
ECU-DIALOGUE

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How Will a WCC Conference Create An Environment for Dialogue? *Being one of about 600 attendees from 105 countries, including full participants from the Roman Catholic Church and from some Pentecostal and Evangelical churches and networks, raised a question.*

Cathy Chang, a delegate and a Princeton Seminary M.Div. student

On May 9-16, I attended the World Council of Churches (WCC) Conference on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME). The conference's theme was "Come, Holy Spirit, Heal and Reconcile! Called in Christ to be Reconciling and Healing Communities." Our PC(USA) delegation also included Bethany Borak, Raafat Girgis, Unzu Lee, Marian McClure (on the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism), and Clint McCoy.

Preparation

As I prepared for Athens, I met with Professor Darrell Guder and he asked about my mission experience. I highlighted some short-term experiences, mostly sponsored by parachurch organizations or denominations other than the PC(USA); my 2002-2003 experience as a PC(USA) Young Adult Volunteer in Cairo, Egypt, was my first taste of doing mission in ecumenical partnership. I also told him about the opportunity to meet and dialogue with other young missiologists at a WCC-sponsored consultation in Rome, Italy, in January.

An internal dialogue had already begun within me. And it seemed that this CWME conference also wanted dialogue *among* Christians of various traditions. My main question became, "How will the conference create an environment for such dialogue to occur?"

An internal dialogue had begun within me. CWME also wanted dialogue among Christians.

I partially answered this question as I thought about the Rome consultation, designed to invite young people to prepare for Athens. In Rome we had divided into different groups for discussion. I joined the group that discussed dialogue, both interdenominational and interreligious. Our group consisted of Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Presbyterian/Reformed, Lutheran, and Pentecostal participants. I was struck by my colleagues' comments, which provided a good reality check on the challenges of ecumenism.

- Stephen, a Nigerian pastor, shared his concerns about what it means to be a "young" missiologist. He said that a typical 30-year old from a developing country might not have reached the same stage educationally as someone from the western world; this affected the opportunity to participate, because of age criteria.
- Marcos, a pastor from Peru, talked about the difficulties of expressing himself in English and not feeling free to

speak his mind in Spanish.

- Peter, a U.S. seminarian, observed that there were 5 U.S. Presbyterians there but none from Africa, where there is a strong Reformed presence.
- Ulrike, a German woman now teaching in Peru, was frustrated by the demographics of our consultation: we were not representative enough of the shift of Christianity away from the north.

Attending the Young Missiologist Consultation had, in fact, prepared me for CWME. I sensed that I would experience and observe even greater joys, insights, and challenges of ecumenism in Athens.

Joys and insights

Some of these greater joys came in the form of ecumenical fellowship. Each morning after breakfast and at the close of each day, I led a ‘home group.’ In the morning, we read together through Bible passages in the *Lectio Divina* style. I remember the words of Tobias, my Swiss German colleague who is a prison chaplain in Hong Kong, when we studied Ezekiel 37. He talked about how the passage reminded him of *baai shan* — the prison jargon for a prison visit that actually means ‘to worship one’s ancestors.’ “It is the feeling that the prison visitor is going to visit somebody who is already in the grave, a dead body,” he explained.

Another form of fellowship came in the opportunity to worship together in song. Different participants at the conference took turns in worship leadership, so I learned songs in other languages and from various liturgies. We learned Pentecostal praise songs and even a Greek Orthodox liturgical hymn proclaiming *Christos Anesti* (“Christ is risen”).



There was also plenty of opportunity to learn through the plenary speakers and from the *synaxis* — in Greek, ‘a gathering of people’ — that allowed participants to opt for attending various afternoon groups to address each day’s sub-themes.

At the conclusion of the conference, I learned from ‘listeners’ who presented their observations to the conference participants. Two particularly caught my attention. Professor Nam-Soon Kang talked about the use of language as power, especially when it is Euro- and androcentric. Rev. Dr. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu spoke about his African contextual reality but with deep concern for the future of ecumenism. While discussing what it would be like to partake Holy Communion across different Christian traditions, he exclaimed, “How can we eat secular food together and not take the Eucharist together?”

Tensions

As much as I experienced the joys of ecumenical fellowship, there were also challenges and tensions.

From the moment I checked in at the registration area, I knew something set me apart. I was at least five years older than some of the stewards and it appeared that I was 20 years younger than the average conference participant. I longed for more young adults who could consider themselves delegates of a WCC-member church or of a WCC-affiliated body.

In our home group, I had hoped for more diversity. Initially our group consisted mostly of men from either North America or Western Europe. Eventually our group gained Janet, a woman from Canada, but we still were not representative of the conference participants. When the delegates sang together in the morning, I also noticed that there was not always full participation. For instance, I did not recall seeing any Orthodox priests in the congregation when the Pentecostals led worship.

