?: What Christians Are Not Being Told About Israel and the Palestinians* [Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003].)

A panel of Palestinian Christians moderated by the Rev. Fahed Abu-Akel, moderator of the 214th General Assembly (2002), provided a glimpse into the experience of living in a context of circumscribed movement, restricted freedom, and violence joined with a longing for and commitment to peace.

Rabbi Arik Ascherman, executive director of Rabbis for Human Rights, spoke with us by web cam from Jerusalem. Since the briefing, he and two codefendants have been convicted by a Jerusalem court for standing in front of bulldozers in an effort to block the demolition of Palestinian homes.

The plenary sessions also included several panels on interfaith perspectives, dynamics, and resources. Because I work in a presbytery and city that has seen great intra- and inter-community disagreement over our church's actions at the 216th General Assembly, I was grateful that the panels provided helpful context and tools for bringing learnings from the conference back into our local presbyteries. Two points stand out.

Jay Rock, the PCUSA's coordinator for interfaith relations, described the *ad hominem* dynamic in disagreements about the Middle East: instead of simple disagreement or talking about the substance within a disagreement, there is a critique or dismissal of *persons* that moves beyond the issues. This phenomenon inhibits conversation and contributes to a climate of distrust and anger. I have witnessed this myself in New York City, and I witnessed it in Louisville — from people on all sides.

A seemingly simple but quite important reminder came from the Rev. Tom M. Castlen, executive presbyter of Long Island Presbytery. A *discussion*, a *debate*, and a *dialogue* are not the same things, he said. It is important to know which you want and which you are having.

**Discussion:** an exchange of ideas and experiences that leads to clarity, understanding, and sometimes agreement

**Debate:** an attempt to convince or persuade through advocacy of a viewpoint, intended to lead to choices and decisions; rule-based.

**Dialogue:** a conversation between equal partners who suspend, but do not abandon, their viewpoints with the aim to achieve new discernment and deepen relationships

Notes on Tom Castlen's presentation on the three D's of conversation

Other presentations and a plethora of written material continued our education and gave us resources for the education of our home presbyteries. These resources were so extensive that I still have not finished reviewing them.

Workshops within the briefing deepened our understanding of dynamics and issues. I attended Jay Rock's interactive session on the interfaith dialogue resource, "Open Doors, Open Minds." I also went to a workshop led by Douglas Dicks — a PC(USA) missionary related to Israel, Palestine, and Jordan — on five key issues impacting the hope for peace in Israel / Palestine: water, Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees, Israeli settlements, and borders.

The formal program was enriched throughout by the opportunity to talk with people from around the country and to hear their reflections on engaging the aftermath of the 2004 General Assembly. Local presbyteries are doing creative work in this area.

### ***Reactions to the program***

The formal program was also enriched — yes, enriched — by disagreement, an inevitable occurrence when dealing with our subject matter. Sometimes the disagreements were uncomfortable. There were elements of the

briefing I found disturbing, including the dynamics of some conversations and presentations. Some of the content seemed to have a deficit of completeness, such as the absence of a Jewish Israeli voice in the eleven-minute video we all received, appropriately called “Steps toward Peace in Israel and Palestine.” I do not feel that those of us who are experiencing high levels of disagreement over the actions of the 216th General Assembly are helped by resources that exclude key points of view. I want to be clear, however, that I was not turned off by being disturbed, though I was uncomfortable.

*A goal: listening to many voices*

The Israel / Palestine conflict and its hometown manifestations are complex. It is difficult to be both balanced and thorough. And it is challenging to escape the limits of one’s own biases and concerns as one tries to frame pedagogy and narrative and even the contextual definitions of justice and peace. This is why dialogue is so important; it is dialogue that brings fullness to our understanding. If one wants to participate in dialogue and ultimately claim the role of a seeker of peace, one must be willing to be disturbed — even to have one’s stomach in knots, with no easy resolution, as one hears different views and witnesses the emotions that sometimes accompany them. The good news I trust is that God has made our spirits strong enough for this, if we will claim that strength. In terms of the PC(USA), my hope is that we all move forward with a spirit of mutual learning and dialogue as the next General Assembly approaches.

In this spirit of moving forward, I offer a short list of additional learnings or observations from the briefing that I am finding particularly useful, ideas I either heard for the first time or heard presented in a useful way in Louisville:

- In dialogue events on the Middle East it can be helpful to include multiple voices from within a dialogue partner’s community — for instance, people in the Jewish community who have different perspectives.
- It may be necessary to have an intra-presbytery or intra-congregational dialogue before reaching out to other traditions / houses of worship. We Presbyterians must be careful not to avoid our own disagreements with each other; it would be easy to displace our own conflicts in an unhealthy way.
- Those who primarily hear a perspective that is in agreement with their own are urged to seek out a different point of view. I say this in realization that some presbyteries do not seem to be dealing with much controversy or disagreement following the last General Assembly, unlike the situation in New York City. This suggestion is not intended to encourage the avoidance of hard truths about the Israel / Palestine conflict. It comes instead from a concern that people who steep themselves in a single viewpoint contribute to polarization and are a challenge to the hope for peace and reconciliation.

