


Interfaith Relations and Christian Living

Study and Action Suggestions

for use with

Interfaith Relations and the Churches:
*A Policy Statement of the
National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA*



Contents

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Introduction

INTRODUCTION

The invitation

Many Christians meet or know people of other faith traditions through the activities of daily life. Even in communities where contacts with people of other religions do not take place, church members are aware of the growing religious plurality in the United States. This study guide, *Interfaith Relations and Christian Living*, invites small groups of Christians to explore what is involved in living as Christians with Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, traditional religionists or people of yet other religions in today's world.

The initiative to begin study may come from any of many possible sources in your community. In every case, however, a small planning group should be formed. The planners should include someone who has teaching familiarity with Christian scripture and tradition (a pastor or priest, Christian educator, or experienced layperson) and at least one other person. The planners will schedule, recruit for, and lead the study. This guide is addressed to the planners who will take responsibility for next steps.

The resources

Interfaith Relations and the Churches: A Policy Statement of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. was adopted for the council's guidance and as "a source for guidance, reflection, and action" for its member communions. The *Interfaith Relations and Christian Living* study guide enables Christian congregations and local ecumenical groups to use the policy statement as a resource for their own reflection and possible action.

The study design

The basic model provides plans for six or seven weekly meetings of a group of Christian adults or young adults in a congregational setting, each session extending for approximately one and one half hours. Each session, as outlined, has three main components:

1. Exploring shared experiences of group members and reflecting together. The group asks, What is our own starting point as we begin this session?

2. Exploring scripture and ideas of the policy statement. The groups asks, What are our questions, and what can we learn?
3. Reflecting upon responses within the group. It asks, What do we discern as our Christian responsibility?

The study suggestions repeatedly allow opportunity for questions to be expressed. While new learning can be facilitated through providing for these, it will be important to plan judiciously so that the questioning does not overwhelm the group or diminish time available for exploring answers. Groups may well conclude the study with a sense that questions about Christian discipleship among people of other faiths remain.

The study design includes the option of planning one of your sessions as a visit to a "congregation" of another faith, in order to observe respectfully their religious practice and to engage their members in conversation. A good visit will require careful planning and some flexibility of scheduling, possibly allotting extra time. In some cases, a Christian congregation or ecumenical group will already have established relationships with a local community of another religious faith. But in many cases it will be essential that one or more of the planners make a prior visit to the community which will be visited, to build some minimum degree of trust and to communicate clearly about the intention of the visit and what is desired. If a group visit is not feasible or appropriate, omit it from your planning.

Rather than using the suggestions for these sessions as presented, you may create a locally-designed plan. For example, a local group might stretch the study over a number of months or compress it into one or more days. Some groups may wish to restrict each session to an hour and will need to select from among the possibilities outlined. Brief suggestions for adaptation are offered at the end of this guide.

GETTING READY

1. Identify the members of your planning group. If several congregations will study together, the leadership team should be drawn from these

- local church bodies. A more broadly ecumenical study, to be offered to the wider Christian community or to member congregations of a church council, may best have a leadership team drawn from the major “families” of Christian traditions involved. (Do not feel restricted to participation from Christians whose churches are part of the NCCC. Your group may include Pentecostals or Catholics, for example.)
2. Obtain copies of the policy statement, *Interfaith Relations and the Churches*, and this study guide (by downloading, photocopying, or ordering; see information below). Make sure all planners have perused the materials in advance.
 3. Arrange for the planners to meet. Review this study guide, and decide what format for study you will adopt. Select elements you will use as presented. Plan modifications you want to make.
 4. If a visit to a religious community outside the Christian tradition is to be part of the study, start planning it. One or more of you should make an appointment with the leaders of the community you will ask to host your visit. Talk with them at the site about the visit’s purpose. Be sensitive to their willingness to receive you. Be ready to discuss the design, date, and time of your visit. Review the section of this study guide devoted to an interreligious visit for help in planning this part of the program.
 5. Publicize your plans. Use verbal announcements, print notices, and other creative avenues to recruit attendees you hope to attract. A clear description of the purpose and content of the study should be part of the publicity, together with details about time, place, and sponsorship. Pre-register participants. Seek a stable group of regular attendees since the study will be cumulative.
 6. As the size of your group becomes clear, modify plans to accommodate the expected number. Arrange furniture appropriately in the room of your choice. A small group should be organized in a circle formation that facilitates discussion; you may be able to allow more time for individual contribution than suggested. A large group will require more formal seating, but you can break into subgroups in order to provide time for each person to speak.
 7. Plan for the opening and closing times of worship or prayer for each session. Since these times are very brief, they will be most effective if careful preparations are made in advance. They will set the framework within which your explorations will occur.
 8. Contact the NCCC Interfaith Relations Office, your denominational offices, or your local ecumenical council for help with planning, as needed. (The NCCC office may have suggestions for special leadership in some situations. See contact information at the end of this booklet.)
9. Obtain materials needed.
 - a. Copies of *Interfaith Relations and the Churches: A Policy Statement of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.* for participants. Additional copies, as needed, of this study guide, *Interfaith Relations and Christian Living* (These are available electronically on the Interfaith page of the NCCC web site, www.ncccusa.org/interfaith/ifresources.html, or in print at the Interfaith Relations Office, National Council of Churches, 475 Riverside Drive, Room 870, New York, NY 10115 [phone 212-870-2560 or fax 212-870-2158]. The printed materials may be reproduced in whole or part for congregational, group, and individual use if appropriate credit is given. Resale of any reproduction is prohibited unless you have obtained prior permission of the copyright holder.)
 - b. A board or easel and a large newsprint pad and markers
 - c. Bibles for the use of your group (Quotations in the policy statement and this guide are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.)
 - d. Resources for the opening and closing worship or prayer periods—for example, copies of songs, hymnals, responsive litanies
 - e. Materials to familiarize the group with the community to be visited and to orient participants about the etiquette for a visit, if this is in your plans (A copy of *How to Be a Perfect Stranger* or a similar resource will provide the help you need. See Suggested Resources.)
 - e. Copies of denominational statements (cf. Recommendation IV, paragraphs 1 and 2 of the NCCC policy statement) and of other resources for reference or study, for use by interested members of the group

