

ECU-DIALOGUE

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Be the Network: Initiating and Being the Ecumenical and Interfaith Network of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Ashley Seaman, representative of the General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical Relations at the meeting she describes and a minister member of Denver Presbytery who recently served on the WCC Central Committee

Can you see men and women moving in the streets of second century Ephesus, before work, navigating to the house church to gather for communion?

See them sharing prayers, stories of Jesus, scripture, the sustenance of the Eucharist, song, and the benediction – “Make every effort to seek the visible unity of Christ’s church” (Ephesians 4:1-6).

Perhaps, in the improvisation of their pre-dawn worship, they shared bonds of unity and signs of Christ’s peace through exchanges like, “I know exactly what you are talking about.” Or, “Have you thought about this alternative action or word when you encounter criticism?”

Can you see men and women navigating roadways and airports in order to gather in Louisville, Kentucky, on December 8-10, 2005, to initiate the Ecumenical and Interfaith Network of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)? It is a different picture from Ephesus, yet there was “church” gathered by the same Spirit in the same love of Christ, hungering for unity’s nourishment. And there we gathered to share prayers, stories of Jesus and of the Church and of the blessed, inseparable relation of all people.

Words buzzing around our table may have been like the Ephesians’ communion talk: “I tried that, too.

You may want to think about....” “I recommend this speaker...and book ...and funding source.” “Please tell me more about your metro interfaith council – and about the Week of Christian Unity and your ecumenical writing project.”

The gathering of such a network of Presbyterians who are engaged in ecumenical [i.e., relations between Christian traditions, making Christian



unity visible] and interfaith ministries made so much sense that the question, “Shall we form a national network?” met an immediate, “Yes!”

The next questions, “How? And to do/ be what?” elicited streams of ideas – create an idea exchange, connect grass roots efforts and organizers, establish a resource library, make space for dialogue and encouragement. In the following moments, days, and month, we formed a web site, agreed to submit our experiences, theologies, and challenges to the web site, and formed a steering team.

Until I was surrounded by these men and women of many ages, hometowns, and vocations who were enlivened and involved in ecumenical and interfaith ministries, I did not realize how isolated I felt in my local work and commitments. Irony bloomed and exploded in those moments. How could I be so committed to Christian unity and human community and feel like an abnormal pastor? Surely I caused this isolation amidst the fast, busy balancing in my life as I served a single congregation’s needs. And I intensified this isolation by my fears, tired of standing for ecumenism and interfaith cultures of peace in the midst of a status quo of privatization and competition among congregations and denominations.

Therefore, the signs of peace and bonds of unity in the church at Ephesus and in Louisville are epiphanies for me, as well. “You have seen Pentecostals from Brazil and Ethiopian Orthodox priests and Catholic sisters called to worship by drummers in Zimbabwe, too! You can show me new ways to make every effort to seek the visible unity of Christ’s church!”

Are you hungering for the nourishment of Christian unity? Do you seek to come out of isolation and experience the presence of Presbyterians who are exploring and initiating ecumenical and interfaith commitments?



Here are ways to be the network:

1. Visit the network's website – a space for dialogue, idea exchange, encouragement, and information – at <www.eif-pcusa.org>.
2. Register your interest in being a network member. (See page 8.)
3. Participate in the next national net-

work gathering on February 1-2, 2007, in Washington, D.C. (immediately following the National Workshop for Christian Unity on January 29-February 1).

4. Engage others or independently journal about these questions:

- Why and how am I involved in ecumenical and/or interfaith activities?

- What book, movie, song, or person would I recommend to someone who wants to grow into a deeper practice of ecumenical and/or interfaith relations?

Welcome to the Ecumenical and Interfaith Network of the PC(USA)!

