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Matthew 25:35 For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,



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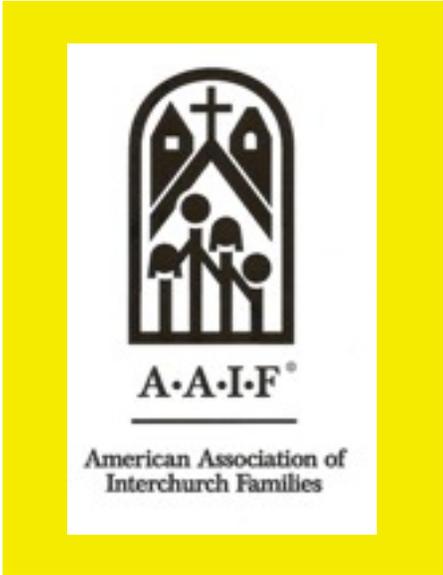
**Interchurch Families: Christian Unity
Made Visible in our Households**

The ARK, a Publication of the American Association of Interchurch Families

Religious plurality and Christian self-understanding

"We need to acknowledge that human limitations and limitations of language make it impossible for any community to have exhausted the mystery of the salvation God offers to humankind. All our theological reflections in the last analysis are limited by our own experience and cannot hope to deal with the scope of God's work of mending the world." It is this humility

that enables us to say that salvation belongs to God, God only. We do not possess salvation; we participate in it. We do not offer salvation; we witness to it. We do not decide who would be saved; we leave it to the providence of God. For our own salvation is an everlasting "hospitality" that God has extended to us." - Faith and Order, Inter-religious Relations, and Mission and Evangelism, and their respective commissions or advisory bodies of the World Council of Churches 2006



The transformative power found in the Easter message allows us to be changed in such a way that we experience "a rebirth" in Christian terminology - comparable in some ways to the joy we may feel upon seeing the reappearance of spring flowers after a long cold winter and more



2011

**Alleluia! The Lord is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

BEING IN AN INTERCHURCH MARRIAGE REFLECTING ON: RELIGIOUS PLURALITY AND CHRISTIAN SELF- UNDERSTANDING

Upon finding this document which was first made public in 2006 although the foundations for this study that allowed for the creation of this document may have begun as early as 1989, I recognized that this document contains significant potential for the world and the future we are creating by the way we live now whether we are interchurch families or other situations.

There is so much information included in this document for the role that interchurch families and the gifts that we bring by our lived experience that this becomes the kind of document that merits much thought and reflection not only about what is written in it, but also about the positive impact that we might be able to gift to the world as “bridge builders” for a future we may not see, but one that we would wish to endow on future generations.

Please take some time with this material. It comes directly from the World Council of Churches. My request for you is to think

about your role that through some unknown mystery, but most likely as a gift from God, has placed you in an interchurch marriage. This gives you insights and experiences to which others are not privileged; it is too easy to assume that others share the same thinking as interchurch families, but upon encountering them, many have reported that many people are not aware of the ecumenical possibility for hospitality within their own denominations that already exist. They have made personal decisions to filter their religious views through historic perspectives which are mentioned in the following document.

All of us are on a journey. Being at different points on our journeys, we share unique perspectives and talents that should become gifts to our communities. The concern over extremism within a Christian context is mentioned. Polarization is mentioned. Politicalization of Christianity is mentioned.

The document is presented to inspire discussion and debate by the WCC; they consider this topic to be controversial. In the American vernacular, this document clarifies “The Big Elephant sitting in the room” that makes it too difficult to be

able to bring up difficult topics; we need to lay the ground work and set up the guidelines so that we can discuss plurality in order to be able to help to move our society into the 21st Century in positive and productive ways through real dialogue and the sharing of ideas where real listening happens. This document invites problem solving in a religiously plural society with a genuine Christian self-understanding.

How do we as interchurch families contribute to solutions needed in the 21st Century? How does “Christian Hospitality” influence our lived experience? How do we listen, or read in many instances now, “with the ear of our heart”?

~ M.J. Glauber

Document date: 14.02.2006

Religious plurality and Christian self- understanding

Source: please see the following links [pdf version](http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wccassembly/documents/english/pb-14-religiousplurality.pdf)
<http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wccassembly/documents/english/pb-14-religiousplurality.pdf>

The present document is the result of a study process in response to suggestions made in 2002 at the WCC central committee to the three staff teams on Faith and Order, Inter-religious Relations, and Mission and Evangelism, and their respective commissions or advisory bodies.

Given the context of increased polarization of communities, the prevalent climate of fear, and the culture of violence that has gripped our world, the mission of bringing healing and wholeness to the fractured human community is the greatest challenge that faces the religious traditions in our day.

The question of the theological approach to religious plurality had been on the agenda of the WCC many times, reaching a certain consensus in 1989 and 1990.¹

In recent years, it was felt that this difficult and controversial issue needed to be revisited.

Some twenty scholars from different contexts and denominations, specialized in religious studies, missiology or systematic theology and part of the networks of the three teams, worked for two years in a significant effort of cooperation between different constituencies in the recent history of the WCC.