Another source of tension came from outside the confines of the retreat center. Since this was the first CWME to be hosted in a predominantly Orthodox context, I was interested to learn what kind of reaction it would cause. A few yards away from our worship tent, I saw and heard for myself: After our conference kicked off, a ‘breakaway’ faction of the Greek Orthodox Church protested the conference. Yet soon after we learned how to sing *Christos Anesti*, we heard strains of the same liturgy at the protest. By day 4, our conference daily newspaper published a statement: “The conference leadership entirely respects [the protesters’] right to hold different views, but also upholds the right of participants to peace and tolerance.” Some participants expressed the desire to worship together with the protesters; others ignored them. Here we were at a conference bringing together Christians of various traditions. I could not help but wonder what dialogue would have looked like if we had extended an invitation for it to this ‘breakaway’ faction.

One of the greater challenges became apparent in the final plenary. Designated writers presented a ‘Letter from Athens,’ to be sent to the churches and respective bodies of conference participants, instead of a statement that previously delegates from WCC-member churches would have prepared. After the letter reading, participants volunteered their feedback. During the whole week, the framework of the conference had been conducive to listening and dialoguing with one another. Now, in the few hours remaining, we worked through some revisions of the letter. In a sense, we shifted gears from listening to one another to ensuring that the letter sounded “just right.” Factions formed between those who wished to work on something and those who wanted to refer the task to the CWME commissioners who were to meet on the following days. In the end, we deferred to the commissioners. As much as I appreciated the efforts of the writers and commissioners to draft and revise our letter, I wished for — and sensed the same desire among other conference participants — a better framework in which to have provided feedback.

To Do: Visit <www.mission2005.com> for conference news and documents; download free a book of WCC statements on mission from 1980 to 2005, or order a copy. ■

Growing Fruits of Faithful Endeavor

The CUIC Ministry Task Force

Freda A. Gardner, member of CUIC Ministry Task Force

As churches of many denominations narrow their definition of ‘church’ to the congregation of which they are a part or to churches in their own neighborhoods, to speak of ‘ecumenical’ movements, issues, or challenges is more like whistling in the wind than speaking to the choir. Yet there are those among us who have, for years and even decades, devoted their attention, prayers, and labors to the church of Jesus Christ in all of its manifestations. Those pioneers — and local, regional, denominational, and global foot soldiers who have studied, prayed, met, written, defended, and advocated to the end that Jesus’ prayer “that all might be one” might be realized — merit our deep gratitude and respect.

An outgrowth of long effort and a new invitation

Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC) is a relationship among nine Christian communions that have pledged to live more closely together in expressing their unity in Christ and to combat racism together. **CUIC** is both an outgrowth of and a successor to the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), an organization that worked for more than 40 years toward the day when Christians can become more fully reconciled to each other. In 2002, its member churches covenanted to enter CUIC and committed themselves to theological dialogue that would provide a foundation for mutual recognition of ordained ministries.

CUIC is not a new *structure*. It is an officially recognized *invitation* to live with one another differently. Christians in the pews know that we belong together because we all belong to the same Lord. **CUIC** is a framework for showing to the world what we truly are — the one Body of Jesus Christ. Thus, one of the Marks of Commitment within CUIC is the emphasis on combating racism within these churches and marks a recognition that the unity called for by our God cannot ignore the divisions that exist across racial lines. **CUIC** intends to keep our denominations attentive to the overt and subtle evidences of racism that exist both in and among our churches.

Nine CUIC communions: African Methodist Episcopal Church African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Christian Methodist Episcopal Church Episcopal Church International Council of Community Churches Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) United Church of Christ United Methodist Church
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Toward Full Communion

The Ministry Task Force, one of three task forces of CUIC, was charged with providing a foundation for the mutual recognition and reconciliations of ordained ministry by the CUIC members. It undertook this responsibility through four years of dialogue which resulted in a document that would set forth the foundations, hopes, and processes that would allow the member churches to recognize and reconcile their ordained ministries. This would complete a process of inviting the churches to declare themselves in ‘Full Communion.’ Full Communion denotes the unity between partner churches who acknowledge each other’s faith as authentically biblical and apostolic, who pledge themselves to work together in mission, acknowledge the validity of each other’s sacramental life, and who have reconciled ministries, including the affirmation that the ordained ministers of the partners are recognized as ministers of all.

The Ministry Task Force proposal, “Mutual Recognition and Reconciliation of Ministries,” in its seventh draft, is now in the hands of selected groups from local churches and governing bodies at several levels within each denomination. These groups are asked to study it, using a study guide, and to respond from their particular perspectives to the document as a whole and to those parts that have special significance to their respective churches. Following the responses and feedback from the churches, the task force will develop a final proposal for the member communions to approve.

Presbyterian-Episcopal issues

The PC(USA) has a long history of ecumenical involvement and has moved into significant partnerships with a number of denominations. Because so many of the issues in the previous COCU conversations that related to the reconciliation of ministries involved differences between the Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church understandings of oversight and *episcopate*, a separate bilateral dialogue was established between these churches. This group has provided feedback to the CUIC efforts and has sought to define and lift up theological, ecclesial, and practical evidences of our common mission and ministry. Simply put, the differences between our church and the Episcopal Church focus in two areas:

- We believe that our *ordained clergy are in historic succession*, derived from the earliest expressions of ministry in Christ’s church. The Episcopal Church believes that their *bishops are in historic episcopal succession* and are essential in ordinations.
- Presbyterians have a *corporate episcopate* (ministers and elders). The presence of ordained clergy *and* elders is essential both for valid ordinations within the PC(USA) and for sacramental celebrations. In CUIC, “presbyter” is the biblical name for those *persons* designated ‘pastor,’ ‘elder,’ ‘minister,’ or ‘priest.’