COMMENTS REQUESTED

This study guide was planned by the Commission on Interfaith Relations of the National Council of Churches. Please send your comments to Interfaith Relations, 475 Riverside Drive, Room 870, New York, NY 10115.

Session I

Prepare your meeting room

1. Prepare the boxed quotations in this session so they can be read by all participants. Box 1 should be quietly displayed on a board or flip chart from the time participants enter the room. The quotations in Box 2 can be distributed on paper or put on a flip chart.
2. Put the quotation from Hesdie Zemuel on a card and ask a participant to be prepared to read it.
3. Have Bibles distributed for use.

Prepare for issues you may face during discussion.

1. Read a commentary on each of the two Matthew passages, but plan to guide group discussion rather than making a presentation.
2. Consider how you can avoid turning the discussion of the Zemuel quotation into an either/or choice between Christian witness through living together or Christian mission seeking conversion.
3. Be prepared to talk about the importance of Christian discipleship as living on behalf of others, remembering that Christians in multifaith contexts always experience the importance of their style of life as a form of Christian witness.
4. Set a group standard that allows opinions to be expressed in mutual trust. Do not seek conformity of viewpoints. Be comfortable with the fact that participants may not fully agree about what our Christian faith calls us to do in relation to other peoples.

What Shall We Ask About Living With People of Other Faiths?

Participant goals for this session

- To get to know each other
- To be oriented to the study series
- To explore biblical passages about Christian discipleship in light of religious diversity
- To identify the questions and concerns we want to examine in our own religiously plural society

Opening (20–25 minutes)

Begin with a brief act of worship—perhaps a prayer and the singing of a hymn. Select materials that help participants affirm their Christian discipleship in the world.

Ask participants to introduce themselves by giving their names and sharing one of the reasons or questions which brought them to this study (one minute per person). Be sure leaders engage in this activity as part of the group.

Tell participants that the study's general objective will be to explore what is involved in living as Christians with Muslims, Buddhists, Baha'is, Jews, and people of other faiths in today's world. The study will allow them both to think about their own experiences and to explore scripture and the Christian tradition. It will use the NCCC policy statement, *Interfaith Relations and the Churches*, as a major resource.

Present a brief overview of the study, as your planning group has organized it.

Exploration and Reflection

1. Biblical Perspectives (30 minutes)

Tell the group: Religious diversity is part of the context in which God's people have lived in many times and places. The study of biblical passages may help us think about what it means for Christians to live faithfully in a religiously plural society. In this first session we begin with two of the many passages in which Jesus teaches about discipleship.

Read together the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:1-16. What do these words teach us? What is the significance of the salt and light images for Christians?

Read Matthew 25:31-46. What are the marks of faithful living in this passage? Why does Jesus emphasize these marks?

What insight do you have about the Matthew 5 passage when you consider it in light of Jesus' call to care for "the least of these" in Matthew 25?

While you are still discussing the last question above, at an appropriate moment request that the assigned participant read this comment from the Rev. Hesdie Zemuël (Director of the Moravian Theological Seminary, in Paramaribo, Suriname). Ask, How does the comment help us think about the two biblical passages in terms of a Christian's relations with people of other religious traditions? What questions or insights do these passages raise regarding our Christian vocation?

"Of whom is Jesus talking when he says "there are other sheep not of this flock" [*John 10:16*]? Or consider, "You are the salt of the earth." When the salt is added to the soup it disappears, but you can still taste it. Is this a metaphor for what it means to be a Christian in society? Giving taste to a society is different from converting people. Maybe being salt is a way of carrying out mission. Giving away our life is perhaps the way of being the church of Christ." (*from a discussion during a 1995 Ecumenical Study Tour*)

2. From the Policy Statement (5 minutes)

Provide the material in Box 2 for participants' reading. Ask them to consider the quotations in silence as background for further thinking:

Reflection (10 minutes)

Ask participants to break into pairs. Ask the partners to take turns answering the question, What are the one or two most important questions, concerns or interests that you have about relations with people of other religious faiths? (The readings from the Bible and the policy statement will have helped people's thinking but their answers to the question do not need to be limited to ideas directly related to the readings and discussion.)

Request that each person make every effort to hear what the partner is saying, without arguing or commenting. After 5 minutes, remind pairs to change the speaker and listener roles so that each person has equal time to share.

Response (10-15 minutes)

As a group, quickly identify some of the questions about Christian practice and people of other faiths that you most want to consider in the course of the sessions to come. These may be:

Factual or informational

Theological

Relational, about particular issues or cross-cultural interaction

Other

Record the group's questions on a flip chart or board as they are shared. It may be helpful to group the questions using the categories above. Keep this list of questions, so that the group can come back to them in Session IV.

