



**Christian Witness In A Multi-Religious World**  
**FINAL REPORT**  
**2018**

**A Faith & Order Convening Table Subgroup Response Paper**  
**within the 2016-2018 Interfaith Peacemaking Study Project**  
The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

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**Charge.** In May 2016, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. announced the two-year study theme for its four Convening Tables: **Interfaith Peacemaking**. The Convening Table for Theological Dialogue and Matters of Faith and Order responded with three Subgroups to work on this: Climate Justice and Conflict (Group One), Violence and Genocide (Group Three), and Christian Witness (Group Two). This latter Group was tasked with formulating an ecumenical study of and response to a pair of related World Council of Churches documents:

++ [“Who Do We Say We Are? // Christian Identity in a Multi-Religious World” \(2014\)](#)  
[\[“WDW”\]](#)

++ [“Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World // Recommendations for Conduct” \(2011\) \[“XW”\]](#)

(The Pontifical Council on Inter-religious Dialogue [Roman Catholic] & The World Evangelical Alliance each joined with The World Council of Churches in this document— an historic cooperation.)

**Resources.** In addition to seven denominational Response Papers to **WDW** & **XW** (Lutheran, Methodist [2], Presbyterian, Mennonite, Christian UUA, Baptist), Faith & Order Subgroup Two (“Christian Witness”) also discussed:

- +Carl E. Braaten (Lutheran),  
“Who Do We Say That He Is? On the Uniqueness and Universality of Jesus Christ” (1979)
- +David A. Hollinger (Presbyterian),  
*After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern Account*, Chapter Two (2013)
- +Indunil J. K. Kankanamalage (Roman Catholic),  
“Conversion and Proselytism in the Light of ‘Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World’” (2014)
- +Thomas Schirrmacher (Romanian/World Evangelical Alliance),  
“The Code: ‘Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World’ — Its Significance and Reception” (2016)
- +The Wisconsin Council of Churches (Ecumenical),  
[“Loving our Interfaith Neighbors”](#) (2014)
- +The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. (Ecumenical), [“NCCCCUSA”]  
[“Interfaith Relations and the Churches”](#) (1999).

**Participants.** Conveners were Benjamin L. Hartley (United Methodist Church), Kirsten S. Oh (UMC), Ray F. Kibler III (Southern California Christian Forum), and W. Scott Axford, Final Report drafter (Council Of Christian Churches Within The Unitarian Universalist Association), along with Kyle R. Tau, clerk/recorder (UMC), Gayle Gerber-Koontz (Mennonite), Alexander S. Santrac (Seventh Day Adventist), and David T. Simmons (The Episcopal Church).

Other intermittent participants were Reginald D. Broadnax (American Methodist Episcopal Zion Church), Donald W. Dayton (Wesleyan), Barry A. Ensign-George (Presbyterian Church USA), Matthew A. Shadle (Roman Catholic), and Christian T. Collins Wynn (American Baptist Churches).

**Meetings.** Subgroup Two met six times: **1)** Baltimore, 5-6 May 2016 and **2)** 1-3 December 2016 (both at Doubletree BWI); **3)** California, 11-13 May 2017 (Azusa Pacific University); **4)** Maryland, 8-9 November 2017 (Sheraton Silver Spring); **5)** Atlanta, 10-12 May 2018 (Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur); and **6)** Washington, D.C., 15 October 2018 (College Park Marriott, Hyattsville, Maryland). These meetings were sometimes coincident [ **1), 4), 6)** ] with the National Council of Churches' annual Christian Unity Gatherings (which include the various Convening Tables [Theological Dialogue and Matters of Faith & Order, Interfaith Relations, Christian Education and Faith Formation, Joint Action and Advocacy]).