The Church Gathered

The 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches

Judy Angleberger, pastor of Steffin Hill Presbyterian Church, Beaver Falls, Pa., GAC member, and PC(USA) delegate to the 9th Assembly of the World Council of Church

It felt like the world was at my door – Barbara from Sri Lanka, Trond from Norway, George from Ethiopia, Sarah from Jamaica, Pawel from Poland, Maria from Finland, Frank from Germany, Sam from Taiwan, Will from Canada, Agnes from Kenya, Andre from Egypt, Nora from Lebanon, Peter from Switzerland, Renta from Japan, Anita from Latvia, Elisee from Rwanda, and Gregor from Australia – such an array of people from around the world, all professing faith in Jesus Christ. It was the holy catholic, apostolic Church gathered for the World Council of Churches (WCC) meeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil. It was amazing! This must be how it will look and feel when we gather around the banqueting table of our Lord – people of all colors and languages and nations. “Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God” (Luke 13:29). What a privilege to be among the Christians of the world.

Delegated to do the work of the Assembly

I attended the Assembly of the World Council of Churches as a delegate by virtue of occupying the position of chair of the Worldwide Ministries Division of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The rest of our PC(USA) delegation included Clifton Kirkpatrick, stated clerk; Robina Winbush, associate stated clerk for ecumenical and agency relations; Vanessa Davila-Luciano, a young adult delegate; Brady Radford, a young adult alternate delegate; and Marian McClure, advisor to the delegation. How encouraging it was to see many young adults at this Assembly with a deep commitment to ecumenism. They seem so willing to cross barriers and divisions in order to work and worship together.

My committee assignment was to serve on the Public Issues Committee. We dealt with such global concerns as water for life, UN reform, elimination of nuclear arms, responsibility to protect vulnerable populations, Latin America, trafficking of women, terrorism and human rights, and mutual respect with people of other faiths (in response to the publication of the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad). As we worked on these issues we heard various perspectives and opinions from our colleagues in other parts of the world.

Sometimes it was uncomfortable being from the United States, sitting in the committee and even in the plenary sessions, hearing others' views about our

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government's policies. It caused me to listen carefully to other peoples' points of view, however, and to consider these issues from their perspectives and experiences.

Gathered to be led by God's grace

There were 750 delegates representing 349 member churches (denominations / communions) from over a hundred countries around the world, accounting for over half a billion Christians. Roman Catholics and Pentecostals are partnering with the WCC but are not currently members; they represent well over a billion Christians. In addition to the delegates there were over three thousand observers and visitors in attendance. Wonderful exhibits, Bible studies, and workshops were available to all four thousand participants in the part of the program called the mutirao. Mutirao is a Portuguese word which means a meeting place and an opportunity to come together to work on a common cause. The Christian world came together for two weeks in Porto Alegre.

The Christian community gathered together for worship under a huge, colorful tent every morning and evening. We surrounded our work each day with confession, supplication, praise, thanksgiving, and the word of God. The liturgy was varied, the language was diverse, the symbols were provocative, the dress was colorful, and the music was rhythmic and lively.

If two billion Christians in our world came together in unity and common purpose and were led by God's grace, indeed we could change the world.

We had the privilege of hearing outstanding speakers in the plenary sessions, such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu; the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams; and the President of Brazil, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

We also heard from many other sisters and brothers in the faith about the concerns impacting their lives. We had opportunities to connect with many partner churches with whom we work in mission and I was able to meet Christians from churches in our world of which I had never heard. What a growing experience.

The Assembly focused much of its energies on economic justice, overcoming violence, Latin America, Christian identity, and church unity. The theme for the Assembly was, "God, in your grace, transform the world." I was struck by the theme as we focused in worship on God's grace and as we discussed issues that could change peoples' lives. I realized that if two billion Christians in our world came together in unity and common purpose and were led by God's grace, indeed we could change the world.

The next WCC Assembly will be held in 2013. In the interim period, the Central Committee, of which I am a newly elected member, will guide the council's work under the leadership of the general secretary, the Rev. Dr. Samuel Kobia, and the executive committee led by its moderator, the Rev. Dr. Walter Altmann, until the world of Christians gathers again to witness to and celebrate God's grace. Perhaps in this "meantime" we will indeed see the grace of God at work, transforming the world. May it be so.

