

A Just World for All: Engaging with All God's Creation United Church of Christ Interreligious Statement

A NEW VISION

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? Isaiah 43:18-19

The United States continues to experience a changing religious landscape. While the country continues to hold a Christian religious majority, demographics point to a decline in the mainline denominations, an increase in other religious traditions, and an increase in individuals who are moving away from traditional ways of religious identification and affiliation. These changes are taking place in a time where bigotry, religious intolerance, and racism are also on the rise, buoyed by Christian theological frameworks which are antithetical to nurturing God's love for all. How will we live into Jesus' call to love in these days and in these times? How will we reinterpret traditional interpretations of scripture to forge a new path to mutual respect and understanding among the world's religions?

The United Church of Christ Board affirmed a new purpose, vision, and mission statement for the denomination. In adopting these statements, the denomination is invited to envision love and justice in the context of the world in which we live and to discern what it means to be a prophetic witness to the church and to the world. The call to love is a call into the mystery of the Spirit, it is a call to a deeper engagement with the Divine and it is a call to be radically transformed in the face of the impossible.

The offering of the new purpose, vision, and mission statements is an entry point into all aspects of the life of the church.

- “The United Church of Christ affirms that its purpose is to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves.
- The United Church of Christ has a vision that united in Christ's love, we seek a just world for all.
- The United Church of Christ sees its mission to be united in Spirit and inspired by God's grace, to welcome all, love all, and seek justice for all.

Congregational life, spiritual formation, mission, ministries to all in the church, ecumenical and interfaith engagement are all undertaken in the spirit of the vision of a just world for all. Our interreligious engagement ought to bear witness to, and a commitment to living this purpose: To love our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves; the vision: United in Christ's love, a just world for all; and the mission: United in Spirit, inspired by God's grace, we welcome all, love all and seek justice for all. Love is at the center of our calling and our witness in the world.

In A Pastoral Letter to a United Church in a Divided Country (November 9, 2016) the officers of the church wrote: "... we were built to heal bodies broken and divided. This is our calling. Our core values of love, hospitality, and justice for all must be fully embraced in the days to come. It could well be that we were called into being for just such a time as this." The time for creating a new reality is now. Amidst the rhetoric of fear, we must affirm the gift of religious diversity, and allow this gift to reveal to us more of God present and at work in the world.

Religion and ways of experiencing and expressing knowledge of the Divine must no longer divide us. Instead, the experience of God's love ought to unite us beyond fear and religious bigotry. Religious differences have devised wars, divided families, and disrupted communities.

We are called for this time to live prophetically in our witness, our words, and deeds calling for love of neighbor, the acceptance of all religions and spiritualities, affirming the mystery of the Divine in a variety of expressions and the presence of religious multiplicity and religious fluidity in the church, in our communities and in the world. There are a variety of ways that Spirit is affirmed among us. While we are unable to name them all, we affirm the Mystery and mind of God are beyond understanding (Isaiah 55:8).

A TIME OF CONFESSION

Acknowledging and righting the past is an important step in creating a new vision and a new future. While the United Church of Christ owns a rich history of justice, hospitality, and interreligious engagement there are places and times in history where the UCC, its predecessor bodies, and the church did not reflect the respect, love, and reciprocity we currently advocate.

Christianity is historically the most powerful religious tradition in the US and remains dominant in many parts of the world. Christians have committed the crimes that Jonathan Sacks, a rabbi in the United Kingdom names in his book, saying, "The crimes of religion have one thing in common. They involve making God in our image instead of letting him remake us in his. The highest truth does not cast its mantle over our lowest instincts – the search for power, the urge for conquest, the use of religious language to spread the aura of sanctity over ignoble crimes. These are forms of imperialism, not faith" (Not in God's Name, 265).

Christianity has been shrouded in privilege that found other traditions in need of religious conversion and the subject of the missional imperative of prior centuries that undervalued other traditions, labeled them as lacking knowledge of God, and destroyed religion, culture, and community in its wake. This privileging of Christianity names Christianity as favored by God, fostering an exceptionalism that threatens the worth and dignity of all creation.

By naming this position of power held by Christians, we can work to create spaces for dialogue in which all religious perspectives are heard, and indeed the historically silenced

voices are potentially given a larger platform than the traditionally dominant religious traditions.

We are called to be healers of the breach, a breach that we have made in the past in our views and relationships with those of other faith traditions. Today, we confess not only the cost of such decisions in our past as well as the call today to see God at work in these various different traditions.