For Next Time

In preparation for the next session, make an assignment to group members: Recall people and institutions of other religious traditions of which you are aware in the places where you live and work. We will begin to make a "map" of religious diversity and of interreligious relationships in our geographical area.

Remind participants of the schedule. Clarify any questions about what is planned and expected

Closing

Take a few minutes for comments. What did you learn that was a surprise?

Close with a prayer or hymn.

Box 1

12. Although this [religious] situation in which we live may seem to be new, it has many parallels throughout biblical history. In the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, God relates to the Jewish people against a backdrop of religious diversity . . . The life, death and resurrection of Jesus took place in one of the most religiously complex environments of the ancient world.

13. The church of Christ has always lived among peoples of many different cultures and religions. Thus we join Christians of many times and places when we ask, How do we live in faithfulness to the Gospel when our friends and neighbors, colleagues and associates, parents and children are members of other religious traditions . . . ?

Interfaith Relations and the Churches

Box 2

The National Council of Churches policy statement on interfaith relations describes one of our tasks as we consider relating to others:

15. Theologically . . . we ask new questions about our religious identity: How do we understand our relationship to God, to other Christians, and to those of other religious traditions? How do we understand the relationship between these men and women and God? Practically, we ask about Christian discipleship: How can we best live a life of faithful witness and service in a multi-faith context?

The policy statement makes the following affirmation:

35. We recognize that scripture speaks with many voices about relationship with men and women of other religious traditions. We need to devote further attention to issues of interpreting scriptural teaching. But as to our Christian discipleship, we can only live by the clear obligation of the Gospel. When Jesus was asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" he, referring to his Jewish tradition, answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:25-27). Love of God and love of neighbors cannot be separated. We rejoice in our common conviction that Jesus calls us to ministries of reconciliation.

Session II

Prepare your meeting room

1. You may wish to sketch a rough map of your city, your state, or the U.S. in advance, to be used for the mapping project. Make your map in some form that can be saved for later display. Decide what use you will make of different colors, if any (e.g., using different colors to differentiate individuals and institutions, or to identify particular religions), and get the necessary chalk or felt tip pens.
2. Have Bibles distributed for use.
3. Plan the method you will use for reading the Marks of Faithfulness – either duplicating Box 3 or asking group members to bring their copy of *Interfaith Relations and the Churches*. If someone will lead a responsive reading, ask the person to prepare in advance.
4. Be sure all participants have a copy of the full *Interfaith Relations and the Churches* at home or have available copies of the portion to be assigned as homework. Bring copies of denominational materials about interfaith relations, as available, for distribution as homework.
5. Have small cards available to pass out as you make the homework assignment.

Prepare for issues you may face during discussion.

1. In the mapping activity, the group will pool its knowledge to construct a “map” of individuals and institutions of other religions known to them. Do the research necessary to gauge in advance what context you should use. If there are no such individuals and institutions in your town, you can ask participants to think about their state, region of the country, or nation as a whole. If you discover there is religious diversity in your own geographic area, however, plan a local mapping exercise.
2. Assign one or more participants to do research ahead that might help fill in the “map” you choose to make. The Worldwide Web is a particularly useful source. For example, visit the directory of religious centers at the Pluralism Project,

Living Among Women and Men of Other Faiths

Goals of this Session

- To construct a “map” of known people and institutions of other religious traditions in the community
- To examine hospitality as a form of faithful living for Christians in situations of religious plurality
- To introduce the Marks of Faithfulness in *Interfaith Relations and the Churches*

Welcome and Opening

Begin the session with an opening prayer, hymn, litany or an office such as Vespers—possibly picking up a theme for this from your Session I discussion.

After welcoming participants, invite them to introduce themselves once again and to reiterate, in one or two sentences, what they hope to learn.

Experience (30 minutes)

Introduce the “mapping” activity by reminding individuals that, in the previous session, we talked about Christian discipleship. We are called to live faithfully in the specific context where we are placed. Therefore, it is important to recognize the nature of our context. In this session, we will map out religious characteristics of our environment in order to identify those with whom we share our lives.

Ask the participants to identify actual individual persons who are adherents of other religions and to connect them with specific places. For example, if you have decided to map your local community, there may be Ali, a Muslim man, whom a participant knows at school; someone may be aware of a Buddhist woman connected to the local hospital; Martha, who is a Baha’i, may be a colleague at work; a woman in the group may have a Jewish husband who works as a lawyer. Are there individuals who run the neighborhood market? Or share in a volunteer activity or organization? If you have decided to map a national picture, what public figures are known to be members of another religious community? What persons, if any, are related to participants by sharing the same profession? Where do they live and what do they do? This is not the time for sharing stories about how people met or what they are like. As group members provide data, record the information on a large piece of paper or a board, roughly arranged geographically. (10 minutes)

Now ask the group to add the names of institutions of other religious traditions known to them, either by precise designation or

<<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~pluralism>>. This step will be particularly important if you gauge that there will be little immediate knowledge in your group.