To Do:

- A significant number of Presbyterians were at the Assembly. If you wish to invite one of them to visit your congregation, middle governing body, or ecumenical council, contact Susan Abraham to discover who would be geographically closest to you.
- Make use of articles, press releases, and documents available after the Assembly. See the web site of the PC(USA) Ecumenical and Interfaith Network at <www.eif-pcusa.org/html/wcc_assembly.html> for links.
- Use worship materials from the Assembly and, using web links, find the message of the Assembly, which is a prayer.

In part, the Message prayer reads:

By the power and guidance of your Holy Spirit, O God, may our prayers never be empty words but an urgent response to your living Word . . .
Open our hearts to love and to see that all people are made in your image . . .
Transform us in the offering of ourselves so that we may be your partners in transformation . . .
as we await with eager longing the full revelation of your rule in the coming of a new heaven and a new earth.
God, in your grace,
transform the world.

Christian Churches Together Formed A decision recently reached

On March 28-31, 34 churches and national Christian bodies formally decided to establish the broadest, most inclusive Christian body in the U.S. News of CCT is available at <www.christianchurchestogether.com>.

On What Basis Do We Relate to Neighbors of Other Faiths? Presbyterian guidance made accessible for use

Jay T. Rock, Coordinator for Interfaith Relations

Many Presbyterians ask about the practical and theological bases for relations with men and women of religious traditions outside the Christian family. Over the past thirty years, our church has adopted a number of papers and policies that provide such guidance. These have been organized and are now being made accessible on the interfaith relations pages of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) web site, at <www.pcusa.org/interfaith>.

The Constitution

Some of our guidance is found in the Book of Order and Book of Confessions.

The Confession of 1967 says,

The Christian finds parallels between other religions and his own and must approach all religions with openness and respect (9.42).

The Book of Order states,

... the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will seek new opportunities for conversation and understanding with non-Christian religious bodies in order that interests and concerns may be shared and common action undertaken where compatible means and aims exist (G-15.0104).

Principles for Interfaith Dialogue

Beyond these and similar statements, the primary policy document of our church in the area of interfaith relations is the "Presbyterian Principles for Interfaith Dialogue" adopted by the 211th General Assembly (1999). This document provides Presbyterians with six principles to guide us in our engagement with neighbors of other faiths. These principles are wide ranging and contain both practical suggestions and theological affirma-

tions. The principles include the statements,

When God gives us courage to engage in the giving and receiving – the listening and speaking – of dialogue, Jesus is present. Through the power of his Spirit, we are enabled to be truly ourselves in authentic relationships (in section 4).

We need to recognize that others' religions have brought them comfort, identity, and meaning. We are not called to approach others in judgment but in awareness of God's limitless love and grace (in section 6).



Documents adopted by the General Assembly

In addition to the Principles, the General Assembly has at various times adopted papers and resolutions that provide particular guidance. In this category we find, among others, the paper, "Toward a Theological Understanding of the Relationship between Christians and Jews," adopted for study and reflection by the 199th General Assembly (1987) together with action mandates. A parallel paper on Islam was adopted at the same Assembly.

The 209th General Assembly (1997) adopted "Respectful Presence: An Understanding of Interfaith Prayer and Celebration from a Reformed Christian Perspective" to assist those persons and groups who are involved with interfaith prayer and worship.

The 214th General Assembly (2002) commended for Presbyterian study the document, "Striving Together in Dialogue: A Muslim-Christian Call for Reflection and Action," the fruit of a decade-long process of Christian-Muslim dialogue facilitated by the World Council of Churches.

An additional source of policy regarding interfaith relations is found in "Building Community Among Strangers," adopted by the 211th General Assembly (1999). This statement notes:

Central to the ongoing story of the Bible is God's long-term, patient, merciful purpose of recreating a human community in which the love of God and neighbor becomes a fact of history.

In the spirit of Jesus Christ, we are called to maintain a respectful presence with people of other faiths. We commit ourselves to meet such persons with gentleness and humility and to seek to learn more about the worshiping practices and faiths that they represent as a way of deepening our own.