**To Do:**

- Use the resources available from the person in your presbytery who went to the briefing.
- Order the resource CD for Presbyterians, “Steps toward Peace in Israel and Palestine,” \$5.00 from PDS, phone (1-800)524-2612. PDS #70-270-05-017.
- Visit the website of Rabbis for Human Rights at <<http://rhr.israel.net>>.
- Download the Christian-Jewish dialogue resource by going to <[www.pcusa.org/interfaith](http://www.pcusa.org/interfaith)>.

## **A Moment of Blessing: Healing Violence**

***We come together in grief, confessing that a tragic death is in part a failure to create a safe community that is humane, compassionate, and just.***

*David T. Alger, Executive Director,  
Associated Ministries of Tacoma / Pierce County*

The late 1990s were a very difficult time in Pierce County, Washington. The homicide rate was very high. The Hilltop neighborhood of Tacoma, home to our agency, Associated Ministries, was especially rough. Driveby shootings were the norm. Gangs were flourishing. As the local ecumenical council for Tacoma / Pierce County, we were looking for ways to help heal the violence in our neighborhood and community.

In 1998 I took note of a program operated by the local council of churches in Indianapolis. Their city had a very high homicide rate. I was fascinated that their representatives were going to the sites where homicides occurred. They went there to pray and to “reclaim” the sites. We consulted with the staff in Indianapolis and, with their blessing, took their idea and created a similar program.

A Lutheran clergyman on our staff commented that it sounded to him as though we were going to be having “Moments of Blessing.” The name took hold.

Now, when we receive word that a homicide has occurred, we work with local law enforcement to obtain the pertinent information and then schedule a Moment of Blessing. We use flyers, e-mail, and the local newspaper to inform neighbors, local churches, and the general public about the time and location of the service.

Because the Pacific Northwest is not one of the most religious parts of the country, we feel it is important to be very clear about who we are. Consequently, we request participating clergy to vest for the occasion.

At each Moment of Blessing we mark the site with prayer poles. These poles carry red ribbons bearing the name of each person who has been killed since we began the Moments of Blessing. Sadly, the poles have been filled with ribbons. Our single original prayer pole is now one of four such poles.

When we gather, we brief the crowd on what is going to happen. We ask those present to participate in the liturgy. We place a small bowl of water exactly where the individual died. We draw close to one another and the worship leader begins:

Grace and Peace to all of you in the name of our loving God. We come together at this place and at this time in grief, acknowledging the tragic loss of (name of the victim), confessing that this tragedy is in part a failure to create a safe community that is humane, compassionate, and just. . .

We share scripture readings, then offer those gathered an opportunity to reflect. These are often powerful moments when friends and families speak; at other times no family or friends are present, but the sharing is equally poignant. As the sharing comes to an end, there is a litany and sometimes a song. Then the one or two people who have been assigned the priestly role of doing the blessing take the bowl of water. Using a small branch of greenery, they sprinkle water on the site and on those of us gathered together. The liturgist recites the following:

We come together this day to reclaim this space of death as a place of life . . . this place where violence occurred we are reclaiming as a place of life . . . this place that causes us fear, anger, and pain we are reclaiming as a place of hope and community.

Come, Spirit, to this place. As we sprinkle this water, come Spirit, and redeem this space and people from the violence and death that has occurred here. Return it as a safe place, a place of community, a place of life, a place of hope. Amen.

We close with a charge and benediction, but people rarely disperse very quickly. We stay together as community a while longer. Words of comfort are shared.

These are times when we connect as community. These are times when the Church is visible in a very special way. Just a few weeks ago, I stood in the cold rain with about twenty people outside a tavern on a county road near Mount Rainer. Men and women had put down their drinks and come outside to join us as we remembered one of their friends. One man stood a little off to the side. He was smoking a cigarette. As the group dispersed he came up to me and said, "God bless you for doing this." I saw in his eyes how important it was to him that we had gathered there. I thanked him and then I thanked God for making this ministry possible.

### **To Do:**

If you wish more information on this model, contact the Rev. David Alger at <DavidA@associatedministries.org>.

## **A New Stage for Interfaith Listening**

*Jay Rock, Coordinator for Interfaith Relations*

Now that two rounds of the Interfaith Listening Project have been completed, a recommendation is under consideration to continue this project as an ongoing ministry of our church.

In September-October 2004, in a second series of Interfaith Listening visits, ten Christian-Muslim teams went to Presbyterian congregations, colleges, community centers, and other venues. The teams visited 36 presbyteries in 28 states. Their hosts had many ideas about how to improve the program and were overwhelmingly positive in assessing the value of the experience.