It must be emphasized that the paper does not represent the view of the WCC.

Discussions in commissions showed how important but also how controversial the matter is.

Much careful theological work is needed.

This document is shared as a background document for discussion and debate.

Further comments, critiques and suggestions from assembly participants or churches and other partners are welcome and will be fed into the continuing reflection on the key issue of Christian self-understanding and witness in a religiously plural world.²

Preamble

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it (Ps. 24:1).

For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to

my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts (Mal. 1:11).

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is



acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35).

1. What do the experiences of the psalmist, the prophet and Peter mean for us today?

What does it mean to affirm our faith in Jesus Christ joyfully, and yet seek to discern God's presence and activity in the world?

How do we understand such affirmations in a religiously plural world?

I. The challenge of plurality

2. Today Christians in almost all parts of the world live in religiously plural societies. Persistent plurality and its impact on their daily lives are forcing them to seek new and



adequate ways of understanding and relating to peoples of other religious traditions. The rise of religious extremism and militancy in many situations has accentuated the importance of inter-religious relations. Religious identities, loyalties, and sentiments have become important components in so many international and inter-ethnic conflicts that some say that the "politics of ideology", which played a crucial role in the 20th century, has been

replaced in our day by the "politics of identity".

3. All religious communities are being reshaped by new encounters and relationships. Globalization of political, economic, and even religious life brings new pressures on

communities that have been in geographical or social isolation. There is greater awareness of the interdependence of human life, and of the need to collaborate across religious barriers in dealing with the pressing problems of the world. All

religious traditions, therefore, are challenged to contribute to the emergence of a global community that would live in mutual respect and peace. At stake is the credibility of religious traditions as forces that can bring justice, peace and healing to a broken world.

dialogue, reconciliation and peace-building across the religious divides have become urgent, and yet they are never achieved through isolated events or programs. They involve a long and difficult process sustained by faith, courage and hope.

4. Most religious traditions, however, have their own history of compromise with political power and privilege and of complicity in violence that has marred human history. Christianity, for instance, has been, on the one hand, a force that brought the message of God's unconditional love for and acceptance of all people. On the other hand, its history, sadly, is also marked by persecutions, crusades, insensitivity to Indigenous cultures, and complicity with imperial and colonial designs. In fact, such ambiguity and compromise with power and privilege is part of the history of all religious traditions, cautioning us against a romantic attitude towards them. Further, most religious traditions exhibit enormous internal diversity attended by painful divisions and disputes.

New forms of religious commitment emerge as people increasingly separate personal faith from institutional belonging. The search for authentic spirituality in the context of a secular way of life presents new challenges to the churches.

5. Today these internal disputes have to be seen in the light of the need to promote mutual understanding and peace among the religions. Given the context of increased polarization of communities, the prevalent climate of fear, and the culture of violence that has gripped our world, the mission of bringing healing and wholeness to the fractured human community is the greatest challenge that faces the religious traditions in our day.

The changing context of the Christian faith

6. The global religious situation is also in flux. In some parts of the Western world, the institutional expressions of



Religious plurality and its implications now affect our day-to-day lives... Therefore dialogue, reconciliation and peace-building across the religious divides have become urgent...

Christianity are in decline. New forms of religious commitment emerge as people increasingly separate personal faith from institutional belonging. The search for authentic spirituality in the context of a secular way of life presents new challenges to the churches. Further, peoples of other traditions, like Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, etc., who have increasingly moved into these areas, as minorities, often

experience the need to be in dialogue with the majority community. This challenges Christians to be able to articulate their faith in ways that are meaningful both to them and their neighbours;

dialogue presupposes both faith commitment and the capacity to articulate it in word and deed.

7. At the same time, Christianity, especially in its evangelical and Pentecostal manifestations, is growing

rapidly in some regions of the world. In some of the other regions, Christianity is undergoing radical changes as Christians embrace new and vibrant forms of church life and enter into new relationships with indigenous cultures. While Christianity appears to be on the decline in some parts of the world, it has become a dynamic force in others.

8. These changes require us to be more attentive than before to our relationship with other religious communities. They

Therefore challenge us to acknowledge "others" in their differences, to welcome strangers even if their "strangeness" sometimes threatens us, and to seek reconciliation even with those who have declared themselves our enemies. In other words, we are being challenged to develop a spiritual climate and a theological approach that contributes to creative and positive relationships among the religious traditions of the world.

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9. The cultural and doctrinal differences among religious traditions, however, have always made inter-religious dialogue difficult.

Traditional Religions resulted in the emergence of theological traditions based on the cultural and religious heritages of these regions.

This is now aggravated by the tensions and animosities generated by global conflicts and mutual suspicions and fears. Further, the impression that Christians have turned to dialogue as a new tool for their mission, and the controversies over "conversion" and "religious freedom", have not abated. Therefore dialogue, reconciliation and peace-building across the religious divides have become urgent, and yet they are never achieved through isolated events or programs. They involve a long and difficult process sustained by faith, courage and hope.

