Growing up as a Pentecostal in Cape Town, South Africa, Elizabeth Petersen tended to avoid discussing religion with those of other faiths. “My involvement with interfaith dialogue started with fear of ‘contamination,’ of being so influenced through it that I might become estranged from my own people,” Petersen said in conjunction with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s Interfaith Listening Project in 2004. But as her faith deepened, her attitude changed: “My understanding of God’s call on my life as being global overcame my fears.”

Ten years later, Presbyterians and other Christians are still grappling with the challenges of interfaith dialogue. And in light of the PC(USA)’s 1001 New Worshiping Communities initiative, the issue has become more nuanced, as Presbyterians weigh how to “grow the church” while treating others with respect in an increasingly diverse, interreligious world.

Alistair Drummond, pastor of West End Presbyterian Church in New York City, says that when he prepares a sermon, he is always aware that he might be speaking to people of other faith traditions or to family members of such people. Reflecting on the lectionary passages, he asks himself, “How will this be heard by others?” His answer “doesn’t change the heart of the gospel message,” he says, though he often chooses to “use different words than the usual clichéd Christian
expressions.” He says he also avoids making negative judgments about other faith traditions.

For many Presbyterians, it’s one thing to acknowledge that search but something else to discuss it outside the church. According to a recent Presbyterian Mission Agency survey, one main reason why congregations don’t practice interfaith activity is that they don’t know where to start.

“Many times, the hardest thing to do is to go to our neighbor’s door,” says Christine Hong, interfaith associate for the Presbyterian Mission Agency.

Exploring diversity
For congregations that have yet to engage in interfaith dialogue, Hong suggests that they explore their own diversity first. Although a congregation may look homogenous, members might discover diversity, she says, if their conversations dig deep enough. “Just because you don’t see diversity doesn’t mean it’s not there,” she says.

When congregations do engage in interfaith relations, those interactions are often limited to what Hong calls “the Abrahamic circle”—Christians, Muslims, and Jews.

“Acknowledging that search is important,” she says. “Often in Christian history, Christians have not shared their
faith in a way that reflects humble modesty. They often did it in ways that made Christianity the dominant—and sometimes only—narrative. But we can learn things about ourselves and about our relationship with Christ through other people’s faith in their own religious context.”

That kind of learning is contingent on being a good listener, she says. “As much as you share your faith with other people, you should be as receptive to hearing about their faith.”

But that doesn’t mean “watering down” or otherwise misrepresenting what you believe, Hong says. “Do not ‘bend’ or ‘trim’ your faith,” she advises. “We should be authentic in what we express. If evangelism is part of your witness as a Christian, don’t hide that. Represent your core faith values as authentically as possible. The flip side of that is that if you’re going to be authentic in your faith sharing, you also need to be willing to let others be authentic in their faith sharing.”

While some Presbyterians will worry that this approach dilutes the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations, for others it is in fact a witness. Though they might avoid the term evangelism because of its historical connotations, what they propose is a kind of evangelism, but with a twist—for the goal is also to receive witness. The result won’t likely be someone’s conversion, but it will be the strengthening of the community of God’s children as well as the enactment of God’s love.

Honesty and sensitivity

Christians also need to be honest about the harm that has been done in the name of Christianity, Hong says. “Part of witnessing among other people is that we have to acknowledge the history of wrongdoing to people of other faiths and cultures—including persecutions and statements in our confessions that are harmful. We need to admit what we have done that has been harmful to other people. It’s not other people’s jobs to flag for us what has been harmful to them.”

Likewise, effective interfaith relationships hinge on sensitivity to issues of identity and community, says commissioned ruling elder Peng Leong, who works in outreach programs sponsored by First Chinese Presbyterian Church in New York City. The outreach programs are geared to Mandarin-speaking people in her church’s neighborhood whose lives are influenced by Chinese religious traditions. Many residents would never consider becoming Christian, she says, adding, for example, that they observe rites for the dead that Christians do not. Nevertheless, the church reaches out in adult education, children’s play days, picnics, and park visits. Members talk about “what we believe and why, and how this has helped in our lives,” Leong says. Outreach

A CHANCE TO ENGAGE IN INTERFAITH DISCUSSIONS

Presbyterians around the country can take part in interfaith conversations through a new program called Neighbor and Neighborhood: Presbyterian and Sikh Dialogues.

