

# A Global Methodist Perspective?

The United Methodist Church and the World Methodist Council have both developed and published statements concerning relationships between Muslims and Methodists. Those statements are included here to help create a more comprehensive picture of the formal and informal status of global Methodist Muslim dialogue and understanding.

## **United Methodist Church: Our Muslim Neighbors<sup>1</sup>**

Christians are called to initiate and promote better relationships between Christians and Muslims on the basis of informed understanding, critical appreciation, and balanced perspective of one another's basic beliefs.

### **The Historical Context**

United Methodists, seeking to be faithful neighbors and witnesses to other members of the human family, recognise with respect peoples of the religion of Islam.

Christians and Muslims acknowledge common roots, along with Jews, in the faith of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. As members of one of the monotheistic world religions, Muslims worship and serve the one God with disciplined devotion. Both Christians and Muslims believe that God is ever-inclined toward humankind in justice and mercy. Based on this common ground, we celebrate where Christians and Muslims are working together to make God's justice a reality for all people. The two faiths sometimes understand differently the particular ways in which God deals with human beings, but they agree that the proper human response to the Almighty is a life of humble obedience, including repentance, faith, and good works. Muslims believe that the Qur'an sets forth the principles for righteous conduct and a harmonious life in society. The following verses from the Qur'an show that these principles are similar to the ones found in the Christian Scriptures:

O believers, be steadfast witnesses for God with justice. Do not let the hatred of a people make you act unjustly. Be just, for justice is next to piety (5:8).

Worship only God; be good to parents and kindred, to orphans and the poor; speak kindly to others (92:83).

Do not mix truth with falsehood, nor knowingly conceal the truth (2:42).

O believers, fulfill your obligations (5:1).

Hold to forgiveness and enjoy good; turn aside from the foolish (7:199).

It may be that God will bring about friendship between you and those whom you hold to be your enemies (60:7).

## **The Need for Understanding**

United Methodists live together with Muslims in many countries of the world and in a variety of social environments. Indeed, in the United States of America, Muslims comprise one of the most rapidly growing religious communities. In places around the world, Muslims may constitute the majority of the population, and in other places, Christians may be the majority. As believers of the two religions build their lives in the same general area, they are often affected by patterns of religious antagonism inherited from the past history of disputes and misunderstanding between the two.

Also, Muslims and Christians experience varying degrees of political and social discrimination, depending on the particular circumstances of each country. In certain areas of tension believers in the two faiths are caught up in struggles for economic, political, and human rights.

We believe that sustained and ever-renewed initiatives of open discussion and sharing of concerns in interfaith settings contribute to the achievement of social justice.

By this statement, we express solidarity with those of either religion who suffer oppression or discrimination.

By this statement, we make a step toward more hospitable and cooperative relationships and encourage dialogical relations.

## **Basic United Methodist Documents**

### *A. Called to Be Neighbors*

A clear biblical basis for discussion in interfaith settings is set forth in Guidelines for Interreligious Relationships:

In conversation with a lawyer (Luke 10:25), Jesus reminded him that his neighbor, the one to whom he should show love and compassion, included a stranger, a Samaritan. Today, Christ's call to neighborli-

## *A Global Methodist Perspective?*

ness (Luke 10:27) includes the “stranger” of other faiths. It is not just that historical events have forced us together. The Christian faith itself impels us to love our neighbors of other faiths and to seek to live in contact and mutually beneficial relationship, in community with them.

### *B. The Social Community*

In our United Methodist Social Principles, we affirm all persons as equally valuable in the sight of God and determine to work toward societies in which each person’s value is recognized, maintained, and strengthened.

Religious persecution has been common in the history of civilization. We urge policies and practices that ensure the right of every religious group to exercise its faith free from legal, political, or economic restrictions. In particular, we condemn anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, and anti-Christian attitudes and practices in both their overt and covert forms, being especially sensitive to their expression in media stereotyping.

### *C. Our Theological Task*

In our United Methodist Doctrinal Standards, our relationship with adherents of other living faiths of the world is set in the context of our ecumenical commitment. We are encouraged to enter into serious interfaith encounters and explorations between Christians and adherents of other living faiths of the world. Scripture calls us to be both neighbors and witnesses to all people. Such encounters require us to reflect anew on our faith and to seek guidance for our witness among neighbors of other faiths.

When Christians enter into such dialogue, they come to it consciously as they seek to live as one people, under the living God who is the Creator of all humankind, the One “who is above all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:6).

This theological understanding compels us to a particular kind of dialogue, one in which we reflect critically upon our Christian tradition, gain accurate appreciation of the traditions of others, and engage with love and generosity of spirit as we seek “to raise all such relationships to the highest possible level of human fellowship and understanding.”

## **Christian-Muslim Discussions**

The long-standing commitment of The United Methodist Church to social justice, to theological inquiry, and to just and open relationships places a particular responsibility on its members to develop discussions between Christians and Muslims. Mutual respect requires the church to recog-

nize and affirm that, although individuals may move from one religion to another, we do not enter into formal interfaith dialogue with the intent to convert the Muslim community to Christianity. Although the movement is still small, there is increasing evidence that groups of Christians and Muslims are coming together to witness to their faith and acknowledge the power of God in their lives, to identify problems that challenge all on the deepest theological and moral level, and to try to understand better the complex factors that determine the crucial decisions being made by governments around the world.