As The Study Resource on Interreligious Relations for the United Church of Christ named, “We have not always worked to understand our neighbors, and often have made no effort at simple hospitality ... the UCC, a church of the ‘united and uniting family’ brings to the pursuit of interfaith relations long experience in honoring diversity and celebrating the many gifts of particularity within the context of unity. A united and uniting church must, by its very nature, practice diligently the work of sustaining a broadly diverse community in covenantal unity as a grateful response to the faithful covenant God has made with us. We struggle daily with a cacophony of voices which often do not blend into a melodious harmony and confess that at times we lean too hard on the distinctive witness of one or another branch of our family in order to avoid conflict.”

We affirm with the Study Document that “Past mistakes, however, should not inhibit present commitment. In a spirit of hospitality and welcome, we believe we are called to new relationships and new ways of relating, knowing that in those encounters we will have much to receive as well as much to give.”

CALLED TO LOVE

Jesus said: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt. 22:37, 39).

Recognizing that we live in an increasingly pluralistic world, this interreligious statement built on the vision for a just world for all offers a theological, moral, and spiritual basis for the United Church of Christ’s ongoing commitment to support and pursue relationships with partners of many faiths. Christians in the United States hold privilege and power, which continue to contribute to the oppression and dehumanization of people of other faiths. In our pursuit of justice, the central themes point us to revisiting our views and commitment to interreligious engagement.

This is a priority for our time because the world is increasingly complex. People are more interconnected than ever before, thanks to the technological revolution. The access to information and understanding of other religions and spiritualities has also resulted in increased fear of people of other faiths and heritage. Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment are spreading across the United States and globally, anti-Semitism and racism are on the rise, the rights of indigenous people continue to be of concern as they continue to experience marginalization and these negative views are readily accessed via technology.

As people's religious identities change rapidly there is a call to faithful response to the realities that are becoming more evident among us. More and more people are identifying as multi-religious with a focus on the spiritual and less on the religious, i.e. Hindu-Christian or Buddhist-Christian or other hyphenated expressions that are rooted in multiplicity rather than the historic mono-religious experiences of the Divine.

Likewise, some are adherents to one religious tradition and yet they practice the sacred rituals of multiple traditions. Yet others identify as 'religious hybrids.' It is no longer unusual for members of our communities of faith to have married persons with a faith tradition different than their own, for their children to choose such a practice or for members of families to be a part of multiple religious households. God calls us to faithfully respond to the changes in our current context. These complexities are framed among the thousands of recognized world religions. These complexities are present in our communities and in the churches we serve and attend. How do we live into these challenges that also hold promise and opportunity for the growth and life of the church and all of God's people?

For us to love our neighbor as ourselves means we must commit to learning about our neighbors. Our transformation and the love of God are strengthened in our ability to see God present in those among us. This commitment encompasses the internal and the external. Issues of racism, sexism, ableism, and other manifestations of injustice directed at identifying and upholding differences as a barrier to right relations are expressions that challenge our own ability to be in right relations with the Divine among us. We offer confession and a call to action to local congregations, to take up the call to live out deep, mutually transformative relationships with individuals and communities of other faiths.

BACKGROUND

This is not the first time our denomination has addressed our commitment to interfaith relationships, we draw upon the conversations we had at General Synod in 1999 and 2005. In 1999, the General Synod requested that the church study and respond to the document of the National Council of Churches "Interfaith Relations and the Churches." A Study Resource on Interreligious Relations for the United Church of Christ (2005) professed, "The foundation upon which we engage in interreligious relationships is our belief that God is sovereign of the entire cosmos and that all humanity is created in God's image. We believe that the community of the whole inhabited earth is a gift which together we are called to nurture." (p.3)

The United Church of Christ, out of its commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ, has spoken in solidarity in the past about relations with people of other religions and the traditions that they represent. The General Synod spoke twice on relations with people of other religions and the traditions they represent with the Jewish community (1987) and with the Muslim community (1989). Our engagement in interreligious relationships is shaped by the historic and cultural traditions, which are part of our theological heritage. These 16 years later, it is to address our call once again, to name and embrace the mystery of God revealed

across time and tradition, in light of our rapidly changing world and the accompanying fears resulting in hatred and bigotry.

In 2005 the General Synod of the United Church of Christ received and adopted a document called A Study Resource on Interreligious Relations. Now twelve years later it is time to revisit and discern the ways in which the United Church of Christ will move forward in an increasingly multi-religious world. The 2005 study resource set the stage for such a time as this, challenging the United Church of Christ to do four things:

1. Reflect upon the reasons for engaging in interreligious relations;
2. Examine the contexts in which such relationships occur;
3. Name the distinctive gifts that the United Church of Christ brings to these encounters; and
4. Discern God's call to us as we live and work alongside people of other religious traditions.