And we acknowledge that we are called, by the God who created us and the world in which we live, to remain faithful in our proclamation of the gospel in Jesus Christ, and to work with others irrespective of their practices and faith commitments, toward a world marked by justice and peace and in which the whole creation is nurtured and protected.

Still another resource is "Turn to the Living God: A Call to Evangelism in Jesus Christ's Way," adopted by the 203rd General Assembly (1991). This evangelism policy (which includes a quotation from a WCC document states:

With other Christians we are called to make joyous witness to persons of other faiths in a spirit of respect, openness, and honesty.... As our Christian affirmation meets the faith of others, we are not called to respond in judgment but in awareness of the limitless, saving presence, power, and grace of God. The spirit that is to inform our witness among people of other faiths "presupposes our presence with them, sensitivity to their deepest faith commitments and experiences, willingness to be their servants for Christ's sake, affirmation

of what God has done and is doing among them and [God's] love for them" (quote from the "Message" of the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism in San Antonio, World Council of Churches).

To Do:

- The documents and affirmations of our church for the guidance of Presbyterians in their relations with neighbors of other faiths have been organized and are in the process of being

made available as this issue of ECU-DIALOGUE goes to press. Visit <www.pcusa.org/interfaith>; look for the tree logo on the home page and click on it. If you wish a paper copy rather than using the internet, please contact Susan Abraham (see box on page 2).

- Share the guidance from General Assembly actions with other Presbyterians who have questions about relating to persons of other faiths.

An Ecumenical Visit with U.S. Muslims A study seminar

Interested Christians are invited to spend the Labor Day weekend, September 1-4, 2006, in Chicago, Illinois, as guests at the annual convention of the Islamic Society of North America. Some thirty to forty thousand Muslims attend this yearly gathering. This is an opportunity for Christians to join a wide variety of American Muslims at presentations on current topics and educational workshops, in socializing,

Deen Mohammad's Mosque Cares society.

The organizer is the Interfaith Relations Office of the National Council of Churches in cooperation with the Islamic Society of North America. Registration will be \$100.00.

To Do:

For more information, contact the NCC Interfaith Relations, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, NY 10015; phone (212)870-2560; e-mail shanta@nccusa.org.

have a full-day excursion to the Orthodox Center in Chambesy and the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey.

The cost of the seminar is \$1,200.00 per person sharing a room (\$300.00 single supplement). This will cover the expenses for all meals except Sunday lunch, 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.

To Do:

For more information or to express interest in being part of the seminar, contact Susan Abraham (see page 2 box for details).



and in exploring exhibits and bazaar offerings. Christians are welcome to observe Muslim prayers. They will also meet in special sessions for prayer and reflection and to talk with Muslim leaders about questions, concerns and opportunities for working together. This year, the study group will cross Chicago to attend a portion of the parallel convention of Warith

Ecumenical Study Travel in Geneva The 32nd Annual Seminar for Clergy and Laity

The Clergy-Laity Seminar of September 27- October 5, 2006, will offer an opportunity to learn about the international ecumenical scene. It will focus on the Ecumenical Center in Geneva, Switzerland, 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 agencies. In addition, the seminar will



Hospitality – A Matter of Life and Death?

Courtney Erwin, *InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington D.C.* [IFC], Coordinator for Religious Liberty

The Bedouins of the Sinai Peninsula are known for their hospitality. To them, hospitality extends beyond mere social grace and proper etiquette. It is an act of honor and a sacred duty. The Bedouins long history as nomadic tribes-people living in a hauntingly barren and unforgiving desert taught them that inhospitality was akin to murder. Today, the Sinai's rugged landscape is peppered with luxury resorts and cellular telephone towers, alleviating the necessity of hospitality for survival. Even so, the Bedouins continue to live by the words of the Prophet Muhammad – “whoever believes in God and the day of resurrection must respect his guest”– and invite those who are weary of the unrelenting sun and stinging sand to share sweet tea and friendly conversation in the shade of their tents.