3. Read one or more commentaries and Bible dictionaries for background on the biblical passages for this session.
4. For your own background, think about broad forms of hospitality that are practiced in your town or city. Imagine which of these—or what innovative forms of hospitality—might be employed if Christians were to practice hospitality as part of their discipleship.

by a generalization such as “the synagogue on Elm Street” or “the Muslim day school out by the mall.” Record the information as part of the same schema used for individuals. (10 minutes)

As a group, look at this quickly sketched map of interreligious relationships based on knowledge of the group. Tell people that more can be added to the map later, if they remember new things or acquire new facts. As appropriate, motivate participants to look for additional information.

How do you respond to the picture you see? What sort of connect- edness to communities of other faiths does it portray for individ- ual participants and groups of Christians? What changes does this map suggest about our society? What are its implications in terms of a common life in the civic sphere? What are its implications for the church? (10 minutes)

Exploration and Reflection

Refer to *Interfaith Relations and the Churches*, paragraphs 1–10. The mapping project has created your own picture of your context among people of other faiths. Especially as our inter-connections with people of other religious traditions grow, we have an increas- ing need to understand how to live as faithful Christians amid reli- gious diversity. Scripture offers insights into this question, and the statement on *Interfaith Relations and the Churches* devotes consider- able attention to describing the nature of such faithful living.

1. Biblical Perspectives (30 minutes)

Read Genesis: 23:1-19. We know that the Hittites—inhabitants of the land before Abraham arrived—were not monotheists and that God warned the Israelites not to worship their gods (cf. Exodus 23:23-24). It is clear, then, that whatever hospitality is found in this story is not based on shared religious beliefs. What is the relation- ship between Abraham and the Hittites? What is your reaction to the Hittites offer and to Abraham’s response? In what way does this story give us a model of hospitality?

Read Paul’s message in Romans 12:12-21. He specifically talks about hospitality to strangers. Who are the “saints” referred to in verse 13? Who, in this context, are the “strangers”? To whom do you believe the other verses apply? Are there significant differ- ences in the behavior Paul suggests be shown to the saints and that he recommended toward strangers?

Compare the Genesis and Romans passages. How might you apply the understandings of hospitality to your relations with men and women of other religious traditions here in the U.S.?

2. From the Policy Statement (5 minutes)

The Marks of Faithfulness found in *Interfaith Relations and the Churches* (Box 3) are a response to the biblical call to hospitality.

Read the Marks aloud. (You wish to use responsive reading, with one person reading the underlined selections and the group reading the remaining material in each numbered section.)

Response (15 minutes)

We will come back to consider these affirmations in more detail in a later session. What questions or comments does the group have about these Marks of Faithfulness at this point in your thinking? What consequences do you think this kind of faithful living has for your daily life?

For Next Time

In preparation for the next session, assign the perusal of Reflections on Theology and Practice in

Interfaith Relations and the Churches, paragraphs 16-44, with special emphasis on paragraphs 19- 29. If you have access to documents of your own church(es) which present a theological framework for relations with people of other religious traditions, distribute them for reading at home. Ask group members to think about their own theological questions and to bring these to the next session, in writing, using cards you provide as they leave. Suggest that, as they are reading *Interfaith Relations and the Churches*, they write on a card the one idea in it that they would most wish to applaud.

Closing

Take a few moments for each person to share one thing they learned during this session. Close with a prayer or hymn.

Box 3

MARKS OF FAITHFULNESS

1. All relationship begins with meeting. The model for our meeting others is always the depth of presence and engagement which marked Jesus' meeting with those around him. In our everyday lives, we will meet and form relationships with men and women of other religious traditions. At times these may be difficult relationships, based on bitter memories. However, we have been created for loving community and will not disengage from trying to build bridges of understanding and cooperation throughout the human family.
2. True relationship involves risk. When we approach others with an open heart, it is possible that we may be hurt. When we encounter others with an open mind, we may have to change our positions or give up certainty, but we may gain new insights. Prompted to ask new questions, we will search the Scriptures and be attentive to the Spirit in new ways to mature in Christ and in love and service to others....
3. True relationship respects the other's identity. We will meet others as they are, in their particular hopes, ideas, struggles and joys. These are articulated through their own traditions, practices and world-views. We encounter the image of God in the particularity of another person's life.
4. True relationship is based on integrity. If we meet others as they are, then we must accept their right to determine and define their own identity. We also must remain faithful to who we are; only as Christians can we be present with integrity. We will not ask others to betray their religious commitments, nor will we betray our commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ.
5. True relationship is rooted in accountability and respect. We approach others in humility, not arrogance. In our relationships we will call ourselves and our partners to a mutual accountability. We will invite each other to join in building a world of love and justice, but we will also challenge each other's unjust behavior. We can do both only from an attitude of mutual respect.
6. True relationship offers an opportunity to serve. Jesus comes among us as a servant. We too are given the opportunity to serve others, in response to God's love for us. In so doing, we will join with those of other religious traditions to serve the whole of God's creation. Through advocacy, education, direct services and community development, we respond to the realities of a world in need. Our joining with others in such service can be an eloquent proclamation of what it means to be in Christ.