The pastoral and faith dimensions of the question

10. There is a pastoral need to equip Christians to live in a

Alleluia! The Lord is risen! religiously plural world. Many Christians seek ways to be committed to their own faith and yet to be open to the others. Some use spiritual disciplines from other religious traditions to deepen their

Christian faith and prayer life. Still others find in other religious traditions an additional spiritual home and speak of the possibility of "double belonging". Many Christians ask for guidance to deal with interfaith marriages, the call to pray with others, and the need to deal with militancy and

...a **Christianity that has been and is changing, that we need a theological response to plurality.**

extremism. Others seek for guidance as they work together with neighbours of other religious traditions on issues of justice and peace. Religious plurality and its implications now affect our day-to-day lives.

11. As Christians we seek to build a new relationship with other religious traditions because we believe it to be

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia! intrinsic to the gospel message and inherent to our mission as co-workers with God in healing the world. Therefore the mystery of God's relationship to all God's people, and the many ways in which peoples have responded to this mystery, invite us to explore more fully

the reality of other religious traditions and our own identity as Christians in a religiously plural world.

II. Religious traditions as spiritual journeys

The Christian journey



Spring, a rebirth in nature that coincides with Easter - Female Cardinal sitting on a garden gate

12. It is common to speak of religious traditions being "spiritual journeys". Christianity's spiritual journey has enriched and shaped its development into a religious tradition. It emerged initially in a predominantly Jewish-Hellenistic culture. Christians have had the experience of being "strangers", and of being persecuted minorities struggling to define themselves in the midst of dominant religious and cultural forces. And as Christianity grew into a world religion, it has become internally diversified, transformed by the many cultures with which it came into contact.

13. In the East, the Orthodox churches have throughout their history been involved in a complex process of cultural engagement and discernment, maintaining and transmitting the Orthodox faith through integration of select cultural aspects over the centuries. On the other hand, the Orthodox churches have also struggled to resist the temptation towards syncretism. In the West, having become the religious tradition of a powerful

empire, Christianity has at times been a persecuting majority. It also became the "host" culture, shaping European civilization in many positive ways. At the same time, it has had a troubled history in its relationship with Judaism, Islam, and Indigenous traditions.

14. The Reformation transformed the face of Western Christianity, introducing Protestantism with its proliferation of confessions and denominations, while the Enlightenment brought about a cultural

revolution with the emergence of modernity, secularization, individualism, and the separation of church and state. Missionary expansions into Asia, Africa,

Latin America and other parts of the world raised questions about the indigenization and inculturation of the gospel. The encounter between the rich spiritual heritage of the Asian religions and the African Traditional Religions resulted in the emergence of theological traditions based on the cultural and religious heritages of these regions. The rise of charismatic and Pentecostal churches in all parts of the world has added

yet a new dimension to Christianity.

What is the relationship between "religion" and "culture"? What is the nature of the influence they have on one another?...What resources within our own tradition can help us deal with these questions?

15. In short, the "spiritual journey" of Christianity has made it a very complex

worldwide religious tradition. As Christianity seeks to live among cultures, religions and philosophic traditions and attempts to respond to the present and future challenges, it will continue to be transformed. It is in this context, of a Christianity that has been and is changing, that we need a



Spring, a rebirth in nature that coincides with Easter - Dogwood Tree Blossoms



theological response to plurality.

Religions, identities and cultures

16. Other religious traditions have also lived through similar challenges in their development.

shaped by religious traditions other than their own. This means that the identities of religious communities and of individuals within them are never static, but fluid and dynamic. No religion is totally unaffected by

...brought its interaction with

into focus the need to collaborate with others in the search for a just and peaceful world. There is also greater awareness of how our ways of speaking about our and other religious traditions can lead to confrontations and conflicts. other religious traditions. Increasingly it has become rather misleading even to talk of "religions" as such, and of "Judaism", "Christianity", "Islam", "Hinduism", "Buddhism", etc., as if they were static,

There is no one expression of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism, etc.

As these religions journeyed out of their lands of origin they too have been shaped by the encounters with the cultures they moved into, transforming and being transformed by them. Most of the major religious

Is God's revelation present in other religions and cultures? ... These were difficult questions and Christians remain divided over the issue. experience of being cultural "hosts" to other religious traditions, and of being "hosted" by cultures

How does one deal with the perceived conflict between conversion and religious freedom? . . . implications in a world of diverse religions, cultures and ideologies have drawn on the concept of *missio Dei*, God's own salvific mission in the world, even preceding human witness, in which we are in Christ called to participate.

undifferentiated wholes.

17. These realities raise several spiritual and theological

issues. What is the relationship between "religion" and "culture"? What is the nature of the influence they have on one another? What theological sense can we make of religious plurality? What resources within our own tradition can help us deal with these questions? We have the rich heritage of the modern ecumenical movement's struggle with these questions to help us in our exploration.