A process and a goal

The Ministry Task Force draft asserts that each church will decide who among its leadership will be designated as bishop for ecumenical purposes. If the CUIC member churches can see themselves in all of these proposed acts/commitments and can find that their own understanding of God's call to the church is ratified, we can move to acknowledge each others' ministries and together witness to a world needing the church and its gift of bearing the gospel to all of God's people.

Reconciliation of ministry is both a goal and a process. The goal is less difficult to explain; the process by which we move together toward the goal is most often the stumbling block. Making the other believe and act as we do is very difficult and, more importantly, unnecessary. Agreeing that each member church is following its own understanding of how it provides for witness and ministry to and in the world will allow the churches to share the joys and challenges of being Christ's body in this 21st century.

To join forces in the effort to eradicate racism is a worthy goal in itself. Closer working and worshiping together may contribute to our recognition that we are all God's children — gifted, needy, human, fearful, hopeful, faithful — and deserving of the best opportunities we can create together for the discovery of that truth for ourselves and each other. ■

To Do:

- View the PowerPoint presentation at <www.cuicinfo.org/resources_publications/resources.html>. Use its ideas for implementing relationships with CUIC partner churches in your area.
- Order CUIC booklet #742-800-2007 from Presbyterian Distribution Service, phone (1-800) 524- 2612.

Anticipating the WCC Ninth Assembly

Robina Winbush, Associate Stated Clerk

When Christians gather from churches around the world, there is always an air of excitement and anticipation. The Ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) is no exception. Gathering in Porto Alegre, Brazil on February 14-23, 2006, over 3000 church leaders and representatives from every Christian tradition will join in worship, prayer, study, and deliberation around the theme, "God, In Your Grace Transform the World." The first WCC Assembly of the 21st century will be the broadest global gathering of its kind.

This will be the first WCC Assembly held in Latin America. As the continent's largest country, Brazil offers a culturally and religiously diverse context for it. The Brazilian National Council of Churches (CONIC) will serve as the local host with the full participation of the Roman Catholic Church, which is a member of CONIC but not the WCC. In addition to the strong Christian presence in Brazil, there are strong communities of Afro-Brazilians who practice traditional religions, as well as Muslims and Jewish communities.

This will be the first Assembly since the report of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC. Established by the Eighth Assembly in Harare (1998), the Special Commission addressed Orthodox concerns with the direction and priorities of the Council and in 2002 made a number of proposals to enable the Orthodox voice to be more effectively heard. One significant recommendation, to practice consensus decision-making during the Assembly, was approved by the Central Committee earlier this year. It is hoped that this change will reduce contentious debate and invite the delegates to listen more fully to each other and to make decisions inclusive of a variety of perspectives.

The quest for visible unity of the churches will be central as delegates consider a statement on ecclesiology, "What Church is God Calling Us To Be Together?," drafted by the Faith and Order Commission. Its purpose is (1) to reflect what the churches can say together about the Church at this point in their journey; and (2) to invite them

into renewed conversation about “the quality and degree of their fellowship and communion” and about what still divides them.

In January 2001, the WCC launched the Decade to Overcome Violence: Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace (DOV). The Ninth Assembly will assess the impact of the DOV and commit anew to engage member churches as active agents of justice, reconciliation, and peace in their particular contexts.

A major thematic plenary will focus on viable alternatives to globalization. The critical work of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) on “Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and Earth” will inform many Reformed delegates. Delegates will be asked to consider a background document, “Alternative Globalization Addressing Peoples and the Earth (AGAPE)” as they pray for God’s grace to transform global economic systems that leave the majority of the world’s people and the earth vulnerable and suffering.

Yes, there is an air of excitement as Christians gather and seek together God’s will for our time. Across cultures, languages, traditions, and national differences, we will seek a common witness to the one God we seek to serve. As we pray, “God, in your grace, transform the world,” we look forward to our own transformation. ■

Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth

Excerpts from the statement of the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, July 30-August 13, 2004

We believe in God, Creator and Sustainer of all life, who calls us as partners in the creation and redemption of the world. We live under the promise that Jesus Christ came so that all might have life in fullness (Jn 10:10). Guided and upheld by the Holy Spirit we open ourselves to the reality of our world.

We believe that God is sovereign over all creation. “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof” (Ps.24:1).

Therefore, we reject the current world economic order which . . . def[ies] God’s covenant by excluding the poor, the vulnerable and the whole of creation from the fullness of life. We reject any claim of economic, political, and military empire which subverts God’s sovereignty over life and acts contrary to God’s just rule.

We believe that God has made a covenant with all of creation (Gen 9:8- 12). God has brought into being an earth community based on the vision of justice and peace. The covenant is a gift of grace that is not for sale in the market place (Is.55:1). It is an economy of grace for the household of all of creation. Jesus shows that this is an inclusive covenant in which the poor and marginalized are preferential partners, and calls us to put justice for the “least of these” (Mt. 25:40) at the center of the community of life. All creation is blessed and included in this covenant (Hos.2: 18ff).

