

Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*

World Council of Churches

Historical Note

It was at Addis Ababa in 1971 that the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches first adopted an "interim" policy statement and guidelines on dialogue with people of living faiths and ideologies. In subsequent years, several bilateral and multilateral meetings were held with neighbors of other faiths to explore issues involved. Reflection on these issues continues in the churches in different parts of the world and in ecumenical gatherings. The consultation held in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in 1977 on the theme "Dialogue in Community" proved to be a significant stage in this ongoing process. The statement adopted at Chiang Mai was received by the Central Committee in 1977, "welcom-

ing the degree of agreement and mutual understanding represented by it among those who hold different theological views." This statement, revised in the light of responses received from the churches, forms the theological basis for the guidelines that follow. "To enter into dialogue requires an opening of the mind and heart to others," the Central Committee said. "It is an undertaking which requires risk as well as a deep sense of vocation." The statement and guidelines were commended to member churches "for their consideration and discussion, testing and evaluation, and for their elaboration in each specific situation."

It is Christian faith in the Triune God—Creator of all humankind, Redeemer in Jesus Christ, revealing and renewing Spirit—which calls us Christians to human relationship with our many neighbours. Such relationship includes dialogue: witnessing to our deepest convictions and listening to those of our neighbours. It is Christian faith which sets us free to be open to the faiths of others, to risk, to trust and to be vulnerable. In dialogue, conviction and openness are held in balance.

In a world in which Christians have many neighbours, dialogue is not only an activity of meetings and conferences, it is also a way of living out Christian faith in relationship and commitment to those neighbours with whom Christians share towns, cities, nations, and the earth as a whole. Dialogue is a style of living in relationship with neighbours. This in no way replaces or limits our Christian obligation to witness, as partners enter into dialogue with their respective commitments.

These guidelines are offered to member churches of the WCC and to individual congregations in awareness of the great diversity of situations in which they find themselves. The neighbours with whom Christians enter into relationship in dialogue may be partners in common social, economic and political crises and quests; companions in scholarly work or intellectual and spiritual exploration; or, literally, the people next door. In some places, Christians and the church as an institution are in positions of power and influence, and their neighbours are without power. In other places it is the Christians who are the powerless. There are also situations of tension and conflict where dialogue may not be possible or opportunities very limited. In many places people of different living faiths interact not only with each other, but also with people of various ideologies, though sometimes it is difficult to make a clear-

cut distinction between religions and ideologies, for there are religious dimensions of ideologies and ideological dimensions of religions, Christianity included. The emergence of new religious groups in many countries has brought new dimensions and tensions to interreligious relationships. With all this diversity in mind, the following guidelines are commended to member churches for their consideration and discussion, testing and evaluation, and for their elaboration in each specific situation.

Learning and Understanding in Dialogue

1. *Churches should seek ways in which Christian communities can enter into dialogue with their neighbours of different faiths and ideologies.*

They should also discover ways of responding to similar initiatives by their neighbours in the community.

2. *Dialogues should normally be planned together.*

When planned together with partners of other living faiths or ideological convictions they may well focus on particular issues: theological or religious, political or social.

3. *Partners in dialogue should take stock of the religious, cultural and ideological diversity of their local situation.*

Only by being alert both to the particular areas of tension and discrimination and to the particular opportunities for conversation and cooperation in their own context will Christians and their neighbours be able to create the conditions for dialogue. They should be especially alert to infringements of the basic human rights of religious, cultural or ideological minority groups.

4. *Partners in dialogue should be free to "define themselves."*

One of the functions of dialogue is to allow participants to describe and witness to their faith in their own terms. This is of primary importance since self-serving descriptions of other peoples' faith are one of the roots of prejudice, stereotyping, and condescension. Listening carefully to the neighbours' self-understanding enables Christians better to obey the commandment not to bear

*These guidelines were adopted by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches at its meeting in Kingston, Jamaica, in January 1979. The Chiang Mai statement on "Dialogue in Community," which in its revised version forms the theological basis for the guidelines, was published in the Occasional Bulletin 1/2 (April 1977). The two documents should be taken together as a single whole and should be read together.

false witness against their neighbours, whether those neighbours be of long established religious, cultural or ideological traditions or members of new religious groups. It should be recognized by partners in dialogue that any religion or ideology claiming universality, apart from having an understanding of itself, will also have its own interpretations of other religions and ideologies as part of its own self-understanding. Dialogue gives an opportunity for a mutual questioning of the understanding partners have about themselves and others. It is out of a reciprocal willingness to listen and learn that significant dialogue grows.

5. *Dialogue should generate educational efforts in the community.*

In many cases Christians, utilizing the experience of dialogue, must take the initiative in education in order to restore the distorted image of the neighbours that may already exist in their communities and to advance Christian understanding of people of other living faiths and ideologies.

Even in those situations where Christians do not live in close contact with people of the various religious, cultural and ideological traditions, they should take seriously the responsibility to study and to learn about these other traditions.

Member churches should consider what action they can take in the following educational areas:

(i) Teaching programmes in schools, colleges, and adult education systems to enhance the understanding of the cultural, religious and ideological traditions of humankind; such programmes should, wherever possible, invite adherents of those traditions to make their contribution.

(ii) Teaching programmes in theological seminaries and colleges to prepare Christian ministers with the training and sensitivity necessary for interreligious dialogue.

(iii) Positive relationships with programmes in university departments and other institutes of higher learning which are concerned with the academic study of religion.

(iv) The review of material used and teachings customarily given in courses of instruction at all levels in the churches, including at theological colleges and seminaries, with a view to eliminating anything which encourages fanaticism and insensitivity to people of other faiths and ideologies.