III. Continuing an ongoing exploration The ecumenical journey

18. From the very beginnings of the church, Christians have believed that the message of God's love witnessed to in Christ needs to be shared with

others. It is in the course of sharing this message, especially in Asia and Africa, that the modern ecumenical movement had to face the question of God's presence among people of other traditions. Is God's revelation present in other religions and cultures? Is the Christian revelation in "continuity" with the religious life of others, or is it "discontinuous", bringing in a whole new dimension of knowledge of God? These were difficult questions and Christians remain divided over the issue.

19. The dialogue programme of the World Council of Churches (WCC) has emphasized the importance of respecting the reality of other religious

traditions and affirming their distinctiveness and identity. It has also brought into focus the need to collaborate with others in the search for a just and peaceful world. There is also greater awareness of how our ways of speaking about our and other religious traditions can lead to confrontations and conflicts. On the one hand, religious traditions make universal truth claims. On the other hand, these claims by implication may be in conflict with the truth claims of others. These realizations, and actual experiences of relationships between peoples of different traditions in local situations, opened the way for Christians to speak of our relationship with others in terms of "dialogue". Yet, there are many questions awaiting further exploration. What does it mean to be in dialogue when the

communities concerned are in conflict? How does one deal with the perceived conflict between conversion and religious freedom? How do we deal with the deep differences among faith communities over the relationship of religious traditions to ethnicity, cultural practices and the state? 20. Within the discussions in the commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) of the WCC the exploration of the nature of the missionary mandate and its implications in a world of diverse religions, cultures and ideologies have drawn on the concept of missio Dei, God's own salvific mission in the world, even preceding human witness, in which we are in Christ called to participate. Several issues of CWME's agenda interact with the present study on religious plurality: What is the relation between

What are the challenges which Christians face in seeking an authentic Christian theology that is "hospitable" to others? What are the limits to diversity? Are there valid signs of salvation beyond the church? How do insights from other traditions contribute to our understanding of what it means to be human?

"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."



Spring, a rebirth in nature that coincides with Easter - Male Cardinal sitting on a garden gate in spring

mjpg ©

cooperation with people of other religious traditions (for justice and peace), involvement in inter-religious dialogue, and the evangelistic mandate of the church? What are the consequences of the intrinsic relation between cultures and religions for the inculturation approach in mission? What are the implications for interfaith relations if mission focuses, as the 2005 conference on world mission and evangelism suggests, on building healing and reconciling communities?

21. The WCC's plenary commission on Faith and Order, meeting for the first time in a Muslim-majority country (in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2004) spoke of the "journey of faith" as one inspired by the vision of "receiving one another". The commission asked: How do the churches pursue the goal of visible Christian unity within today's increasingly multi-

Spring, a rebirth in nature that coincides with Easter



Red bud tree blossoms in spring against a blue sky

...drawing out the implications of the Christian belief that God is active as Creator and Sustainer in the religious life of all peoples: "This conviction that God as Creator of all is present and active in the plurality of religions makes it inconceivable to us that God's saving activity could be confined to any one continent, cultural type, or group of people. A refusal to take seriously the many and diverse religious testimonies to be found among the nations and peoples of the whole world amounts to disowning the biblical testimony to God as Creator of all things and Father of humankind"

religious context? How can the search for visible unity among the churches be an effective sign for reconciliation in society as a whole? To what extent are questions of ethnic and national identity affected by religious identities and vice versa? The commission also explored broader questions arising in multi-religious contexts: What are the challenges which Christians face in seeking an authentic Christian theology that is "hospitable" to others? What are the limits to diversity? Are there valid signs of salvation beyond the church? How do insights from other traditions contribute to our understanding of what it means to be human?

22. It is significant that all three programmatic streams of the WCC converge in dealing with questions that are relevant for a theology of religions. In fact,

attempts have been made in recent conferences to deal with, and formulate, positions that take the discussions forward.

Recent developments

23. In its search for consensus among Christians about God's saving presence in the religious life of our neighbours, the world mission conference in San Antonio (1989) summed up the position that the WCC has been able to affirm: "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." Recognizing the tension between such a statement and the affirmation of God's presence and work in the life of peoples of other faith traditions, the San Antonio report said that "we appreciate this tension, and do not attempt to resolve it". The question

following the conference was whether the ecumenical movement should remain with these modest words as an expression of theological humility, or whether it should deal with that tension in finding new and creative formulations in a theology of religions.

24. In an attempt to go beyond San Antonio, a WCC consultation on theology of religions in Baar, Switzerland (1990), produced an important statement, drawing out the implications of the Christian belief that God is active as Creator and Sustainer in the religious life of all peoples: "This conviction that God as Creator of all is present and active in the plurality of religions makes it inconceivable to us that God's saving activity could be

confined to any one continent, cultural type, or group of people. A refusal to take seriously the many and diverse religious testimonies to be found among the nations and peoples of the whole world amounts to disowning the biblical testimony to God as Creator of all things and Father of humankind."

25. Hence, developments in the Mission and Evangelism, Faith and Order, and Dialogue streams of the WCC encourage us to reopen the question of the theology of religions today. Such an inquiry has become an urgent theological and pastoral necessity. The theme of the ninth WCC assembly, "God, in Your Grace, Transform the World", also calls for such an exploration.

