

## Remembering a biblical narrative that shapes our interfaith commitments

Building bridges through interfaith work

**By J. Herbert Nelson, II**  
**Stated Clerk of the General Assembly**

Greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ:

After one month of serving in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of General Assembly (OGA) as Stated Clerk, it is clear that there are knowledgeable and committed servants of God in our denomination. I have received calls, cards, emails, letters, texts, tweets, and voice messages offering support and prayers. Thank you for your expressions of support for our denomination and the journey ahead. I feel both privileged and humbled to lead the PC(USA) during this period in history.

A significant amount of the correspondence that greeted me upon my arrival pertained to the 222nd General Assembly (2016) in Portland, Oregon. The overwhelming majority of letters and emails were positive. However, a few expressed disappointment over a prayer offered by a Muslim partner who referred to Jesus as a prophet. He also addressed the Deity as Allah.<sup>1</sup> Several of the communications received expressed dismay over the quoting of the Koran (the Islamic holy book). For some Presbyterians, these expressions were offensive since we in the Christian faith acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Savior, the Bible as our holy book, and refer to the supreme deity as God. The Office of the General Assembly provided mid council leaders with a resource to help them and their congregations understand what took place, and other efforts were made to help individuals who wrote in response to the actions of our Muslim guest.

During my past thirty-one years of ordained ministry, parishioners and persons of other Christian groups have raised questions regarding both our denominational stance and my personal engagement in interfaith work. We who are engaged in interfaith work recognize that it is not categorical theological faith stances or beliefs that bind the interfaith community together. Our bond with one another is bridged by an ethic of love. We also understand the bridge among the three great religions (Judaism, Islam, and Christianity) through Abraham. The sons of Abraham (Ishmael and Isaac) are the progenitors of the Islamic and Christian faiths respectively. Our acknowledgement of the same Creator—who may send different prophets, messengers, and servants at particular times in history—may differ, but love is the centerpiece of God’s expectations for us. Therefore, we worship the same God, but may derive different messages in our reflection, prayer, and meditation. Furthermore, we agree that any message that is devoid of love is oppositional to God. The Spirit of the words of our Bible, *“And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony (Col. 3:14)* is at the core of our collective engagement.

### **Love is essential to our interfaith commitments**

Allah is the term used by the Islamic faith to refer to God. It is derived from the Aramaic language, which predates the Greek and Hebrew languages of the Bible. The Koran is the Holy Book of the Islamic faith. True Islamic believers of a Supreme Being witness that there is no worship, service, or faith expression unless love is the basis of our actions and relationships—Love for God, Love for Neighbor, and Love for Self are common elements of faith, practice, and worship.

The vast majority of Christians engaging in interfaith work have accepted that there are differences in our understanding of issues and perspectives. Based on our own experience, Presbyterians are aware that every Christian is not in categorical agreement with other Christians. (*Our last thirty-three years since the reunion of two Presbyterian branches will attest to the struggle to agree within our own fold.*) However, our interfaith work is held together by love, because both the Koran and the Bible teach a faith grounded in love.

In all faith experiences, we have read and, in some cases experienced, extremism. We have witnessed acts of violence by Muslim extremist. We have also seen professing Christians engaged in similar actions. Pastors have protested Islam by Koran burnings. Extremist people purporting to represent faith communities have ranted language of hate in our public media while supporting violence as a means of solving problems. Some of us who support interfaith engagement have been severely criticized for our associations with other faith communities because of these acts. However, persons who truly believe in interfaith commitment as a witness to God's call for human and religious unity remain steadfast in our collective commitment to believing that love is a supreme force over hate.

We are challenged in this age to differentiate the acts of extremism in all religious cultures, including our own. Acts of non-love leading to killing and other violent and vitriolic actions against another person or group are not measures embraced by any of the three great religions' (Judaism, Islam, and Christianity) holy books or core faith values. These acts are oppositional to God.

### **Jesus' view on the commonality of our faith expression**

Jesus acknowledges the commonality of purpose between groups of religious leaders other than our own. When the disciples of Jesus reported to him that there were others casting out demons in another name, he responded, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us" (Mk. 9:39–41). Jesus acknowledged that the bond of unity was found in the centrality of their purpose, not the joining of their band. This is the crux of interfaith commitments. We acknowledge a common heritage rooted in Abraham as the father of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic heritage. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are the progenitors of the Judeo, Islamic, and Christian heritage. Abraham, the father, is linked to his two sons who are half-brothers mothered by Sarah and Hagar. Abraham's son, Isaac, is the extension to Christianity while his other son, Ishmael, is the extension to the

Islamic heritage. We have a historic connection between Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

Your Office of the General Assembly affirms this connection through our interfaith commitments. This is the reason our interfaith work is held together by a common bond grounded in our own biblical faith. We invite guests from other religious spheres (some not named in this document) to our General Assembly in order to bond around our common heritage as a religious group. We are involved with other religious groups beyond the Judeo-Christian-Islamic heritage for justice advocacy work in Washington, D.C., and in New York, including multifaith work, worship, and fellowship in local communities. We struggle together to end “Islamaphobia” and other hate crimes against our interfaith partners. Many Presbyterian clergy have been featured in both local and national news in recent years supporting and embracing various non-Christian faith communities who are the victims of hate crimes—from the Oklahoma City and Boston Marathon bombings to the shootings at Jewish facilities in a suburb of Kansas City.

Interfaith commitments are not grounded in a point-by-point theological agreement. We must recognize that even within our own context as Christians, we do not agree on every point. Mutual cooperation and love are the keys to reaching beyond the boundaries that we create for ourselves. I appreciate the passion of my Presbyterian sisters and brothers regarding a love for Jesus. I, too, love Jesus and give my life to witnessing in his name. However, I acknowledge the contributions of those who witness in the *Spirit* of Jesus by healing, loving, and standing on behalf of others. Jesus was able to accomplish this type of boundary breaking love and respect ... why can't we? Love binds everything together.<sup>2</sup>

For more information about Presbyterians involved in interfaith and ecumenical work, go to [The Office of Ecumenical Relations](#) and [The Interfaith Relations Office](#).

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<sup>1</sup> Allah is the term used by the Islamic Faith to refer to God. It is derived from the Aramaic language, which predates the Greek and Hebrew language of the Bible. The Koran is the Holy Book of the Islamic faith.

<sup>2</sup> Although “Love binds everything together” is taken from the bible (1 Cor. 13), this statement acknowledges the grounding upon which Presbyterians are engaged in ecumenical and interfaith work. A “love ethic” is at the centerpiece of all of our Holy books. Each book (Bible, Torah, or Koran) may word this statement differently; however, love is not hidden in any of our faiths as the core of our unity with one another and others.