Few Bedouins have crossed the Atlantic to reside in the United States and yet their spirit of generosity and welcome – regardless of race, religion, origin, or ethnicity – infuses the interfaith relations in metropolitan Washington. Recently, newspapers published a dozen Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad as a terrorist. In some parts of the world, embassies burned, protesters rioted, and people died. In metropolitan Washington, however, Muslims reflected on the words and actions of the Prophet himself and launched an educational campaign – titled “Explore Muhammad” – that has included open houses and dialogues in many different houses of worship. On Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoons, mosques, churches, and temples have opened their doors and invited those who are weary of hostility, misunderstanding, and isolationism to share coffee, tea or punch, cookies, and, in one instance, home-cooked Afghani treats.

Through this initiative, peoples of all faiths have been encouraged to explore not only the prophet of Islam but also Muslim prayer, the contours of free speech, the halls of churches, and, most importantly, each other. In an upstairs room of an urban Unitarian Universalist church, a self-proclaimed Humanist conversed with women in head scarves. At a mosque in Virginia, in anticipation of the open house, the director requested fifty chairs and food for seventy (just in case). The older man in charge of both looked skeptical. The next day, the director saw one hundred and fifty chairs neatly arranged. Before his eyes, he saw them all filled by members of his congregation and visitors from the community. When he nervously inquired about the food, the older man smiled broadly and told him that he had prepared enough for two hundred.

At a Methodist church, after listening to a Muslim imam recount stories about his beloved prophet, a young woman stood and said, “When I came to this [open house], I knew I would hear ideas of interest to me. But you have also touched my heart.” At the end of the two hours, both hosts and guests have taken a few steps toward knowing each other, steps that began by walking into another's sacred space – their houses of worship.

This collaboration between the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington, the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), and local faith

communities will continue for one year. Thereafter, the initiative will end but the moments of enlightenment and the remembrances of kindness will endure.

The Sinai has changed but so has a world where cartoons can lead to global chaos. Perhaps hospitality is needed as much today as it was centuries ago. It still seems to be a matter of life and death.



Hospitality to the Stranger and the Poor in the World's Faiths

Mark Hoelter, *IFC Coordinator for Grassroots InterFaith Dialogue*

Confronted by a stranger – even more, a stranger who is dirt poor – what would Jesus do? One could answer that, in some respects, he would do the same as Abraham or as Muhammad – or as Gautama, Krishna, Lao Tsu, or Kung Fu Tsu.

Special attention to the stranger and the poor is threaded through at least all the classical traditions. It is among the highest common denominators between different faiths and, as such, perhaps offers a test for new religions and new expressions of the classical traditions: Do they include injunctions concerning the stranger and the poor in some important measure?

There is a dynamic, resonant pattern in hospitality to the stranger that helps

make interfaith dialogues possible. At the same time, it is itself a fruitful line of inquiry for interfaith dialogues. Between the faiths, how similar is the motive for attention to the stranger and the beggar? Do the expressions of this special attention take similar forms? Is this special attention more central or more peripheral to the specific faith way? And surely also, the key question might be, “Brother, Sister, how are you doing in living out this expression of your faith?”

When we think of modern faith leaders who have demonstrated special care for the poor and the stranger, certain names come immediately to mind: Mahatma Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Abraham Heschel, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., Thich Nhat Hanh, to name a few.

Strikingly, these are often people who studied faith traditions other than their own, who engaged in dialogues with leaders of faith traditions other than their own, who remained dynamically faithful to their own tradition yet also allowed their faith to be influenced by the other, and, most often, who profoundly influenced the leaders with whom they dialogued as well as millions of others in the world. Perhaps their exemplary interfaith lives as well as their faith lives – lived with special care for the stranger and the poor – are a paradigm test for the rest of us.

To Do:

- See the author's collection of sayings on hospitality from various faiths at <http://www.eif-pcusa.org/html/publications1.html>, under Ecu-Dialogue.
- If you have stories about interfaith hospitality and dialogue, go to www.eif-pcusa.org and click to share your model.
- See guidelines for “opening your mosque” at www.cair-net.org/Muhammad/page.asp?pageid=oym.