"When we meet and talk with folks nose to nose, smile to smile," said Ed DeLair of Miami Presbytery, "we are given a gracious new understanding of what it means to be children of God."

### ***Presbytery responses to team visits***

Other presbyteries provided reports:

The Presbytery of Northern New York received a Muslim Indonesian professor, Dr. H. Machasin. One of the presbytery hosts initially reacted to having a Muslim guest by saying, "Why would we have a Muslim stay in our home? We are at war with them." Yet, the presbytery reported, "the gentle nature of Dr. Machasin helped her realize that not all Muslims are terrorists and also to understand that the 'war' is not with Muslims."

"The major benefit of the Interfaith Listening Project was that it served as the impetus for us to meet with our local Muslim representatives," reported Cimarron Presbytery's Pat Dorr.

The Rev. Steve Runholt, Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Western North Carolina Presbytery, said of his congregation's encounter, "I was as touched as I was surprised that informal conversation between our members, some other Christian visitors, and our Muslim guests and [international] visitors continued on. I had the sense that our local Muslim friends were just ravenous for friendly contact and communication with non-Muslim Americans."



At New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., the Interfaith Listening project engaged church young people. Their leader indicated that they “were genuinely energized and I believe will carry on this dialogue and open new ones.”

### *New experiences in home countries*

The program also strengthens the work of the visiting teams when they return to their home countries. Sharing the experience of this program, teams from the Philippines and Indonesia, to Egypt and Lebanon, and on to Ethiopia and South Africa have continued working together with increased commitment to building community and addressing pressing, shared concerns.

### *Program objectives*

The Interfaith Listening Project began in the context of two converging needs following September 11, 2001:

- first, an urgent need to provide models of caring and reconciliation, especially between Christians and Muslims, at a time dominated by images of violence and enmity
- secondly, the concurrent need on the part of a number of partner churches (especially, but not only, in the Middle East) to continue their Christian-Muslim dialogue by engaging U.S. partners, in the U.S., in response to international dynamics and perceptions.

The program has been particularly effective in replacing stereotypes with perceptions born of human interaction and in energizing the work of building relationships among neighbors of differing faiths.

### *New achievements and needs*

In comparison with the first visits in 2002, the 2004 project reached a greater number of young adults; further, more planning with local Muslims resulted in a greater number of events with Muslims or in Christian-Muslim settings.

For the project to become an ongoing program, additional financial support is needed. The Peacemaking Program will be able to provide some continuing financial support, and we hope that organizers in presbyteries will continue to be generous with the hours they dedicate to local planning and the funds they spend to provide hospitality. But we will need further, sustained support.

For me, one of the most moving moments of the 2004 debriefing session came when Dr. Aslam Khaki, a team member and Muslim judge from Pakistan, announced that he was making a donation to see that Interfaith Listening continues.

If *you* can help support this program, please contribute.

### **To Do:**

- Designate gifts to the Interfaith Listening Program (EO#51688).
- Watch for an upcoming DVD, now in production, to provide a clear presentation of Interfaith Listening and its usefulness in the church.

## Spend a Weekend with American Muslims

Are you interested in an opportunity to meet our Muslim neighbors and have an immersion experience in Muslim life, right here in the United States?

An ecumenical group of Christians will hold a study seminar at the 42nd annual convention of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) on Labor Day weekend — Friday, September 2, through Monday, September 5, 2005 — at the convention center in Rosemont, Illinois, very near Chicago's O'Hare International Airport. The ISNA event's theme is "Muslims in America: Accomplishments, Challenges and the Road Ahead."



Christian participants will stay in a block of hotel rooms near the convention center. They will be registered for the convention and will be welcomed to all its plenary sessions, workshops, and gatherings, including the Muslim prayers in the convention prayer hall, for observation. They will also have access to the bazaar area, where Muslim publishers, charitable organizations, and vendors will have merchandise, displays, and information booths. Most importantly, seminar participants will have the opportunity to interact with some of the 35,000-40,000 Muslims in attendance.

The seminar will have its own "home" room, where participants can congregate and relax. Each day, the group will gather there for reflection and discussion of what they are seeing and learning. Seminar organizers will invite speakers and ISNA leaders for special conversations.

The Rev. Dr. Jay Rock, PC(USA) coordinator for interfaith relations, is working with the Rev. Dr. Shanta Premawardhana, interfaith relations director of the National Council of Churches of Christ (USA), and Mr. Mohamed ElSanousi of ISNA to coordinate the program.

### To Do:

- See convention information at the ISNA website, <[www.isna.net](http://www.isna.net)>.
- Contact <[sabraham@ctr.pcusa.org](mailto:sabraham@ctr.pcusa.org)> to request more information or registration materials.