This grace of God shown in Jesus Christ calls us to an attitude of hospitality in our relationship to others. Paul prefaces the hymn by saying, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5).

The Bible speaks of hospitality primarily as a radical openness to others based on the affirmation of the dignity of all. We draw our inspiration both from Jesus' example and his command that we love our neighbours.

IV. Towards a theology of religions

26. What would a theology of religions look like today? Many theologies of religions have been proposed. The many streams of thinking within the scriptures make our task challenging. While recognizing the diversity of the scriptural witness, we choose the theme of "hospitality" as a hermeneutical key and an entry point for our discussion.

Celebrating the hospitality of a gracious God



Daffodil in the morning sun

mjpg ©

Spring, a rebirth in nature that coincides with Easter



27. Our theological understanding of religious plurality begins with our faith in the one God who created all things, the living God present and active in all creation from the beginning. The Bible testifies to God as God of all nations and peoples, whose love and compassion includes all humankind. We see in the covenant with Noah a covenant with all creation that has never been broken. We see God's wisdom and justice extending to the ends of the earth, as

We see the nurturing power of the Holy Spirit working within, inspiring human beings in their universal longing for, and seeking after, truth, peace and justice (Rom. 8:1 8-27). "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control", wherever they are found, are the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23, cf. Rom. 14:17)

God guides the nations through their traditions of wisdom and understanding. God's glory penetrates the whole of

creation. The Hebrew Bible witnesses to the universal saving presence of God throughout human history through the Word or Wisdom and the Spirit.

28. In the New Testament, the incarnation of the Word of God is spoken of by St. Paul in terms of hospitality and of a life turned towards the "other". Paul proclaims, in doxological language, that "though he (Christ) was in the form of God he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied

himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:6-8). The self-emptying of Christ, and his readiness to

The person of the Holy Spirit moved and still moves over the face of the earth to create, nurture and sustain, to challenge, renew and transform.

We confess that the activity of the Spirit passes beyond our definitions, descriptions, and limitations in the manner of the wind that "blows where it wills" (John 3:8).

assume our humanity, is at the heart of the confession of our faith. The mystery of the incarnation is God's deepest identification with our human condition, showing the unconditional grace of God that accepted humankind in its otherness and estrangement. Paul's hymn moves on to celebrate the risen Christ: "Therefore God has highly exalted him, and given him the name that is above every name" (Phil. 2:9). This has led Christians to confess Jesus Christ as the one in whom the entire human family has been united to God in an irrevocable bond and covenant.

29. This grace of God shown in Jesus Christ calls us to an attitude of hospitality in our relationship to others. Paul prefaces the hymn by saying, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5). Our hospitality involves self-emptying, and in receiving others in unconditional love we



Spring, a rebirth in nature that coincides with Easter

participate in the pattern of God's redeeming love. Indeed our hospitality is not limited to those in our own community; the gospel commands us to love even our enemies and to call for blessings upon them (Matt. 5:43-48; Rom. 12:14).

As Christians, therefore, we need to search for the right balance between our identity in Christ and our openness to others in kenotic love that comes out of that very identity.

30. In his public ministry, Jesus not only healed people who were part of his own tradition but also responded to the great faith

of the Canaanite woman and the Roman centurion (Matt. 15:21-28, 8:5-11). Jesus chose a "stranger", the Samaritan, to demonstrate the fulfilling of the commandment to love one's neighbour through compassion and hospitality. Since the gospels present Jesus' encounter with those of other faiths as incidental, and not as part of his main ministry, these stories do not provide us with the necessary information to draw clear conclusions regarding any theology of religions. But they do present Jesus as one whose hospitality extended to all who were in need of love and acceptance.

Matthew's narrative of Jesus' parable of the last judgment goes further to identify openness to the victims of society, hospitality to strangers and acceptance of the other as unexpected ways of

Thus, it is our faith in the trinitarian God, God who is diversity in unity, God who creates, brings wholeness, and nurtures and nourishes all life, which helps us in our hospitality of openness to all. We have been the recipients of God's generous hospitality of love. We cannot do otherwise.

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Matthew's narrative of Jesus' parable of the last judgment goes further to identify openness to the victims of society, hospitality to strangers and acceptance of the other as unexpected ways of

being in communion with the risen Christ (25:31-46).

31. It is significant that while Jesus extended hospitality to those at the margins of society he himself had to face rejection and was often in need of hospitality. Jesus' acceptance of the peoples at the margins, as well as his own experience of rejection has provided the inspiration for those who show solidarity in our day with the poor, the despised and the rejected. Thus the biblical understanding of hospitality goes well beyond the popular notion of extending help and showing generosity towards others. The Bible speaks of hospitality primarily as a radical openness to others based on the affirmation of the dignity of all. We draw our inspiration both from Jesus' example and his command that we love our neighbours.

32. The Holy Spirit helps us to live out Christ's openness to others. The person of the Holy Spirit moved and still moves over the face of the earth to create, nurture and sustain, to challenge, renew and transform.