**Study and Response.** The Subgroup's work is summarized under Four Questions (**Q1. – Q4.**):

### **Q1. What in the two World Council of Churches documents [WDW, XW] is commended to the Churches?**

The World Council of Churches' July 2014 statement "[Who Do We Say We Are?](#)" seeks to hold the doctrine of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church in the one hand, and "the manifest plurality of churches" in the other (**WDW**, paragraph 72). This experience in seeking unity in the midst of diversity within the church "provides a reference point for understanding, appreciating, and acting upon what it means to be church in the context of religious plurality" (72). As the document states, "We cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time we cannot set limits to the saving power of God. . . . We appreciate this tension, and do not attempt to resolve it" (42). The Christian Church should be hospitable and open to dialogue, and yet it must "safeguard the essential integrity of the expressions of [Christian] faith in language and liturgy" (80). Note that this is different from general "multiculturalism" as commonly expressed. Nor is this a theological ambivalence (Hollinger) that tends toward a muting of genuine religious difference. When does such a theological ambivalence lead to an implicit relativism and cease to be the Faith once delivered to the Saints (Jude 3c)? It can be easier to engage in generic talk of God or sacred texts, than to affirm the particularity of the Person of Jesus Christ as prerequisite to all Christian understanding. Particularism in true dialogue is a challenge across many religious traditions. Perhaps the American experience of having multiple religious traditions in one nation can be helpful for the global project.

**WDW** gives clarity to a few often-used terms, some of which have been traditional points of conflict. "[Evangelism](#)" tends to have in view a *result* (to gain a convert), and can be connected with the negative connotations of "[Proselytizing](#)," under which some missionaries sought out not only non-Christians, but also Christians already in another church. **WDW** reflects a concerted effort to recast evangelism in terms of witness (81). "[Witness](#)" bears less of the burden of proselytizing, and can be defined as introducing others to the Kingdom of God, through Christ, with the possibility of planting a seed or leaving an invitation. "[Dialogue](#)" represents mutual interaction, conversation, and inquiry— preferably using the Principles and Recommendations detailed in the World Council of Churches' June 2011 "[Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World](#)." The Recommendations are: [study](#), [build](#), [encourage](#), [cooperate](#), [call](#), [pray](#). The Principles are: [Act](#) in God's love, service, and justice; [Imitate](#) Jesus Christ; [Practice](#) Christian virtues; [Engage](#) in ministries of healing; [Reject](#) violence; [Honor](#) freedom of religion; [Pursue](#) mutual respect; [Renounce](#) false witness; [Build](#) relationships.

## **Q2. Why should Christians engage in Interfaith work at all?**

**WDW** answers, “[T]he risen and living Christ can move and be met beyond the bounds of the Church’s institutions and proclamation. In these ways, our belief in Christ opens us to seek God’s presence through the Spirit within other traditions than our own” (34). Further, **WDW** affirms the Divine mission in the world which God created (75), with God’s Church acting as “the springboard for proclamation and evangelization” (75). Indeed, God wills all to be saved (94) and therefore the Church “cannot set limits to the saving power of God” (42). Mere human beings, even given God’s will to save all, do not know definitively who is finally “in” or “out.” The Church is called to preach the Gospel, but the results are God’s. The Body of Christ is called, gathered, and sent—for the sake of others and for the sake of the world. The horizon of the Kingdom of God is indeed the world, “the realm that the church is called to serve” (76). In the New Jerusalem, all nations come (Revelation 21:24), with all sorts and conditions of the People of God at last face to face. It is just this awareness of God’s presence in the wider world and its communities which calls Christians to engage in interfaith work.

The Wisconsin Council of Churches’ 17 November 2014 statement (in response to the attack on the Sikh Temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin in 2012) proved to be a wonderful resource. It develops an understanding of “neighbor” as “someone who is related to us by virtue of our placement in the world, not by virtue of our relationship to Christ” in the context of Jesus Christ’s Great Commandment to love God and love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37,39). It commends three norms for Interfaith involvement: Humble listening/ Openness, Prophetic witness/ Christian fidelity, Compassionate collaboration/ Solidarity for the common good. And it makes a further distinction for relations within and without the Church: Article One of the Nicene Creed gives Creation and with it fellow Creatures; and then Article Two lays the foundation for Christian unity.

## **Q3. What contribution is offered to the pending review of the 1999 NCCCUSA Interfaith Statement?**

Interfaith work must be based in the centrality of Jesus Christ as the way Christians profess and understand God. Starting-points are important—such as beginning with the Trinity, as opposed to starting from our varied human religious experiences. Participants in interfaith dialogue ought not to present a Christianity so diluted as to be unrecognizable to the vast majority (past and present) who practice it.