Sponsored by the Presbyterian Mission Agency’s Interfaith Relations Office, the program is available to congregations and presbyteries nationwide. The program consists of a “fishbowl conversation” in which Christine Hong, the Presbyterian Mission Agency’s interfaith associate, and a Sikh colleague discuss faith and interfaith relations with program participants. The program starts with Hong and her colleague having what Hong calls “an intimate public conversation” about faith, with the conversation gradually expanding to include the other participants.

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workers also ask the residents about their needs. When residents attend services at the church, someone from the congregation remains with them, as a gesture of welcome.

Such relationships can be productive even if fundamental disagreements remain, says Hong.

"Be honest about how we disagree with different religious beliefs, and make room for other people to disagree with you," she advises. "Sometimes we feel as if a discussion needs to end in consensus, with a clear winner and a loser. But Jesus never chased people down for not agreeing with him. He left the door open."

And remember, she says: Even in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we sometimes disagree with one another. "This is not a new concept," she says. "We often disagree with each other in the Presbyterian Church. And there are times we walk away from each other without coming to an agreement, but we always leave the door open. There's always room for people to rejoin the conversation."

When interfaith conversations are conducted with sensitivity and respect, Hong says, the rewards can be far-reaching.

"Interfaith work saves lives," she says. "Interfaith work prevents hate crimes and tackles the needs of humankind. The interfaith community works to seek justice, not selectively, but holistically. It's a community holding onto one another in order to thrive in a world that often seems to be unraveling."

The rewards can be personal as well, she adds. "When you do this work well, your heart is constantly opening and sharing and receiving."

And to do that work well, she advises, don't be afraid to let down your guard.

"The most powerful thing a friend of another faith said to me was, 'Don't be afraid to speak passionately about being a Christian. It's that passion that tells me who you are, and I want to know you better.' That's what it comes down to, isn't it? Knowing one another better. We honor multifaith relationships by coming to them as we are, by bringing our faith stories and passionately sharing them."

Karen Bosc is the associate editor of Presbyterians Today.

INTERRELIGIOUS STANCE PROVIDES GUIDANCE

Affirming a commitment “to work for the common good in society together with people of other faiths and interreligious bodies,” the 221st General Assembly (2014) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approved an Interreligious Stance.

“In our relationships with people of other faiths,” the document says, “interreligious conversations promote the virtues of mutual respect and mutual understanding.” It notes that the Confession of 1967 says Christians “must approach all religions with openness and respect” (9.42).

The Interreligious Stance also includes these statements:

» In our pluralistic society, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) recognizes that it must work with others because of the sure faith that the church, through the power of the Spirit, is a sign and means of God’s intention for the wholeness and healing of humankind and of all creation.

» Presbyterians approach others in a spirit of openness and trust as they follow Jesus Christ in respecting and affirming the freedom of others. Thus the church affirms that dialogical (i.e., mutually interactive) relationships are an authentic and appropriate form of witness in which we share ourselves and our commitments and also listen intently to what others express to us.

» Presbyterians are called by God to work with those of other religions for peace, justice, and the sustainability of creation. Experience has taught that the most fruitful interfaith relationships often develop when people of different faiths explore concrete ethical concerns and unite to act on them together.

» Presbyterians urge a humble modesty in witness that recognizes God’s Spirit is at work in ways we often least expect. Whatever the form of witness—mission, dialogue, evangelism, peace, justice, environmental issues—the church affirms that it is not called to respond to others in judgment but in awareness of the limitless grace of God.

As part of a two-year Young Adult Interfaith Fellowships program sponsored by the Presbyterian Mission Agency’s Office of Theology and Worship, nine young adults are developing online resources pertaining to the Interreligious Stance.

For the full text of the Interreligious Stance: pcusa.org/resource (search by title)