Therefore we reject the culture of rampant consumerism and the competitive greed and selfishness . . . We believe that any economy . . ., given to us by God’s covenant to sustain life, is accountable to God.

We believe the economy exists to serve the dignity and well being of people in community, within the bounds of the sustainability of creation. . . .

Therefore, we reject the unregulated accumulation of wealth and limitless growth that has already cost the lives of millions and destroyed much of God’s creation.

We believe that God . . . calls for just relationships with all creation.

Therefore, we reject any ideology or economic regime that puts profits before people, does not care for all creation, and privatizes those gifts of God meant for all. We reject any teaching which justifies those who support, or fail to resist, such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

We believe that God calls us to stand with those who are victims of injustice. We know what the Lord requires of us: to do justice, love kindness, and walk in God’s way (Micah 6:8). . . .

Therefore, we reject any theology that claims that . . . poverty is the fault of the poor. We reject any form of injustice which destroys right relations — gender, race, class, disability, or caste. We reject any theology which affirms that human interests dominate nature.

We believe that . . . Jesus brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; he frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind (Lk. 4:18); he supports and protects the down-trodden, the stranger, the orphans and the widows.

Therefore, we reject any church practice or teaching which excludes the poor and care for creation in its mission. . . .

We believe that God calls men, women and children from every place together, rich and poor, to uphold the unity of the church and its mission, so that the reconciliation to which Christ calls can become visible.

Therefore, we reject any attempt in the life of the church to separate justice and unity.

We believe that we are called in the Spirit to account for the hope that is within us through Jesus Christ, and believe that justice shall prevail and peace shall reign.

We commit ourselves to seek a global covenant for justice in the economy and the earth in the household of God.

We humbly confess this hope, knowing that we, too, stand under the judgment of God’s justice.

We acknowledge the complicity and guilt of those who consciously or unconsciously benefit from the current neoliberal economic global system; we recognize that this includes both churches and members of our own Reformed family and therefore we call for confession of sin.

We acknowledge that we have become captivated by the culture of consumerism, and the competitive greed and selfishness of the current economic system. This has all too often permeated our very spirituality.

We believe, in obedience to Jesus Christ, that the church is called to confess, witness and act, even though the authorities and human law might forbid them, and punishment and suffering be the consequence (Acts 4:18ff). Jesus is Lord..

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Now we proclaim with passion that we will commit ourselves, our time and our energy to changing, renewing, and restoring the economy and the earth, choosing life, so that we and our descendants might live (Deut.30:19). ■

For the Common Good

A New Interfaith Center for Philadelphia

Sherri Hausser, associate pastor, Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church and a founding board member, and Abby Stamelman Hocky, executive director, Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

“What gives us hope in these times?” In February 2004, people of faith from Jerusalem and Philadelphia explored this question through a teleconference. On one side sat Muslims, Christians, and Jews who said, “Being in relationship is our source of hope — our action for peace that defies incident after incident of violent fissures in our daily lives.” On the other side sat a Philadelphia interfaith group formed in 2001 in response to fears stirred by daily headlines. “We were compelled by our distinctive faith commitments to reach out and build bridges of reconciliation. Years later, we still leave the busyness of our hospitals, businesses, schools, and religious institutions to gather monthly. It is the richness of these relationships, forged through dialogue, that draws us together and sustains our hope.

Crossing religious divides while working together for the common good is at the heart of the Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia. In the wake of the events of September 11, 2001, people of many faiths felt the urgency to join hands in the fight to rebuild trust, hope, and safety among the citizens of our region. “We must be the change we wish to see,” as Gandhi said. Taking seriously the responsibility to create the society we want to live in, religious and community leaders in Philadelphia created an organization to envision and support the birth of a new day.

The mission of the Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia is to advance mutual trust, understanding and cooperation among faith communities in order to work together for the common good of the region.

Assessing the need ... establishing the Center

Aware that other cities have reaped the benefits of having an interfaith center, a multifaith advisory committee was formed in September 2003 to assess the need for creating such a center in the Philadelphia area. The advisory committee began by identifying and meeting with heads of interfaith groups in our region, for the purpose of uncovering areas of continued and pressing need.

We ascertained that Greater Philadelphia is in many ways a model of religious pluralism; diverse religious organizations and congregations live side by side respectfully. At the same time, we discovered a crying need for meaningful interaction and communication among religious groups and for ways to reduce woeful ignorance about faith traditions not our own. We also discovered that the multiple ecumenical and interfaith groups in Greater Philadelphia focus primarily on particular social issues, e.g., housing, hunger, immigration, early childhood education, and aging. Until now, there has been no multifaith organization in our region that is principally dedicated to interreligious dialogue, education, and community building at the grassroots and leadership levels.

In January 2004 the Center received its non-profit incorporation in Pennsylvania, and a year later, we received our 501(c)(3) Federal tax-exempt status.