Interfaith Relations and the Churches, paragraphs 45-52

Session III

Prepare your meeting room

1. Display the map you prepared during Session II.
2. Arrange an area in your meeting room for posting the cards participants bring from home, as assigned in Session II. Plan a way to differentiate the cards with questions and those that applaud ideas.
3. Have Bibles distributed for use.
4. Prepare information and instruction handouts, if you are planning to visit another religious group as your next group activity:
 - a. As you meet with community leaders of the other religion, collect some basic self definitions and information about basic beliefs and practices that they will consider appropriate for you to supply to your members.
 - b. Ask the religious community's leaders about etiquette for your visit and/or arrange instructions taken from a resource such as *How to Be a Perfect Stranger* (see closing item in bibliography). Remember that others may assume certain behaviors that you do not understand (e.g., forms of dress, appropriate posture for standing or sitting, patterns of speech or quiet) and may not mention important concerns, especially if they are not accustomed to receiving guests.
5. Decide how you will make the material in Box 4 available, through passing out copies or having participants bring *Interfaith Relations and the Churches* to your meeting. If you will have the material read aloud, ask someone in advance. Alternately, all participants may review the material silently.

Prepare for issues you may face during discussion.

1. In the previous session, you mapped the religious picture of your community, which you viewed from a geographic perspective. For this session, be ready to emphasize the human community brought into being by God's acts of creation. You may wish to find your own quotation about this for use during the Biblical Perspectives section (see below). (Be

God and Human Community

Goals for this session:

- To explore our understandings of community
- To reflect on the significance of God's creation of humanity for our relations with men and women of other religious traditions

Welcome and Opening

As group members arrive, invite them to post any cards they have prepared in response to your invitation in the previous session's homework assignment. Other participants may want to read the cards as they are posted. Do not attempt to discuss the content of the questions at this time but thank those who brought cards, indicating you will study them carefully.

Follow your established means of opening with worship or prayer. You may want to use a prayer that speaks about love of neighbor.

Experience (25 minutes)

Ask each person to turn to another person sitting nearby and quickly to share one specific image, or one story, that expresses their experience of community at its most meaningful level. (Do not offer definitions of community as you assign this work in pairs.) (5 minutes)

Call the group together to share insights. You may wish to write highlights of the discussion on a blackboard or flip chart, as a means of visualizing the conversation.

- What are the elements that make up, or mark, community for you?
- What are the kinds of actions that bring about community?
- How important is community in our lives? To our faith? (20 minutes)

Exploration and Reflection

1. Biblical Perspectives (15 minutes)

Read Genesis 1:26-31. Recall that God's act of creation has been explicitly connected with the concept of community in such places as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Brief Statement of Faith, which reads, "In sovereign love God created the world good and makes everyone equally in God's image, male and female, of every race and people, to live as one community." (You may use another quotation, as available, if it better meets the ecclesial identity of your participants.) Do you agree that all people, because of their creation in God's image, are equal in God's sight? What are the implications of your answer? If you do not agree, what kind of differences do you see?

aware that, if you look up references to “community” in a Bible dictionary or similar resource, you may find materials describing the covenant community brought about by God’s *salvific* acts rather than the human community formed by God’s *creative* acts. New Bible translations, such as the Contemporary English Version (CEV) published by the American Bible Society, use the word “community” applied to the “community of Israel” and, minimally, the community that is the church. You will need to distinguish carefully between the forms of community as you lead discussion in this session. Do not raise issues about these various forms unless necessary.)

2. Read one or more commentaries and Bible dictionaries for background on the biblical passages for this session
3. Be prepared to read the posted theological questions as they arrive to be sure that there are no concerns best handled during this session on human community. Otherwise, be ready to deal with the cards’ questions in future sessions. Read participants’ selections of ideas to applaud to get a sense of where the groups’ thinking is.

Read Luke 12:15-32. Ask, In what does one’s life consist? The Lukan passage suggests that our main concern should be the establishment of God’s reign (“the kingdom of God”). Does living in this way—making this one’s primary commitment—reflect what it means to be made in the image of God? What else does our creation in the image of God imply about us?

2. From the Policy Statement (30 minutes)

Continue your exploration by reading the section of *Interfaith Relations and the Churches* on God and Human Community (Box 4). Discuss your responses to the section, in light of your biblical reflection:

- What do you think the stature of being made in God’s image means about the capabilities of every individual?
- Does being made in the image of God serve as a basis for your understanding of how people should treat each other?
- Do you agree that God’s will is for community?

Response (20 minutes)

Discuss further questions in light of your explorations of the biblical passages and the policy statement:

- What kinds of communities do we want to build? How will men and women of other religious traditions be part of them?
- Do women and men of other faiths have things to tell us about God as well as about human nature? Why?
- What should be our goals in relating to people of other religions?

For Next Time

If the group will make a visit to a “congregation” of another faith tradition, this will best occur before one of the next two regular sessions. (See planning notes in this guide.) Make clear to participants where they will be going, where they are to meet, and when. Talk about any questions concerning etiquette of visitation that may require attention. Distribute basic introductory material about the practice and beliefs of the host community, and appropriate etiquette, for participants to read in preparation for the visit.

Invite participants to read the section on Jesus Christ and Reconciliation, paragraphs 30-35, in *Interfaith Relations and the Churches*.

Closing

Close with a hymn of the group’s choice and/or a prayer.

Box 4

19. God and Human Community

20. Understanding the churches' relationship to people of other religious traditions begins in the recognition of God's many gifts to us, including that of relationship. All are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). When we meet a human being, no matter what her or his religion, we are meeting a unique creation of the living God. "One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live on all the face of the earth." All are equal in God's sight; each is equally the object of God's love and potentially open to receive "a ray of that truth which enlightens all [humanity]." Because we are all children of the one God we are all related to one another. It is in this sense that we may call all men and women our brothers and sisters. (We also recognize a specific use of this familial language to refer to those within the household of Christian faith.) Community is itself a divine gift which we are called to make real in our lives.