The study resource asserted that we affirm "our distinctive beliefs and our witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We celebrate boldly the richness of the Christian encounter with God revealed in the particular person of Jesus Christ and recognize that we are called to spread this good news of God's message of healing and reconciliation. We affirm our continuing and unambivalent mandate, as a part of the whole Church, to engage in life-enhancing relationships with all of God's creation. The foundation upon which we engage in interreligious relationships is our belief that God is sovereign of the entire cosmos and that all humanity is created in God's image. We believe that the community of the whole inhabited earth is a gift which together we are called to nurture." (Paragraph #3)

This 2005 Study Resource articulated a paradigm for our current interreligious engagement and pushes us further to broadening and deepening our Christian witness by acknowledging and accepting all faith traditions. Past mistakes do not need to inhibit authentic commitment. Today we are called into new relationships and new ways of relating, we have much to receive as well as to give in dialogue, witness, welcome, and hospitality. We are called anew in these days to be visionaries for right relationship and bearers of God's love.

TRANSFORMATION

These changes that are evident across the religious landscape offer opportunities for transformation for our lives, for the church, and for the world. The Baar Statement: Theological Perspectives on Plurality issued by the World Council of Churches states: "We have seen and experienced the goodness, truth and holiness of God among followers of other paths and ways than that of Jesus Christ" (p.4). The Spirit moves beyond our definitions, descriptions, and limitations "as the wind blows where it wills" (John 3:8).

The World Council of Churches' Baar Statement affirms that: God, the Holy Spirit has been at work in the life and traditions of peoples of living faiths. Can we affirm that the Holy Spirit will lead us into a fresh and unexpected discovery of new wisdom and insight as we

learn more from our neighbors of other faiths? Authentic dialogue opens both partners to a deeper conversion to the God who speaks to each through the other. Through the witness of others, we can truly discover facets of the divine mystery which we have not yet seen or responded to (Baar, 5).

We can no longer push aside those who hold different religious views and practices. They are members of our families, our communities, and these traditions have shaped us as well. The advancements of pluralism and the reactions against them now define our national life. Every day, our existence in a pluralistic world has the potential to strip away another layer of our provincialism, the complacent unawareness of other faiths, yielding other forms of emancipation. We hear the testimonies of those among us whose faith has been nurtured in and because of their relationships to others of other religious traditions and faith practices. We draw on the ancient tradition and call of God who invites us to meet God in the other and experience hospitality to the stranger who teaches us more about God and draws us deeper into knowing more of God and more of ourselves.

“Through encounters with people of other religions we hope to find new understanding and to discover fuller and more meaningful ways to live in reconciled communities together.” We engage in interreligious relationships out of gratitude for the gifts we have received from a generous and loving God. Can we affirm that the Holy Spirit, which we understand to be the comforter promised by Jesus, will lead us into fresh and unexpected encounters? Can we affirm that it is morally, ethically, and spiritually wrong for any person, group, or religion to claim exclusive access to God, God’s love, grace, or salvation? (Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement” #13). We testify that embracing and affirming all traditions of faith is God at work, working through us and in the world. “United in Christ’s love, a just world for all!”

A CALL TO ACTION

The vision of a just world for all is an inclusive proposition for all people and includes our interreligious engagement. The affirmation of all religious, faith, and spiritual traditions acknowledges the familiar and the unfamiliar and leaves room for that which is yet to be named. The United Church of Christ has long been theologically engaged with Muslims and Jews in interreligious dialogue as well as the common source of these faiths as “religions of the book” or “Abrahamic traditions.” In approaching and receiving, seeking to meet and welcoming all traditions, we invite the unity of the spirit.

The list of religions holds too many to name and yet, we are willing to receive the presence of the Divine in spiritual expressions as well as places where the Divine is not revealed in the ways that are familiar to or similar to our Christian practices. Learning about other traditions and assisting in the recovery of traditions that were vilified in the past, particularly indigenous traditions and those brought into the Americas by enslaved Africans is the work of justice and love.

A Litany Affirming our Commitment to Live Inter-religiously

We celebrate boldly the richness of the Christian encounter with God
revealed in the particular person of Jesus Christ.

We recognize that we are called to spread this good news of God's
message of healing and reconciliation.

We engage in interreligious relationships because we believe
that God is sovereign of the entire cosmos,
that all humanity is created in God's image.

We affirm our desire to expand our relationships with God's creation.

Therefore,

We find ourselves called to re-interpret cherished traditions.

We listen carefully to religious people throughout the world.

We pray for the common good, sharing fears and hopes.

We confess, and we ask for forgiveness.

We try to forgive the unforgivable.

We cultivate wonder and awe, and we admit limits.

We acknowledge differences and explore commonalities.

We welcome diversity and avoid judgment.

We honor the redemptive work of all religious traditions.

We seek fellowship with our neighbor rather than trying to change our neighbor.

We understand that engagement with others makes us vulnerable.

Yet,

We believe that the church can experience transformative love.

We know that Jesus' prayer "That they may all be One," is stretching our faith.

We affirm the community of the whole inhabited earth as a gift we are called to serve.

Amen.