Building capacity through collaboration

While the Interfaith Center is new, its executive director, officers, and board members bring a collective legacy of experience and achievements in interfaith relations work. The board is comprised of leaders whose interfaith work has spanned Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, Baha’i, Hindu, and Sikh communities, as well as schools, neighborhoods, prisons, civic and governmental bodies, and college campuses.

Collaborative partnerships have already enhanced the capacity of the Center. We share office overhead with an

innovative nonprofit organization, the Arts & Spirituality Center, and are housed in the offices of the Philadelphia Cathedral. Philadelphia was one of three cities nationwide to receive a grant from Religions for Peace, U.S.A. to help establish an Interreligious Leaders Council, accompanied by consultations from the Rev. Clark Lobenstine, a PC(USA) minister and executive director of the Washington, D.C., interfaith conference and the Rev. Bud Heckman, executive director of Religions for Peace, U.S.A. Tabernacle United Church (Presbyterian-UCC) was the Center's fiscal sponsor in its first year of operation. The Center's best practices were informed by our participation in the Partner Cities Program of the Goldin Institute for International Partnership and Peace. The Interfaith Center's capacity has been strengthened by graduate student interns from the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work in our first two years of operation.



Program highlights

A few highlights provide a glimpse of our early programming:

- Christian, Jewish, and Muslim educators, each hoping to empower their students to better the world, are collaborating to design a 'shared values' immersion experience for teens engaged in a year-long interfaith community service initiative.
- Children from a Muslim, a Catholic, and a public school, who reside in the same neighborhood yet were strangers to one another, dialogued about their distinctive heritages as they depicted their hopes for safety and peace in a community arts project.
- Doctors, nurses, and other health care professionals, yearning to be responsive to diverse patients at critical moments, gathered to learn how to meet the spiritual and religious end-of-life needs of patients and families.
- Law enforcement officials, community relations professionals, and religious leaders, seeking skills for defusing tensions, joined together for a workshop led by the author of UN training materials on conflict transformation.
- Over 250 people from diverse backgrounds experienced the sacred tapestry of our region when they gathered to dedicate the Interfaith Center.

The Center's largest initiative, beginning this fall, is a collaboration of local synagogues, mosques, and churches in a program modeled after Chicago's Interfaith Youth Core. Entitled "Walking the Walk: Values in Action," the Interfaith Youth Service Learning Initiative will be piloted in two urban Philadelphia neighborhoods. This project will engage 30 high school students from diverse religious backgrounds in a year-long opportunity to strengthen their own identities, develop intergroup understanding, serve the community, and learn leadership skills.

Investing in the vision: sources of funding

The Center is implementing a four-pronged strategy to achieve sustainable funding from a multifaith individual donor base, foundations and corporations, religious organizations and congregations, and program income.

The Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia is committed to creating innovative initiatives that will build strong and harmonious neighborhoods and workplaces. These times call upon us to model new ways to open hearts and minds to one another so that we can join hands to invest in the welfare of our region. Reflecting on a world beset by war, President Harry Truman said, "It is understanding that gives us an ability to have peace."

To Do: • Visit <www.interfaithcenterpa.org>

for information or contact the center at 3723 Chestnut St., Philadelphia, PA 19104, phone (215)222-1012.

• Visit <www.rfpusa.org> to learn about Religions for Peace, U.S.A. (formerly WCRP-USA), a multireligious organization in which the PC(USA) has actively participated since its inception. ■

Becoming Vulnerable to the ‘Other’

A personal reflection on a Christian-Jewish Visit to Israel-Palestine

Jay Rock, Coordinator for Interfaith Relations and a trip participant

On September 18-22, sixteen Jewish and Christian staff persons from the United States traveled together to Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Ramallah. Our purpose was to enter more fully into each other’s perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To this end, each group — Jews and Christians — planned two days of the visit. We put ourselves in each other’s hands to meet and interact with those who are our respective partners and informants regarding the situation in the ‘Holy Land.’

The trip was planned for a group who had been meeting since May 2004 to discuss our divergent understandings and approaches to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as an issue that divides us, undermining our ability to work together for the peace we all desire. Jewish participants came from the American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, Anti-Defamation League, Jewish Council for Public Affairs, Union of Reform Judaism, and United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. Christians came from the Alliance of Baptists, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, National Council of Churches, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church.

Deepened trust

As the final statement of the group notes, “We came to see and we came to listen — and to try to understand the human dimensions of an unholy situation in a land most holy. . . . In session after session, we confronted the realities on the ground and gained new understandings of, and an appreciation for, the deep complexities of the conflict that consumes Israelis, Palestinians and us alike. . . . While there were many difficult moments, our trust in each other deepened. We sustain hope in each other as agents of peace. We affirm hope and faith in our two religious communities as partners and advocates for a two-state solution.”

Taking this journey together fostered a significant deepening of relationships among participants. We were able to talk openly about what we were seeing and hearing, and we discovered the complexity of each other’s emotions, critique, principles, and commitments in relation to the conflict. I hope that this will have positive results, beyond this small circle of people, and lead to more positive engagements with each other as local and national communities.