We confess that the activity of the Spirit passes beyond our definitions, descriptions, and limitations in the manner of the wind that "blows where it wills" (John 3:8). Our hope and expectancy are rooted in our belief that the "economy" of the Spirit relates to the whole creation. We discern the Spirit of God moving in ways that we cannot predict. We see the nurturing power of the Holy Spirit working within, inspiring human beings in their universal longing for, and seeking after, truth, peace and justice (Rom. 8:18-27). "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control", wherever they are found, are the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23, cf. Rom. 14:17).

33. We believe that this encompassing work of the Holy Spirit is also present in the life and traditions of peoples of living faith. People have at all times and in all places responded to the presence and activity of God among them, and have given their witness to their encounters with the living

God. In this testimony they speak both of seeking and of having found wholeness, or enlightenment, or divine guidance, or rest, or liberation. This is the context in which we as Christians testify to the salvation we have experienced through Christ. This ministry of witness among our neighbours of other faiths must presuppose an "affirmation of what God has done and is doing among them" (CWME, San Antonio 1989).

34. We see the plurality of religious

traditions as both the result of the manifold ways in which God has related to peoples and nations as well as a manifestation of the richness and diversity of human response to God's gracious gifts. It is our Christian faith in

The word "stranger" in the scriptures does not intend to objectify the "other" but recognizes that there are people who are indeed "strangers" to us in their culture, religion, race and other kinds of diversities that are part of the human community. Our willingness to accept others in their "otherness" is the hallmark of true hospitality.

God which challenges us to take seriously the whole realm of religious plurality, always using the gift of discernment. Seeking to develop new and greater understandings of "the wisdom, love and power which God has given to men (and women) of other faiths" (New Delhi report, 1961), we must affirm our "openness to the possibility that the God we know in Jesus Christ may

Practical hospitality and a welcoming attitude to strangers create the space for mutual transformation and even reconciliation.



encounter us also in the lives of our neighbours of other faiths" (CWME, San Antonio 1989). We also believe that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, will lead us to understand anew the deposit of the faith already given to us, and into fresh and unforeseen insight into the divine mystery, as we learn more from our neighbours of other faiths.

35. Thus, it is our faith in the trinitarian God, God who is diversity in unity, God who creates, brings wholeness, and nurtures and nourishes all life, which helps us in our hospitality of openness to all. We have been the recipients of God's generous hospitality of love. We cannot do otherwise.

V. The call to hospitality

36. How should Christians respond in light of the generosity and graciousness of God? "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without

knowing it" (Heb. 13:2). In today's context the "stranger" includes not only the people unknown to us, the poor and the exploited, but also those who are ethnically, culturally and religiously "others" to us. The word "stranger" in the

scriptures does not intend to objectify the "other" but recognizes that there are people who are indeed "strangers" to us in their culture, religion, race and other kinds of diversities that are part of the human community. Our willingness to accept others in their "otherness" is the hallmark of true hospitality. Through our openness to the "other" we may encounter God in new ways. Hospitality, thus, is both the fulfillment of the commandment to "love our neighbours as ourselves" and an opportunity to discover God anew.

37. Hospitality also pertains to how we treat each other within the Christian family;



sometimes we are as much strangers to each other as we are to those outside our community. Because of the changing world context, especially increased mobility and population movements, sometimes we are the "hosts" to others, and at other times we become the "guests" receiving the hospitality of others; sometimes we receive "strangers" and at other times we become the "strangers" in the midst of others. Indeed we may need to move to an understanding of hospitality as "mutual openness" that transcends the distinctions of "hosts" and "guests".



38. Hospitality is not just an easy or simple way of relating to others. It is often not only an opportunity but also a risk. In situations of political or religious tension acts of

have also been transformed by their encounters. We have discovered unknown aspects of God's presence in the world, and uncovered neglected elements of our

own
Christian



There is greater awareness of the interdependence of human life, and of the need to collaborate across religious barriers in dealing with the pressing problems of the world.

hospitality may require great courage, especially when extended to those who deeply disagree with us or even consider us as their enemy. Further, dialogue is very difficult when there are inequalities between parties, distorted power relations or hidden agendas. One may also at times feel obliged to question the deeply held beliefs of the very people whom one has offered hospitality to or received hospitality from, and to have one's own beliefs be challenged in return.

The power of mutual transformation

39. Christians have not only learned to co-exist with people of other religious traditions, but

traditions. We have also become more

conscious of

the many passages in the Bible that call us to be more responsive to others.

40. Practical hospitality and a welcoming attitude to strangers create the space for mutual transformation and even reconciliation. Such reciprocity is

encounter Abraham's understanding of the nature of the deity who had led him and his family from Ur and Harran was renewed and expanded.

41. Mutual transformation is also seen in Luke's narrative of the encounter between Peter and Cornelius in the Acts of the Apostles. The Holy Spirit accomplished a transformation in Peter's self-understanding through his vision and subsequent interaction with

mutual transformation is at the heart of authentic Christian witness. Openness to the "other" can change the "other", even as it can change us.

exemplified in the story of the meeting between Abraham, the father of faith, and Melchizedek, the non-Israelite king of Salem (Gen. 14). Abraham received the blessing of Melchizedek, who is described as a priest of "God Most High". The story suggests that through this

Cornelius. This led him to confess that, "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (10:34-35). In this case, Cornelius the "stranger" becomes an instrument of Peter's transformation, even as

Peter becomes an instrument of transformation of Cornelius and his household. While this story is not primarily about interfaith relations, it sheds light on how God can lead us beyond the confines of our self-understanding in encounter with others.