(v) The development of church school materials for the study of people of other faiths and ideologies.

(vi) The provision of courses for people who may be sent to serve in other cultures or who may travel as tourists in such cultures to promote their greater understanding and sensitivity.

(vii) Responsible reaction to school text books and media presentations which may prejudice the image of the neighbour.

(viii) The creative use of the media, radio, television etc., wherever possible in order to reach a wider audience in efforts to expand understanding of people of other faiths and ideologies.

Sharing and Living Together in Dialogue

6. *Dialogue is most vital when its participants actually share their lives together.*

It is in existing communities where families meet as neighbours and children play together that spontaneous dialogue develops. Where people of different faiths and ideologies share common activities, intellectual interests, and spiritual quests, dialogue can be related to the whole of life and can become a style of living-in-re-relationship. The person who asks a neighbour of another faith to

explain the meaning of a custom or festival has actually taken the first step in dialogue.

Of course, dialogue between long-term neighbours may be frustrated by deeply engrained suspicions, and men and women will have to reckon not only with the communities they seek but also with the barriers between their present communities.

7. *Dialogue should be pursued by sharing in common enterprises in community.*

Common activities and experiences are the most fruitful setting for dialogue on issues of faith, ideology and action. It is in the search for a just community of humankind that Christians and their neighbours will be able to help each other break out of cultural, educational, political, and social isolation in order to realize a more participatory society. It may well be that in particular settings such common enterprises will generate interreligious committees or organizations to facilitate this kind of dialogue-in-action.

8. *Partners in dialogue should be aware of their ideological commitments.*

Dialogue should help to reveal and to understand the ideological components of religions in particular situations. When Christians

"It is out of a reciprocal willingness to listen and learn that significant dialogue grows."

find themselves in communities with neighbours of other living faiths they may have common or diverse ideological convictions.

In such situations partners need to be sensitive to both religious and ideological dimensions of the ongoing dialogue. Where Christians find themselves in communities with people of secular ideological convictions, the dialogue will at least expose shared contributions in a common search for the provisional goals of a better human community. Here dialogue may begin as a kind of "internal dialogue" seeking to bring to explicit reflection and discussion issues in the encounter of the Gospel both with ideological factors in various communities where Christians find themselves, and with the ideological assumptions of Christians themselves.

9. *Partners in dialogue should be aware of cultural loyalties.*

Dialogue and sensitivity to neighbours need to be developed in the area of relating Christian faith to cultures. This applies especially to those places where traditional and popular culture has been unduly despised and rejected by the churches. A culture should not be romanticized or made into a false absolute but it may often challenge and enrich the expression of the Christian faith. After careful interpretation and discrimination local cultures may make meaningful contributions in symbols and liturgy, social structures, relations, patterns of healing, art, architecture and music, dance and drama, poetry and literature.

10. *Dialogue will raise the question of sharing in celebrations, rituals, worship and meditation.*

Human communities draw together, express, and renew themselves in ritual and worship, and dialogue presumes an attitude of respect for the ritual expressions of the neighbours' community. Dialogue at times includes extending and accepting invitations to visit each other as guests and observers in family and community rituals, ceremonies, and festivals. Such occasions provide excellent opportunities to enhance the mutual understanding of neighbours.

Working together in common projects and activities or visiting in homes and at festivals will eventually raise the very difficult and important question of fuller sharing in common prayer, worship or meditation. This is one of the areas of dialogue which is most controversial and most in need of further exploration.

"On occasion it may be necessary for Christians to make clear that their participation does not necessarily signify acceptance of the underlying assumptions of a particular meeting or organization."

Whether or not any such activities are undertaken, dialogue partners will want to face squarely the issues raised, sensitive to one another's integrity and fully realizing the assumptions and implications of what is done or not done.

Planning for Dialogue

11. *Dialogue should be planned and undertaken ecumenically, wherever possible.*

Member churches should move forward in planning for dialogue in cooperation with one another. This may well mean that regional and local councils of churches will have a separate commission on dialogue.

12. *Planning for dialogue will necessitate regional and local guidelines.*

As the member churches of the WCC consider, test and evaluate these guidelines they will need to work out for themselves

and with their specific partners in dialogue statements¹⁰⁹ and guidelines for their own use in particular situations. The WCC can best assist the member churches in their specific dialogues by itself concentrating upon the world-wide features of the Christian dialogue with people of particular religions and ideologies. For this purpose, the WCC will arrange appropriate consultations at the world level.

13. *Dialogue can be helped by selective participation in world interreligious meetings and organizations.*

There are now many organizations linking world religions and seeking to enable them to cooperate for various purposes, such as the struggle for peace and justice in the community and among the nations. Christians involved in dialogue need to be selective in their participation in the meetings arranged by such organizations. Christian representatives should guard the mutual recognition of and respect for the integrity of each faith. On occasion it may be necessary for Christians to make clear that their participation does not necessarily signify acceptance of the underlying assumptions of a particular meeting or organization. Christians will normally avoid being identified with alliances against other religions or against ideologies as such. The WCC will be willing to provide consultant-observers for selected meetings of this kind but will not at present take a direct official part in the organizational structure of world interreligious organizations.

To enter into dialogue requires an opening of the mind and heart to others. It is an undertaking which requires risk as well as a deep sense of vocation. It is impossible without sensitivity to the richly varied life of humankind. This opening, this risk, this vocation, this sensitivity are at the heart of the ecumenical movement and in the deepest currents of the life of the churches. It is therefore with a commitment to the importance of dialogue for the member churches of the WCC that the Central Committee offers this Statement and these Guidelines to the churches.