Difficulties

Critiquing the other and not the self

One difficulty we encountered was that of “you” language. I heard Israelis talking about what is true for Palestinians and describing what Palestinians believe. Similarly, I heard Palestinians talking about what is true for Israelis and describing what Israelis believe. Many seemed more comfortable offering a picture of the other than commenting on their own community. It was sometimes difficult to get such speakers to talk about, and especially to critique, their own community’s views and concerns.

Nonetheless, we heard multiple voices, Israeli and Palestinian, critical of many aspects of current Israeli policies and of current Palestinian leadership. Almost unanimously, these voices spoke in support of all who are working for a solution that will result in “a secure, viable and independent Palestinian state alongside an equally secure State of Israel,” and of the necessity of such a peace for all the people of the region. While we heard much pessimism about the possibilities and current realities, there seems to be general commitment to the goal.

Differing perceptions

Basic and deep differences remain in the perception of the Israelis and Palestinians with whom we spoke regarding

what lies at the root of the conflict: Many Palestinians lifted up occupation as the primary issue that must be addressed, and many Israelis saw occupation as unacceptable — corrosive to Israel and Israeli moral formation — but as something thrust upon them and necessary as a temporary measure. Many Israelis spoke of security as the basic issue, and Palestinians raised serious questions about the actual intent of measures that are a regular feature of the current situation yet seem to serve an agenda of expansion or division rather than security. All agreed that there is no other course than to work together for peace.

The human rights or humanitarian issues raised up by B'tselem (an Israeli human rights organization), the United Nations, and others include lack of access for Palestinians, the *route* of the security barrier and the hardship it is inflicting on certain Palestinian villages and families, home demolitions, and the deteriorated economy in the Palestinian areas.

The commitment to nonviolent resistance among Palestinian leaders with whom we talked is strong and consistent. Understandably, however, Israeli fears of violence are not easily put to rest, even after nine months of

relative calm and the construction of a barrier. It is essential to support those Palestinians and Israelis who are working for reconciliation and a two-state solution with concrete actions that will help sustain their work.

Many Palestinians and others critiqued the Palestinian leadership. They noted the difficult challenges facing the leaders, such as establishing sufficient law and order, disarming the many security units that Arafat established, and building social and democratic institutions to serve the Palestinian people. They spoke openly of a lack of focus among leaders and of corruption among senior Palestinian Authority leadership (serving to foster the people's support for Hamas, seen as "incorruptible"). All were highly critical of the goals and methods of Hamas, while noting the local social institutions they have built. Many recommended that those interested in peace consider direct involvement in building democratic institutions and in doing economic and social development in local villages.

We also heard very sharp critique of Israeli unilateralism, from some Israelis as well as from Palestinians. If Israel and the U.S. cannot support a multilateral approach, for which many affirmed a need, can there not be support for a 'parallel unilateralism'?

Experiencing the pain

All of us were affected by our visits together to the wall/fence — and to people directly affected by it — and to the new Holocaust museum at Yad vaShem. Such experiences of the pain and scarring of people are important parts of a basic understanding of the situation. Encountering these realities together led us to a greater vulnerability with each other and greater openness to look at things afresh.

Encountering realities together led to greater vulnerability and openness to look at things afresh.

Individual voices

Let me mention a few specific interactions:

- Lutheran Bishop Munib Younan suggested that while Israelis and Palestinians must let go of what has been done, there can be no forgetting. What is needed is an accounting, akin to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, followed by forgiving and then moving forward. This idea met with a very mixed reception among the Israeli and American Jews who heard him but is intriguing.
- Khalil Shikaki, director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Social Research, discussed his polling results showing that Palestinians see the right of return as a 'sacred value' but that very few would want to exercise that right in actual fact, especially within territory controlled by Israel. Only 10% said that they would return to a place

within Israel, and 50% of that number would do so only to areas in Palestinian control. Over 50% are against the use of violence. Shikaki was the person who most clearly suggested that the right of return is for Palestinians what the right to a Jewish homeland in Israel/ Palestine is to Israelis and to Jews.

- The Rev. Mitri Raheb, of the International Christian Center in Bethlehem, commented on the failure of leadership on both sides; he said there was a need on both sides for those who support peace to convince those who take more hardline positions. Both the original Israeli Zionist dream and the dream of early Palestinian nationalism have failed, he suggested. “We need to take the prophetic stance that is in both of our traditions and say that the current situation is a mess and unacceptable; then we need to care about each other’s freedom.”

Heartbreak and commitment

Returning to Israel and Palestine filled me with heartbreak. The place is so beautiful — the stone, the buildings from the histories of Judaism and Christianity, the terraced hillsides that still support olive trees, figs, cedars, gardens, even joy. And yet this same place is so filled with fear, ugliness, sorrow, and barriers to peace and life.

One of my strongest impressions from the trip is of the plumes of dust everywhere from the busy pace of current construction. The building of the security barrier, as a fence in the more open areas or as a wall in the more urban areas, goes on without stop. Construction is also continuous on bypass roads for settlers and on roads to take Palestinians from point to point without going through certain territory. Buildings are going up in and around Jerusalem, on both sides of the Green Line. Access barriers are being built or moved. The ecological havoc is hardly counted, given the effect of all of this on social and economic life, primarily of the Palestinian community, but of Israel as well.