21. In our Christian understanding, relationship is part of the nature of God. In God's own essence, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are in dynamic interrelationship, a unity of three in one. Similarly, humanity is created in diversity. In the scriptural account of creation, it is the first humans in community who together constitute the image of God. Being made in God's image we are created to live a life of relationship and called to claim the unity in our human diversity.

22. We recognize, however, that though we are given this gift of community, we act in ways that break or undermine it. Too often we set ourselves against each other. We become separated from God and alienated from God's creation. We find ourselves in seemingly irreconcilable conflict with other people. We confess that as human beings we have a propensity for taking the gift of diversity and turning it into a cause of disunity, antagonism and hatred—often because we see ourselves as part of a unique, special community. We sin against God and each other.

23. This is part of the reality of our human condition. We see it in the ease with which our father Adam accuses our mother Eve: "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree" (Genesis 3:12). Within a generation the vision of the community for which we are created had become so distorted that Cain can challenge God with the question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9).

24. Scripture suggests that our responsibility extends not only to a brother or sister, but also to the stranger. Hebrew Scripture celebrates the wider community to which humanity is called in the stories of Melchizedek, Jethro, Rahab and Ruth, and the Hittites who offered hospitality to Abraham. In the Torah God enjoins the Jewish people to treat the sojourner as part of their own community. Throughout the Bible, hospitality to the stranger is an essential virtue. We recall both the words of the Epistle to the Hebrews (13:2), "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it," and the example Jesus gives in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37).

25. In the churches' long history with people of other religions, as we have struggled to make actual God's gift of community, we have acted both faithfully and unfaithfully. While Christians have suffered persecution at the hands of those of other faiths and from each other, we have much to repent. Christians have persecuted Jews, and crusaded against Muslims. Christians have enslaved Africans and other peoples, and have participated in subordinating indigenous peoples and erasing their religious traditions. Many Christians have accepted or perpetuated the use of their religion to bless the imposition of western culture and economic domination. Anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim biases, together with racism and ethnic biases have flourished among us.

26. We can rejoice that Christians were leaders in the anti-slavery movement, and have worked for the human and communal rights of many peoples. Christians have fought oppressive economic and social systems of many societies, including our own, and have resisted injustice without regard to cost. Christians also have invited transformation of those ways of living that damage others and undermine the one human community. In many of these efforts Christians have worked closely with people of other faiths.

(continued on next page)

Box 4 *(continued from previous page)*

27. Our experience, therefore, is a mixture of successes and failures in building loving community and in exercising our stewardship of God's creation in justice and peace. We must struggle to reject or reform all those human actions and systems that destroy or deny the image of God in human beings or that tear down the structures of human community. On the other hand, we must seek to affirm all human impulses which build up true community.

28. Because God is at work in all creation, we can expect to find new understanding of our faith through dialogue with people of other religions. Such interaction can be an opportunity for mutual witness. Mutual witness, however, does not always take place in a context of mutual respect. We may fail in our efforts to reflect God's love for all and, even on those occasions when we succeed in the practice of a respectful presence, we do not always find our success mirrored by our conversation partners.

29. We find ourselves in need of repentance and reconciliation. Again and again we are reminded "of the Christian Church as a sign at once of people's need for fuller and deeper community, and of God's promise of a restored human community in Christ." As we wait for the fulfillment of God's promise, we commit ourselves to work for fuller and deeper community in our own time and place.

Interfaith Relations and the Churches

Session IV

Prepare your meeting room

1. Have newsprint or a board ready for writing key ideas from discussion.
2. Have Bibles available.
3. Have paper and pencils or crayons ready for doing the drawing in the Experience segment.
4. Plan the method you will use for reading from *Interfaith Relations and the Churches*—either duplicating Box 5 or asking group members to bring their own copy. If you will read aloud from Box 5, ask one person to prepare.

Prepare for issues you may face during discussion.

1. Having reviewed the questions brought on cards to Session III, determine if there are items that should be incorporated into this session's planning. Otherwise, you will be reviewing the questions again in Session V discussion.
2. Read one or more commentaries for background on the biblical passages for this session.
3. Research definitions for cooperation, reconciliation, and community building—particularly considering what distinguishes reconciliation from the other two. Look up "reconciliation" in a Bible dictionary.

Jesus Christ and Reconciliation

Goals for this session:

- To explore ideas and experiences of cooperation and reconciliation
- To reflect on the reconciling role of Christ and our vocation as reconcilers

Welcome and Opening

If your group had a visit to another religious community since your last regular Session, spend a few minutes debriefing. Remind participants that you gave them questions that will be used in Session V for a fuller time of reflection about the visit.

Pause to pray in thanks for having met new neighbors.

Experience (25 minutes)

Invite participants to recall silently some event(s)—personal or in stories – when a wrong is righted, a breach between people is healed, or those who have been alienated from each other and caused each other harm are reconciled. Next tell the participants, Having thought about events that illuminate the meaning of reconciliation, I invite you to think of a person who taught you, through his or her way of living, what it means to be a reconciler. Think of a person in your life whose behavior has shown you what is involved in bringing reconciling attitudes and actions into life situations, and in thereby enabling reconciliation to take place.