The 1999 NCCCUSA “Interfaith Relations and the Churches” document’s basis in Creation (paragraph 19, “God and Human Community”) may in this sense be insufficiently particular for Interfaith work, while its affirmation that “relationship is part of the nature of [the Triune] God” (paragraph 21) may be a better place to start. The document’s move from “conversion” to “witness” is a helpful one and worthy of further development.

Also, the context matters: that is, it matters whether one is doing Christian Interfaith work in a *majority* (as in the West) or in a *minority* (as in the Middle East) context. No one living in Christian cultures notices its assumptions as keenly as its non-Christian minorities—just as Christians living in non-Christian cultures are naturally much more sensitive to the pressures on their very existence.

One fruitful Biblical text is Acts 3:1-4:3 (Saints Peter & John healing outsiders and proclaiming salvation to be had in no other Name than Jesus’). And yet, it being impossible to “set limits to the saving power of God” (**WDW**, 42), there are signs of God’s power elsewhere, too—perhaps unnamed, perhaps different manifestations of the Holy Spirit. The much-burdened category of “salvation” itself benefits from nuance: it could mean peace in this world, or faith-enabled life in the next world, or something not *just* limited to “conversion.” Other helpful texts are: Acts 17 (Saint Paul on Mars Hill, Athens), Mark 7 (the Syro-Phoenician woman), Luke 15 (the good Samaritan), Matthew 8 (the Roman centurion), and Luke 24 (the Emmaus Road strangers).

#### **Q4. What counsel is offered to the Interfaith Relations Convening Table for its continuing work?**

The Interfaith Relations Convening Table, anticipating its role in the pending review of the National Council of Churches' 10 November 1999 statement, "Interfaith Relations and the Churches", invited the Faith & Order Convening Table (on 9 November 2017 during Session Four) for colloquy. In response to this conversation, the Faith and Order Convening Table commends **XW**, which gives a short and very practical list of how Christians should then conduct themselves (**Q1.**), as well as the Wisconsin statement (**Q2.**). These lists are actually quite helpful, and if they seem obvious to those already engaged, they may yet be leaven in the loaf (Galatians 5:9) of those who are much less so.

The Faith & Order Convening Table commends the multilateral approach which has characterized its ecumenical work for decades (since 1927). Recognizing the value of other bodies' continued, direct dialogues (Hindu-Jewish, Muslim-Buddhist, *etc.*), the fairly-new Interfaith Relations Convening Table could take up a topic submitted by the participants (or perhaps by the NCCCUSA), and then discuss responses from the various religious traditions. For example, the Faith & Order Commission issued documents on such as "Unity in Mission" (Paulist Press, New York: 2013), "Salvation and Justice" (*Ecumenical Trends*, XLI, 9-11: Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute, New York: 2012), and "The Authority of the Church in the World." Perhaps the Interfaith Relations Convening Table could examine "What is peace?", "Who is my neighbor?", or "Where does conscience interact with truth?" Striking commonalities (and unexpected groupings of differences) would surely emerge, to general edification.

**Concluding comments.** It is *because of* our devotion to Jesus Christ, that we *engage others*: practicing hospitality (Romans 12:13b); seeking to discern the work of God both within and without the Church, in the world God created, and among our neighbors; and bearing faithful witness to the authentic Gospel as we receive it. Genuine participation in inter-religious dialogue requires that Christians honestly articulate the particularities of Christian belief and practice. There is a recurring principle: that Christians act as committed and informed *Christians*.

The very Nature of the Triune God— a Communion of distinct-and-related Persons— is a multiplicity as well as a unity. That Nature is the basis for God's ongoing creation of, search for, and establishing relationship with, *other persons*. This in consequence summons Christians to the fullest understanding of our shared but varied *human* nature. It is the very human nature created in the Triune God's own divine image.

There are differences, and even schism, *within* Christian traditions (and/or denominational bodies) as well as *between* them (as treated in the unfinished 2012-2013 Faith & Order project on *internally*-dividing issues [and the effect of various structures in resolving or furthering them]: *q.v.*) The quest for unity among Christians in the midst of such irreducible differences ought to inform our approach to the differences among Christians and their Interfaith neighbors. Finally, through all of this, Christians should bear in mind that there are divisions and schism within those *other* religious bodies, too, as well as within our own.

And, ... who knows (Esther 4:14d), ... whether we are come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

Washington, D.C., 15 October A.D. 2018.