May there be peace, and may we reach even across deep differences to be peacemakers together! ■

To Do: If you are planning a trip to the Holy Land together with Jewish colleagues, consider suggesting that you arrange a part of the trip. Contact Jay Rock for counsel about making a proposal and for assistance in formulating appropriate plans to meet Palestinian partners of the PC(USA).

PC(USA) Receives Social Justice Award from Muslim Society

Moderator speaks to convention

Over the Labor Day weekend, Presbyterians were among Christians who attended the 48th annual convention of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), and the PC(USA) was recognized at the Interfaith Unity Banquet there with an award for accomplishments in social justice. Moderator Rick Ufford-Chase received the award and spoke.

ISNA is the largest Muslim organization in North America, an umbrella body whose activities bring together Muslims through both the convention and active organizations of social scientists and medical professionals, youth, young adults, particular ethnic communities, and women. It supports the work of the Fiqh Council of North America, a body of Muslim legal scholars and heads of communities that considers issues of Islamic practice for American Muslims.

A primary emphasis of this year’s convention was education and advocacy around a Fiqh Council decision condemning “religious extremism and the use of violence against innocent lives.” This *fatwa* states, “there is no justification in Islam for extremism or terrorism.” Targeting civilians’ life and property through suicide bombings or any other method of attack is *haram* — or forbidden — and those who commit these barbaric acts are criminals, not ‘martyrs’.”

Christians at the convention

For the first time, an ecumenical Christian seminar at the ISNA convention was organized by the Interfaith Relations Office of the National Council of Churches, together with ISNA and the PC(USA) Interfaith Relations Office. Those who attended were warmly welcomed and accorded full convention privileges — plenary and workshop attendance, observing prayers, and talking and eating with some of the 35,000 Muslims attendees. They were also free to visit the education, relief, and advocacy exhibits of Muslim organizations as well as to shop among the stalls of clothiers, homeware companies, and booksellers in the bazaar.

Seminar participants met with Muslim leaders for focused discussion and talked with Christian educators about theological issues raised by their experiences.

Jay Rock, PC(USA) interfaith coordinator, says, “Building respectful and well-informed relations with Muslim neighbors is part of our call as disciples of Christ. Along with opportunities for local interaction, an event such as the ISNA convention helps us move forward in this ministry.”

Award citation

As the PC(USA) was cited at the convention’s interfaith banquet, the program read:

“In the aftermath of September 11, the [PC(USA)] took a unique step of faith in an effort to engage conversation and seek understanding. It launched an ‘Interfaith Listening Project’ . . . This past year, [it] launched another round of these listening sessions because ‘the needs for Christians and Muslims to listen to one another and talk with one another is urgent.’ In another action . . . , the [PC(USA)] took a controversial step to implement its convictions for peace and justice in the Middle East . . . The Church also initiated accountability measures for multinational corporations operating in conflict zones where continuing occupation and violence against innocent people are regrettable realities.

“. . . the Church gave serious attention to . . . *Violence, Religion, and Terrorism* in an effort to help Presbyterians ‘understand more fully and accurately the phenomenon of terrorism and its probable causes.’ The Church proclaimed terrorism immoral because it wrongfully and deliberately attacks innocent civilians, violating the criteria of both just peacemaking and justifiable war. However, it also said that Presbyterians are called to listen to the message of those who feel compelled to resort to terror. Recognizing that the pursuit of justice may reduce acts of terrorism, the Church urges Presbyterians to join in the struggle to overcome conditions of injustice. . . .” ■

To Do: Plan to attend the ecumenical seminar at the Labor Day 2006 ISNA convention. Contact Susan Abraham for information (see p.2).

Award Acceptance Remarks of Elder Rick Ufford-Chase

“Thank you for this opportunity to be with you in this gathering. It is wonderful to be with you, who are our neighbors and fellow American citizens. And it is a great and humbling honor to receive this award from you on behalf of the Presbyterian Church.

“ I have a confession to make to you. I was until recently someone who knew nothing about Islam and Muslims. Then, last May, I got into a car with staff from the Presbyterian Center in Louisville and drove up to Plainfield, Indiana, to the headquarters of the Islamic Society. I must admit that I felt hesitant, even a little fearful, of going into that imposing building. But then you, Dr. Syeed [ISNA secretary general], came to welcome us. You welcomed me with a warm hug. From that moment I knew that this was going to be all right! You would help me learn what I needed to know.

“We talked about issues and concerns that we share, and you answered my questions. I learned very quickly how important it is for our church and ISNA to have a strong relationship. There is much that we can do together.

“As I accept this Peace and Justice Award, I am aware that, even as you are honoring us in part for the witness for peace we are trying to make in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian situation, these same actions are a matter of concern and even alarm for other interfaith partners. I pray we will be able to be faithful to our relationships with one another and to work together for the peace that is our heart’s desire.

“I am a Matthew 25 Christian: I believe that God is interested much more in what we *do* than in what we *say*. In that passage of the Bible, God’s judgment of us is linked to how we treat the “least” of our sisters and brothers; God’s eye is on our *acts* of love rather than our *professions* of love for our fellow human beings. I believe that we share this commitment to faithfulness in practice, in our living day by day.