Ask participants to draw an object related to the person about whom they are thinking, to symbolize that person's role as a reconciler, perhaps in some specific situation. Ask them next to break into pairs and to tell each other briefly about their drawing and about the person to which it refers. What were the persons actions or ways of living that taught you something concerning being a reconciler? (10 minutes total)

As a whole group, think about what kinds of *actions* and *attitudes* make for reconciliation. Are these actions and attitudes different in your view from those that characterize cooperation? Or community building? In what ways? You may wish to write key ideas on newsprint or a board. (Do not take time to ask participants to share their drawings.) (15 minutes)

Exploration and Reflection

1. Biblical Perspectives (30 minutes)

Read Matthew 5:23-24. What test does Jesus propose for determining whether or not reconciliation is necessary? What, if anything, do Jesus' words say about determining who is "in the right?" Is this approach different from the way in which people normally approach their relationships with others? What, if anything, is the significance of the fact that Jesus does not specifically mention returning to the altar together with your reconciled brother or sister?

Read 2 Corinthians 5: 14-20. Are the words, "that those that live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them," primarily an invitation to become a Christian or are they a description of how those who have become Christians should behave? What does it mean to live for Christ? How does living for Christ affect the way we treat our neighbors?

What does it mean to "regard no one from a human point of view?" How do you think God regards our non-Christian neighbors? Our friends? Our enemies?

What relationship do you see between being reconciled to God and being reconciled with other people?

2. From the Policy Statement

Read aloud from the section on Jesus Christ and Reconciliation, paragraphs 30-35, in *Interfaith Relations and the Churches* or ask participants to review the section in silence.

Ask the group, How do you understand and respond to the statement, "It is our Christian conviction that reconciliation among people and with the world cannot be separated from the reconciliation offered in Jesus Christ?"

Response (20-25 minutes)

What is your thinking at this point concerning whether and how non-Christians are reconciled with God? Are there issues about which you need to think more? If so, what? How might you approach these in your personal reflection in the future?

Is reconciliation with our neighbors, including women and men of other religious traditions, central to our calling as Christ's disciples? Why? To what kinds of behavior or activity does being "ministers of reconciliation" call us?

For Next Time

Invite participants to read *Interfaith Relations and the Churches*, paragraphs 36-44, which will be discussed in the next session.

Closing

Close with a prayer or song.

Box 5

30. Jesus Christ and Reconciliation

31. The revelation of God's love in Jesus Christ is the center of our faith. Incarnating both the fullness of God and the fullness of humanity, Jesus Christ initiates a new creation, a world unified in relationship as God originally intended. We believe that Jesus Christ makes real God's will for a life of loving community with God, with the whole human family and with all creation. Through Jesus Christ, Christians believe God offers reconciliation to all. "In Christ God was reconciling the world to [God]self" (2 Corinthians 5:19).

32. It is our Christian conviction that reconciliation among people and with the world cannot be separated from the reconciliation offered in Jesus Christ. Jesus, addressing the crowds and the disciples on the mountain (Matthew 5:1 and 7:28), teaches that any who would offer their gift at God's altar must first be reconciled to their brothers and sisters in the human family (Matthew 5:24). The hope of a cosmic reconciliation in Christ is also central to Christian scripture: "The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:21).

33. Jesus Christ is also the focus of the most vexing questions regarding how Christians understand their relationship with men and women of other religions. Christians agree that Jesus Christ incarnated—and incarnates still—the inexhaustible love and salvation that reconcile us all. We agree that it is not by any merit of our own but by God's grace that we are reconciled. Likewise, Christians also agree that our discipleship impels us to become reconciled to the whole human family and to live in proper relationship to all of God's creation. We disagree, however, on whether non-Christians may be reconciled to God and, if so, how. Many Christians see no possibility of reconciliation with God apart from a conscious acceptance of Jesus Christ as incarnate Son of God and personal savior. For others, the reconciling work of Jesus is salvific in its own right, independent of any particular human response. For many, the saving power of God is understood as a mystery and an expression of God's sovereignty that cannot be confined within our limited conceptions. One question with which we must still struggle is how to define the uniqueness of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ in the light of such passages as "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6); "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12); "in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to [God]self all things" (Colossians 1:19-20); and "as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:22).

34. As Christians we recognize that Jesus is not central to other religious traditions. For men and women in other communities, the mystery of God takes many forms. Observing this, we are not led to deny the centrality of Christ for our faith but to contemplate more deeply the meaning of St. Paul's affirmation: "Ever since the creation of the world [God's] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things [God] has made" (Romans 1:20). Christians disagree on the nature and extent of such "natural revelation" and its relation to salvation. No matter what our view on this may be, we can be open to the insights of others.

35. We recognize that scripture speaks with many voices about relationship with men and women of other religious traditions. We need to devote further attention to issues of interpreting scriptural teaching. But as to our Christian discipleship, we can only live by the clear obligation of the Gospel. When Jesus was asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" he, referring to his Jewish tradition, answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:25-27). Love of God and love of neighbors cannot be separated. We rejoice in our common conviction that Jesus calls us to ministries of reconciliation.

Interfaith Relations and the Churches

Session V

Prepare your meeting room

1. Have Bibles available.
2. Prepare handout sheets or a display listing the questions saved from Session I. Be sure you use a method that enables every participant to read the questions during discussion.
3. Prepare a card with the quotation from Georges Khoder and ask a participant in advance to be ready to read it as requested.

Prepare for issues you may face during discussion.