Through such interactions, Christians and Muslims are finding that working for better exchange of information and for ways to cooperate in solving mutual problems and concerns often leads to discovery and growth, adding to the depth and understanding of each tradition.

If we observe the unfolding of events in today's world and assess Islamic movement as only reactionary and threatening, we will hinder the advancement of justice and peace and neither gain from nor contribute to mutual understanding.

If we develop friendships with Muslims as members of the human community from whom and with whom we have much to learn, we will increase our respect for Islam as a way of life that calls its millions of followers to the highest moral ideals and satisfies their deepest spiritual aspirations.

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, The United Methodist Church has intentionally explored what it means to be in relationship with the Muslim community. The United Methodist Church stands in solidarity with Muslims in the struggles for economic, political and human right

### **Action Statement**

Local congregations and United Methodist agencies are encouraged to develop ongoing relationships with Muslims and their respective organizations. They are urged to initiate conversations, programs, and dialogues leading to the understanding of both Islam and Christianity, and appreciation of their particular gifts, while discovering commonalities and differences; and seeking areas of mutual cooperation. They are also urged to exchange information and discuss ways to cooperate when they address common problems and concerns.

### **Recommendations**

We request the Council of Bishops to support, participate in, and assist United Methodists in implementing this resolution.

## *A Global Methodist Perspective?*

We call upon the General Board of Global Ministries, and particularly its Women's Division, to promote a program of ongoing relationships with Muslim women, seeking areas of mutual concern about how to live ethically, morally, and responsibly in today's world and to join in common struggles for peace and justice.

We urge the General Board of Church and Society to work with Muslims in activities designed to achieve common political, social, economic, and ecological goals.

We urge that the General Board of Global Ministries and the General Board of Church and Society develop advocacy programs on behalf of religious freedom and minority rights, particularly regarding nations that are experiencing crisis in Christian-Muslim conflict in which religious minorities are harassed or persecuted. These advocacy programs should be directed toward, among others, the U.S. Department of State, U.S. Embassies, and the United Nations Human Rights Commission.

We recommend that the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, as it initiates and engages in dialogue with representatives of Islam, remain mindful of the evangelism imperatives of the gospel and the gospel mandate to seek justice for those who are oppressed.

We recommend that United Methodist Communications, through its Division of Public Media and News Service, monitor and call attention to discrimination against Muslims in both the religious and secular media.

We urge United Methodist members, local churches, and agencies to take the following specific actions:

1. Study Islam, using resources such as: Brochures, "Basic Facts about Islam," "Guidelines for Interfaith Dialogue," (GCCUIC, 2001) "Called to be Neighbors and Witnesses" (General Conference, 2000); *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*, World Council of Churches (Geneva: 1990); *God Is One: The Way of Islam*, by R. Marston Speight (New York: Friendship Press, updated/revised 2001); *The Holy Qur'an*, New Revised Edition, trans. 'Abdullah Yusuf' Alli (Brentwood, MD: Amana Corp., 2001); National Council of Churches Interfaith Policy Statement 2000; *Silent No More: Confronting America's False Images of Islam*, by Paul Findley (Amana Publications, Beltsville Maryland, 2001); *A New Religious America*, by Diana Eck (Harper Collins, New York, 2001); *Creating Interfaith Community*, by Marston Speight (GBGM, Service Center, 2003); magazines such as *Minaret* (MultiMedia Vera International, 434 South Vermont, Los Angeles, CA 90020).

2. Initiate dialogue with Muslims, utilizing as our guide the resolution of the 2000 General Conference entitled “Called to Be Neighbors and Witnesses, Guidelines for Interreligious Relationships,” and models of dialogue developed by the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns. The dialogue will address theological and justice issues, related to the particular contexts in which those dialogues occur.
3. Develop awareness of the concerns of particular Muslim populations through implementation of other applicable General Conference Resolutions in the 2000 *Book of Resolutions*, such as “Prejudice Against Muslims and Arabs in the U.S.A.”
4. Promote understanding between Christians and Muslims in local communities through:
  - arranging visits to local mosques;
  - developing and participating in cultural exchanges with Muslims;
  - inviting Muslims to social occasions;
  - seeking Muslim participation in local interfaith councils and interfaith worship;
  - sending messages of greeting and good will to Muslims upon the occasion of their religious festivals;
  - encouraging authorities of schools, hospitals, prisons, factories, and places of business and government to respect particular features of Muslim life;
  - upholding the dignity of individuals, families, and communities; and
  - seeking to remedy situations in which Muslims encounter misunderstanding, prejudice, stereotyping, or even hostility from the neighborhood or population when they desire to express their faith in everyday life.

## **World Methodist Council**

### *Wesleyan/Methodist Witness in Christian and Islamic Cultures<sup>2</sup>*

The world’s two largest religions, Christianity and Islam, are today perceived by many people to be on a collision course, as a result of militant religious fundamentalism and aggressive secular militarism.