Muslims and Christians To Share Experience Interfaith Listening Teams Come This Fall

Two Interfaith Listening teams will be itinerating this fall, from October 28 to November 12. A Muslim and a Christian will be coming from Indonesia; the other pair will be from the Project for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa. Presbytery groups or churches working with their presbyteries have been invited to apply to host a team for a visit of three to five days. The application deadline has been extended to June 9, and planners expect to respond by June 15. Find the application at www.pcusa.org/interfaith (disregard earlier dates, if you see them) or contact Susan Abraham immediately (see page 2).

This year each hosting presbytery is asked to give \$750.00 toward expenses of the program in addition to providing all hospitality for the team, including meals sensitive to dietary restrictions, lodging and local transportation.

Hospitality in Our Tradition

Scripture suggests that our responsibility extends not only to a brother or sister, but also to the stranger. Hebrew Scripture celebrates the wider community to which humanity is called in the stories of Melchizedek, Jethro, Rahab and Ruth, and the Hittites who offered hospitality to Abraham. In the Torah God enjoins the Jewish people to treat the sojourner as part of their own community. Throughout the Bible, hospitality to the stranger is an essential virtue. We recall both the words of the Epistle to the Hebrews (13:2), “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it,” and the example Jesus gives in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37).

– NCC Policy Statement on Interfaith Relations, paragraph 24

The model for our meeting others is always the depth of presence and engagement which marked Jesus' meeting with those around him.

All relationship begins with meeting. The model for our meeting others is always the depth of presence and engagement which marked Jesus' meeting with those around him. In our everyday lives, we will meet and form relationships with men and women of other religious traditions. At times these may be difficult relationships, based on bitter memories. However, we have been created for loving community and will not disengage from trying to build bridges of understanding and cooperation throughout the human family.

– NCC Policy Statement on Interfaith Relations, paragraph 47

As much as I can, [with people of other religions] I should meet friendship with friendship, hostility with kindness, generosity with gratitude, persecution with forbearance, truth with agreement, and error with truth. I should express my faith with humility and devotion as the occasion requires, whether silently or openly, boldly or meekly, by word or by deed. I should avoid compromising the truth on the one hand and being narrow-minded on the other. In short, I should always welcome and accept these others in a way that honors and reflects the Lord's welcome and acceptance of me.

– PC(USA) Study Catechism, answer 52

An Important Action Request

Relate to the Ecumenical and Interfaith Network

An invitation to help launch an Ecumenical and Interfaith Network in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) appeared in ECU-DIALOGUE a year ago. A fledgling network has now been birthed, and ECU-DIALOGUE readers are invited to consider relating themselves to this network. Ashley Seaman's story on page 1 tells why the network is important to her and what she urges readers to do.

ECU-DIALOGUE joins Ashley Seaman by urging readers to do one or more of the following things:

- Use the network's web site, <www.eif-pcusa.org>, as a reference. Its contents are updated regularly.
- Contribute to the network both information and your stories of best practices and models for doing local and regional ecumenical/interfaith work. These will be edited and posted on the web.
- Keep informed about national and international ecumenical and interfaith efforts in ways that support Presbyterian participation at all levels.
- Read about becoming a network member. Fill in the form at <www.pcusa.org/interfaith> or contact Susan Abraham (see box on page 2).

pcusa.org/interfaith> or contact Susan Abraham (see box on page 2).

- Consider attending the next network gathering in Washington D.C. on February 1-2, 2007, as you may be able. (While presence at network gatherings is heartily welcomed, it is not the sole basis for participation.)

The present network leadership team is composed of Sherri Hausser, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, and Landon Whitsitt, Louisville, Kentucky, co-chairs; David Alger, Tacoma, Washington; Paul Masquelier, Jr., San Jose, California; Joseph Pallikathayil, Kansas City, Missouri; Ashley Seaman, Denver, Colorado; and H. S. Wilson, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