42. So one can draw consequences from these examples, and from such rich experiences in daily life, for a vision of mutual hospitality among peoples of different religious traditions. From the Christian perspective, this has much to do with our ministry of reconciliation. It presupposes both our witness to the "other" about God in Christ and our openness to allow God to speak to us through the "other". Mission when understood in this light has no room for triumphalism; it contributes to removing the causes for religious animosity and the violence that often goes with it. Hospitality requires Christians to accept others as created in the image of God, knowing that God may talk to us through others to teach and transform us, even

as God may use us to transform others.

43. The biblical narrative and experiences in the ecumenical ministry show that such mutual transformation is at the heart of authentic Christian witness. Openness to the "other" can change the "other", even as it can change us. It may give others new perspectives on Christianity and on the gospel; it may also



Spring, a rebirth in nature that coincides with Easter -common violets

"pilgrimages" towards human fulfillment in search for the truth about our existence. Even though we may be "strangers"

..at the heart of the Christian faith lies an attitude of hospitality that embraces the "other" in their otherness. It is this spirit that needs to inspire the theology of religions in a world that needs healing and reconciliation. And it is this spirit that may also bring about our solidarity with all who, irrespective of their religious beliefs, have been pushed to the margins of society.

enable them to understand their own faith from new perspectives. Such openness, and the transformation that comes from it, can in turn enrich our lives in surprising ways.

VI.

Salvation belongs to God

44. The religious traditions of humankind, in their great diversity, are "journeys" or

to each other, there are moments in which our paths intersect that call for "religious hospitality". Both our personal experiences today and historical moments in the past witness to the fact that such hospitality is possible and does take place in small ways.

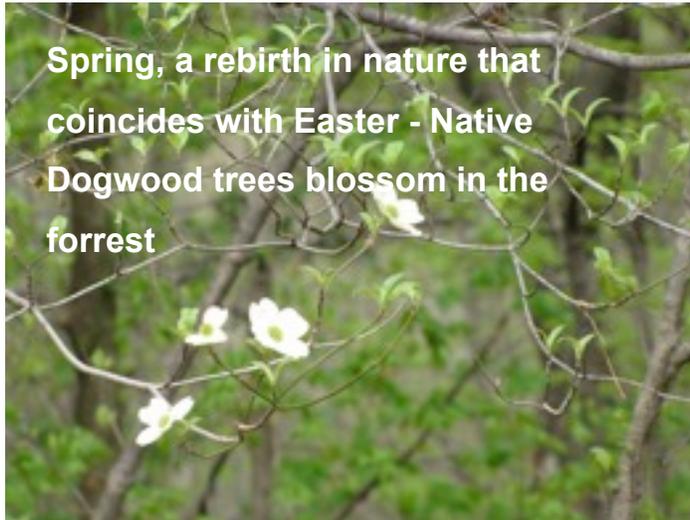
45. Extending such hospitality is dependent on a theology that is hospitable to the "other". Our reflections on the nature of the

biblical witness to God, what we believe God to have done in Christ, and the work of the Spirit shows that at the heart of the Christian faith lies an attitude of hospitality that embraces the "other" in their otherness. It is this spirit that needs to inspire the theology of religions in a world that needs healing and reconciliation. And it is this spirit that may also bring about our solidarity with all who, irrespective of their religious beliefs, have been pushed to the margins of society.

46. We need to acknowledge that human limitations and limitations of language make it impossible for any community to have exhausted the mystery of the salvation God offers to humankind. All our theological reflections in the last analysis are limited by our own experience and cannot hope to deal with the scope of God's work of mending the world.

47. It is this humility that enables us to say that salvation belongs to God, God only. We do not possess salvation; we participate in it. We do not offer

salvation; we witness to it. We do not decide who would be saved; we leave it to the



Spring, a rebirth in nature that coincides with Easter - Native Dogwood trees blossom in the forrest

providence of God. For our own salvation is an everlasting "hospitality" that God has extended to us. It is God who is the "host" of salvation. And yet, in the eschatological vision of the new heaven and the new earth, we also have the powerful symbol of God becoming both a "host" and a "guest" among us: "[A] See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples..." (Rev. 21:3).

¹ For the world mission conference of 1989, cf. F. R. Wilson ed., *The San Antonio Report*, WCC, 1990, in particular pp. 31-33. For the 1990 consultation in Baar, Switzerland, see *Current Dialogue*, no. 19, Jan. 1991, pp. 47- 51.

² Reactions can be sent to the secretariat of the policy reference committee or to the World Council of Churches, General Secretariat, P.O. Box 2100, CH-1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland, bc@wcc-coe.org.