“I thank you for this Award with a full heart. We have found ways to cooperate in the past and have much more we can do together for all the people of this world and for the glory of God. I take this as the mark of a beginning, rather than any sort of conclusion.” ■

Critical Moment in Interreligious Dialogue

A movement from the margins to the center of WCC life

This past June, the World Council of Churches (WCC) convened a conference that brought together over a hundred people from a spectrum of religions in order to assess with them what has been learned through interreligious dialogue in the past and to share visions for the future. While recognizing the ways dialogue has facilitated relationships, peace, and understanding, the WCC identified the current time as a “critical moment” in which much remains to be done.

The WCC Central Committee initiated an interreligious relations program, then called “Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies,” in 1971, when it was considered risky. Now, WCC general secretary Samuel Kobia said that interreligious relations and dialogue should no longer be on the margins of the work of the WCC but in the center. “The main challenge in a globalized context,” he said, “is how to live together our diverse identities in one world. Unfortunately, increased relations between communities have sometimes been marred by tension and fear.”

Collaboration to provide a moral base

WCC Central Committee moderator H.H. Aram, Catholicos of Cilicia, called the world “sick morally, politically, and ecologically.” In this environment, he said, people of various religions need to foster broader collaboration. Concerns that, in his opinion, call for common action today include promoting tolerance, building peace with justice, supporting UN peace/justice/ reconciliation initiatives, promoting global ethics, and identifying shared values through which to provide globalization with a moral basis.

The world is sick morally, politically, and ecologically. In this environment, people of various religions need to foster collaboration to provide globalization with a moral basis.

Conditions for credible dialogue

Aram also offered his list of essential conditions for credible dialogue:

- respect for the integrity and distinctiveness of each religion
- an atmosphere of trust where existing differences can be clearly spelled out
- recognition of limitations and risks — humility deepening confidence and awareness of vulnerability building community
- a concrete and realistic context in which the aim is to find convergence growing out of an exchange of various perspectives and experiences

- listening in a spirit of belonging to a common humanity, looking at each other through the eyes of God rather than through our own traditions
- affirming identity in *relation* to the other, not in opposition
- a common search for truth

A panel at the close of the conference envisioned characteristics needed for the future: humility, healthy self-criticism, enlarged community, interpersonal relationships across religious lines, rejection of violence, recognition of complexity, and movement away from overly simplistic thinking.

To Do:

- Find “Critical Moment” conference speeches at <www.wcc-coe.org>.
- Become a part of the new PC(USA) ecumenical/interfaith network in order to be in contact with others who are engaged in relationship building. Contact Susan Abraham for information.

WCC Assembly Plans

A partnership invitation

The WCC Assembly theme is a prayer. Indian theologian Valson Thampu has written, “In the Bible, prayer is infused into the partnership between God and human beings. To pray is not, hence, to shift responsibility to God but to prepare ourselves for the tasks in partnership. To pray in truth is to be willing to work alongside with God in addressing the issue we pray for.” Christians around the world are invited to be in partnership with the Assembly in the days ahead.

To Do:

At home

View postings on the web at <www.wcc-assembly.info>. Find information on consensus-style decision-making; download new songs on the theme; see Bible studies outlines; get the news or documents. Congregations or governing bodies will find material suitable for small group or public use. Contact Susan Abraham for help.

At the Assembly

The PC(USA) will be contributing to the meeting place, the *Mutirão*, at the Assembly and will convene a seminar to facilitate participation. It is also possible to register directly with the WCC at the web site <www.wcc-assembly.info> for individual attendance. ■

National Workshop on Christian Unity

May 8-11, 2006, is the date for the next annual workshop, to be held in San Jose, California, at the Fairmont Hotel. The local planning committee for this important ecumenical education event is chaired by Presbyterian Paul Masquelier. All information will be available on the web site by November, at <<http://www.nwcu.us/events/index.htm#SanJose>>.

To Do: Presbyterians are asked to register through Kathy Reeves’ office. Contact Susan Abraham for a registration brochure in December.

32nd Annual Seminar for Clergy and Laity

This annual travel study event, on international ecumenism as seen from Geneva, Switzerland, will next be offered on September 27-October 5, 2006. The seminar meets with col leagues serving in the Ecumenical Center in Geneva, 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. Participants will also enjoy a full-day excursion to the Orthodox Center in Chambesy and the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey.

Accommodations are provided at the John Knox International Reformed Center. The cost is \$1,200.00/person sharing a room (\$300.00 single supplement). Included in the cost are all meals except Sunday lunch, a half-day guided walking tour of Geneva, a full-day sightseeing tour to Gruyere and Chateau de Chillon including a fondue/raclette lunch in a traditional Swiss restaurant, and a local bus pass.

To Do: For more information and registration forms, contact Susan Abraham.

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Plan a community celebration for January 18-25, 2006, under the theme “Where Two or Three Are Gathered in My Name” (Matt. 18: 15-22). For information and materials, contact Susan Abraham or visit <www.geii.org>.

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