## The Mutirão

### *World Council of Churches Assembly*

Nearly 800 delegates from the World Council of Church's 342 member churches will come together in assembly next year to evaluate the council's work, reflect on the assembly theme, and provide guidance for the council's future work. This Ninth Assembly will be the first in Latin America. It will convene in Porto Alegre, Brazil, on February 14-23, 2006, around the theme "God in your grace, transform the world."

The World Council of Churches (WCC) assembly, held every seven or eight years, is the highest governing body of the council. The PC(USA) will have four delegates (already elected by the General Assembly). But an assembly also provides an opportunity for a larger ecumenical family gathering. Thus, representatives of related organizations, other churches, and other faiths will be in Porto Alegre, as well as advisors and guests. Additionally, it is expected that a large number of people from all parts of the world will come to participate in the broad experience of the ecumenical movement. Instead of having what is called a visitor's program at this assembly, there will be a Mutirão.

*Mutirão* is a Portuguese word, derived from Tupi, an indigenous Brazilian language. It means a meeting place, a coming together, an opportunity to work together for a common purpose. In Brazil, people in poor communities sometimes “make a mutirão” to build a house together. Having ensured there will be the needed expertise, the community gathers to work toward a concrete objective.

The Mutirão at the assembly will provide a space for seminars, celebrations, and exhibits for all. A full program will include offerings organized by churches and related organizations from all parts of the world, albeit with a particular Latin American and Caribbean focus and a special emphasis on youth. It will provide a place for reflection on the plenary sessions that will take place in the first half of the assembly time.

Mutirão participants may:



- pray together in the morning and evening as part of the assembly community and participate in worship services at midday
- engage in daily Bible studies around the assembly theme
- participate in daily workshops
- attend seminars on ecumenical formation
- celebrate being in Latin America with youth
- participate in the Women’s Space
- follow plenaries (on economic justice, unity, religious pluralism, the Decade to Overcome Violence, Latin America and the theme) as well as business sessions
- worship with Brazilians

The PC(USA) is planning to contribute to the Mutirão and is organizing a travel study seminar for those who are interested in attending the WCC Ninth Assembly.

#### **To Do:**

- Contact <sabraham@ctr.pcusa.org> for information on the seminar.
- Read more about WCC assembly plans at <mutirao@wcc-coe.org>

The WCC Ninth Assembly theme, “God in your grace, transform the world,” is in the form of a prayer. In the midst of a secularized and despairing world, invoking God to transform the world is in itself a proclamation, a witness to the liberating and lifegiving message of the Gospel. The theme emphasizes our prayerful dependence on God and points us forward hopefully to the fulfillment of God's purpose of fullness of life for all.

## **31st Annual Seminar for Clergy and Laity**

This annual study event, on October 12-20, 2005, travels to Geneva, Switzerland, for an opportunity to learn about the international ecumenical scene. The Ecumenical Center in Geneva is home to the administrative offices of the World Council of Churches (WCC), the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), the Conference of European Churches (CEC), and other ecumenical agencies.

The cost of the seminar is \$1,100.00 per person sharing a room (\$200.00 single supplement). In addition to meeting with colleagues serving at the Ecumenical Center, participants will enjoy a full-day excursion to the Orthodox Center in Chambesy and the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey. Included in the cost are all meals (except

lunch on Sunday), a half-day guided walking tour of Geneva, a full-day sightseeing tour to Gruyeres and Chateau de Chillon (including a fondue / raclette lunch in a traditional Swiss restaurant), and a bus pass for local transportation.

## A Prayer for Ecumenical and Interfaith Life

For fullness of life, we give thanks, O God.  
And as we pray for ourselves,  
we pray for all people, made in your image,  
to know life in all its fullness.  
God in your mercy, *Hear our prayer.*  
God who loves us so much,  
we know that we need each other,  
that we find you in each other,  
that we find each other in you.  
Help us to receive your community in our midst,  
to play our part in its wellbeing,  
loving, forgiving, serving, and encouraging each other. . . .  
God in your mercy, *Hear our prayer.*  
We pray for those who think they have nothing worth saying  
and for those who have no one to listen to them.  
Give us confidence to know that our stories matter.  
Give us tact in knowing the right place to tell them. . . .  
[M]ake us ready to listen to others.  
God in your mercy, *Hear our prayer.*

WARC worship book, *Celebrate Life!*, page 13

## Celebrate Life! Worshipbook

This worshipbook offers the liturgies used for the opening ceremony and the daily worship at the 24th General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (2004) in Accra, Ghana. Congregations of the PC(USA), a member of WARC, may utilize its contents without any use charge. They may order from Presbyterian Distribution Service, phone (1-800)524-26120. English book, PDS #74-280-04-007; Spanish book, PDS #74-280-04-008.



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