This document in its original format can be found at <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/porto-alegre-2006/3-preparatory-and-background-documents/religious->

[plurality-and-christian-self-understanding.html](#)

The preceding document is included in the ARK to generate discussion and dialogue. It doesn't necessarily reflect the opinion of AAIF or of the WCC who published it.

~~I believe that the underlying question for the general public pertains to how we will live in the world together in the future so that we do not have to repeat the same mistakes we may have made in the past that have led us into a constant state of war over centuries.~~

I liked this document since it set out to seek solutions asking all people of faith to enter into the dialogue with us as equals and as the children of God in finding a solution for a way forward. Recognizing history, but not dwelling there in a place that is stuck and incapable of finding any solution of any kind because they have not allowed themselves to fall into a trap of pushing blame around, this document lays a foundation for some positive dialogue which I haven't seen elsewhere.

Please study the potential that is being offered to the world's people within the contents of this document. **M.J. Glauber**

My Personal Reflections on Religious plurality and Christian self-understanding confirms that Salvation belongs to God.

Our human languages are basically inadequate either to express our every day thoughts or our experience of the Divine in our lives. Our efforts to comprehend are always through a point of

Registration has begun for "Strengthening Beloved Community" - Please see: <http://www.fgcquaker.org/gathering/2011/strengthening-beloved-community> This event will take place in Grinnell, Iowa this year.

reference that is based on our own linguistic and cultural experience.

This is limiting as we seek to know the God who created all of the Heavens and Earth. We are called to be still and to listen for that still small voice of God. We are required to look for that of God in all people.

This means we need to be more attentive to the ways that we listen, to the ways that we take in information and to the natural world of creation

God made. Beginning with the story of Cain and Abel, we have learned that humans are weak and not God.

We forget to love each other. All opposite thoughts and resulting actions require so much effort and expense that distract us from God's single task that is required from us. We are simply required to love one another as Christ has loved us.

We have examples of Christ eating with the most disenfranchised people of his

time, reaching out to the "Others" of his time. Do we not see our

us has a deeper understanding of our own denomination, and a respect for our spouse's tradition.

Alleluia! The Lord is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!



The other added benefit is that God has also allowed us to be open to even greater possibilities in the encounter with others from other traditions who may be able to shed light on the Divine simply by posing questions in a new way.

Interchurch Families as the Little Church of the Home or as the Domestic Church is a microcosm of Christian Unity.

Given our lived examples of Christian Unity, may this knowledge

face in the face of the "Others"? We could become the "Others" at any point in history.

Apart from that, God has placed the "Others" there to bring us out of ourselves to see a fuller image of ourselves and a fuller image of the possibility of God. Interchurch Couples already know this.

This document describes our lives as Interchurch Couples in long standing interchurch marriages. Although we have each remained in our own denomination of origin, each of

of our gifts encourage us to explore the calling God has made for us as InterChurch Families so that we may find the path that God has intended for us.

Easter brings so much potential for a new beginning and new possibility.

This document sparks many ideas for possibility in our time. May we be the agents of Christ's love in the world.

~ M.J. Glauber

AAIF City Chapters: Are you interested in meeting and talking to other interchurch families in your city between AAIF Biennial Conferences?

Please See www.aifusa.org for membership information - 2011 dues are due
TREASURER: L. Elaine & Clint Hall; Georgetown University;
P.O. Box 571250; Washington, D.C. 20057 E-mail: pastorelaine@springfieldvaumc.org

Please contact: AAIF.co.chair@ gmail.com or Laura & Franz Green at fandlgreen@cox.net

FOR INFORMATION ABOUT HOW TO FORM A CITY CHAPTER IN YOUR AREA OR HOW TO FIND THE AAIF CITY CHAPTER CLOSEST TO YOU.

Spring and rebirth coincide with Easter: Redbud blossoms over a pond where a turtle suns itself on a log. Two ducks swim searching for food.



Conquering the Spirit

- a poem, a prayer

Almighty God, Upon You I call.
Don't let evil Spirits Possess my soul.
Don't let hatred Strangle my love.
Or despair Crush my hope.
Tie me with the rope Of patience
To the pillar of strength
When anger erupts In my mind.
Don't let emotion Blind my reason.
Teach me the psalm of faith
And restore my calm.
Dispel my doubts and fears
While the bells of life Toll my years.
Let the warm rays
Of Affection and compassion
Conquer my spirit. O Lord, our God.
Please disperse
The seeds of peace and brotherhood
Upon the earth As time rolls
On the wheels Of the Universe.

← Lines have been edited for space consideration in formatting only. Otherwise this prayer appears exactly as it was published in "The Treasury of American Prayer" by James P. Moore, Jr. in the chapter, "Endurance and Resolve" - This prayer is a devotional poem written by Magda Herzberger, a survivor of three death camps during the Nazi Holocaust. Moore states that she "attributed her survival to her faith in God and her ability to pray." This prayer has universally appealing qualities to it. ~ M.J. Glauber

Looking forward to the 2012 AAIF Biennial Conference
- details to follow at www.aifusa.org

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Alleluia! The Lord is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

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