As Wesleyan/Methodist Christians, we believe that Christ Jesus is the Lord of creation and history and the Savior of the world. As followers of Jesus, we believe in the rule of love, the worth of all persons, tolerance of others and his vision of a kingdom of peace. As a consequence, we respect much of what we witness in Islam. We share Islam’s strong emphasis on

## *A Global Methodist Perspective?*

prayer and fasting, the call for the pursuit of personal holiness, and the focus on charity and the dignity of every human being. We are aware that Islam, like Christianity, is expressed in many different ways in different cultures. We recognize the faithfulness of most Muslims as they seek to live lives committed to Allah and free from the perversions of this world. We also appreciate the many great contributions of Islamic culture that have benefited humankind.

We are keenly aware that Muslims have been abused, oppressed, humiliated, and enslaved by the political, economic, and military forces of Western nations and that, even though these nations have functioned primarily as secular entities, they have been associated with the Christian community. Further, we clearly acknowledge that the abuses of Muslims by Westerners connected with the Medieval Crusades, the imperial colonialism of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, and the militarism of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries have often been driven more by greed, self-preservation, and a distorted interpretation of the Christian faith than by the peaceful and loving commandments of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. For these abuses by the Christian community, we seek the forgiveness of Islamic people throughout the world.

We are also aware that Christians were abused and enslaved by force in the establishment of the Islamic Empires. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we abhor the terrorism of militant Islam and the militarism of Western governments that are escalating in a tragically violent spiral causing immense suffering, fear and grief throughout the world. We join with peace loving persons of both faiths to reject the use of Christianity and Islam for the abuse and enslavement of persons. The Qur'an and the Bible call us to honor and respect all people, to submit to the will of God in all things and to bring about a just and peaceful society in which love and tolerance overcome hate and fear.

Aggression against people or nations, for any reason other than self-defense or the defense of others, is in conflict with the teachings of Christianity and Islam, in both the New Testament and the Qur'an. We call on all Christians and Muslims to bring an end to the cycle of hatred and violence threatening all persons and creation.

Even though we recognize and affirm some similarities between Islam and Christianity and between the Qur'an and the Bible, we believe the distinctions between us are significant.

While we understand that Muslims believe that Allah is revealed to the world in the Qur'an, we affirm that God is revealed in the Bible and God's ultimate self-revelation is in the person of Jesus Christ.

While we understand that Muslims affirm the absolute oneness of Allah, we believe that God is one and has been revealed to us in three persons as God the Father who gave us life, as God the Son in whom God's complete nature is disclosed, and God the Holy Spirit who abides within us and continues to give us strength and guidance in all that we do.

While we understand that Muslims believe that all of life's realms personal, religious, social, family, political, economic, and military must come under the authority of Allah, Christians affirm God's sovereignty and the Lordship of Christ Jesus over all of life.

While we understand that Muslims believe that salvation comes through complete submission to Allah through affirmation of the declaration of faith (shahada), participation in daily prayers (salat), giving of alms (zakat), observation of the Ramadan fast (sawm), and participation in the pilgrimage (hajj), Wesleyan/Methodist Christians believe that salvation comes through justification by grace through faith in the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the singular, unique event in human history which makes the salvation of all human beings possible. This salvation received by grace is lived out in a life of discipleship seeking holiness of heart and life. In a world ripped apart by sin, fear, hopelessness and meaninglessness, we believe that the coming of God in Jesus of Nazareth and the teachings, sacrificial death and miraculous resurrection of Jesus offer healing, hope and salvation for all. This salvation provides escape from the bondage of sin, meaningful new life, the reconciliation of persons, the renewal of all creation and the hope of eternal life for all who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We believe that God calls us to affirm the dignity and wholeness of every human being, and we respect the right of all persons to worship God in the way that is most meaningful to them. Therefore, we hope and pray that governments will not impose laws that infringe on the religious rights of their citizens. We affirm that if it is acceptable to build Mosques in Christian cultures, it should also be acceptable to build Christian Churches in Islamic cultures. As Christians, we also believe that we are called to share God's love, forgiveness, and gracious action in the person of Jesus Christ with everyone.

Christians seek to live in a world community that is shaped by the reign of God, and we pray for and expect the kingdom of God, righteousness, peace and love to come on earth as it is in heaven.

Therefore, all Wesleyan/Methodist Christians are called by God, first, to lovingly accept Muslim brothers and sisters as persons of faith; second, to stand firm against violence and hatred in all its forms; third, to stand

## *A Global Methodist Perspective?*

with persons who are being persecuted and are suffering for their faith; and fourth, trusting in the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit, to share with all persons, including Muslims, the love and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ through our words, deeds and signs by the power of the Holy Spirit, and invite them into life-changing relationships with God through Christ

### **NOTES**

- 1 ADOPTED 1992, AMENDED AND READOPTED 2004. *See* Social Principles, 165A, B, and C. United Methodist Church Book of Resolutions 2008, #6061. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
- 2 Developed by the Officers, Regional Secretaries and staff of World Methodist Evangelism and adopted by the Executive Committee of the World Methodist Council, Port Elizabeth, South Africa, September 18, 2004.