1. Read one or more commentaries and Bible dictionaries for background on the biblical passages for this session.
2. Reflect on your own evaluation of the trip to another religious community and prepare yourself to lead discussion about it. Especially consider if there were theological issues, etiquette failures, misunderstandings, difficult interpersonal relationships, or other concerns that will require special debriefing. As necessary, seek an opportunity to talk with your contact person in the other community before you have your group discussion.

Hope and the Holy Spirit

Goals for this Session

- To reflect on interreligious relationships, either through discussion of the visit with people of another religious tradition or through further attention to the relational “map” and questions of the group
- To clarify our understanding of God’s sovereignty and the power of the Holy Spirit in regard to our lives among men and women of other faiths

Welcome and Opening Prayer

Open the session with prayer and the singing of a hymn, or with a brief liturgical service. Check in with each other: How is everyone?

Experience (30 minutes)

1. If you made a visit

Invite participants to form pairs and talk with each other about the visit you made:

- What particularly caught your attention in the visit?
- How did you feel about these things?
- What did you learn?
- What questions do you have now? (5 minutes each)

As participants form again into the larger group, distribute or display a list of the questions identified in the first session. Ask each participant to reflect in silence on how the experience of the visit addresses or changes these questions. (5 minutes) Next, ask the group to speak about the following questions and list responses on newsprint or a board: (15 minutes)

- What have you learned?
- What new questions do you have?
- What previous questions might you want to change or modify?

As you engage in discussion of the questions, as appropriate, briefly summarize for participants the other remaining questions you have noted from your review of the cards and previous class sessions.

2. If you did not make a visit

Distribute or display a list of the questions identified in the first session. Ask each participant to reflect in silence on how, in light of this ongoing study series, she or he might now change or modify these questions. Briefly summarize the remaining questions you have noted from your review of the cards and previous class sessions, as appropriate. (5-10 minutes)

Look again at the relational “map” that the group made in Session II.

- What do these people and places make possible for you?
- What more do you want to know about them?
- What concerns do you think would be shared by people in many or all faith groups?
Do you see ways in which these people and places could become more a part of something you are trying to do, or to understand?

Exploration and Reflection

1. Biblical Perspectives (30 minutes)

Read the following passages regarding the Holy Spirit:

John 15:26; 16:12-15 (The Spirit of truth)

John 3:1-10 (The spirit blows where it chooses)

Acts 2:1-13 (The Spirit enables understanding of God’s power)

Tell the group: Discerning the truth is always a difficult task. Not all Christians will be able to affirm every truth claim made by those within the Christian community. The faithful are called to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1). In the gospel of John, we read, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.”

Ask:

- How do we understand the illumination and understanding brought to us by the Spirit?
- What does the freely moving and illimitable nature of the Spirit suggest to you about the possibility that the Spirit could be present in the experience of men and women of other religious traditions?

At an appropriate time in your discussion, ask a participant to read the perspective of the ecumenist, Georges Khoder, rooted in Orthodox theology:

God says, “This will happen in the last days. I will pour out upon everyone a portion of

my spirit” (Acts 2:17).... The Spirit is present everywhere and fills everything by virtue of an economy distinct from that of the Son. The Spirit operates and applies his energy in accordance with his own economy, and we could from this angle regard the non-Christian religions as points where the Spirit’s inspiration is at work. And all who are visited by the Spirit are the people of God. (from G. Khoder, “Christianity in a Pluralistic World—the Economy of the Holy Spirit,” in M. Kinnamon and B. Cope, ed., *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Press, 1997)

How do you respond to Khoder’s suggestion?

2. From the Policy Statement

As an extension of your biblical reflection, read and discuss the section on The Spirit of God and Human Hope from *Interfaith Relations and the Churches*, paragraphs 36-44, in Box 6. (15 minutes)

Response

Ask the participants: What does the Holy Spirit have to do with how you/we relate to men and women of other faiths?
(10 minutes)

For Next Time

Ask participants to bring an object with them to the next session that symbolizes one thing they find most nourishing in their experience of the Christian life.

Closing

Take a few minutes for comments. What are you learning that you wanted to know? What are you learning that you did not want to know?

Close with a prayer.

Box 6

36. The Spirit of God and Human Hope

37. The presence and power of the Holy Spirit fill us with hope. The realities of religious fragmentation and conflict could become a cause of despair, especially in a world of broken community, racked by division and hate based on color, language, ethnicity, and class. We are pained when our religious traditions do not empower us to build community. Yet we have hope because of the Holy Spirit, who hovered over the waters when the earth was void and without form (Genesis 1:2), who brings order out of chaos, and who can reshape our warped societies.

38. We believe that our relationships with people of other religious traditions are being shaped by the Spirit who, like the wind, "blows where it chooses" (John 3:8). Though we do not always understand the Spirit's purposes, we need never be without hope, for neither we nor the rest of creation are ever without the Spirit of God.

39. In this time of constant change, a sometimes bewildering variety of technologies, cultures, religions, and languages impinges upon our lives. The ways in which we should witness and act to bring about reconciliation in our torn world are not always clear. But the Spirit enables us to discern how to nurture the loving community of persons which is God's intention for creation and gives us the strength to keep working toward it.

40. Our experience of the transforming power of God's love overflows in joyous anticipation of a renewed and reconciled humanity. As the body of Christ, we are called to live out this new reality and to be a sign of the restored community to which all people are called. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we witness in word and deed to this hope.

41. This witness will be as varied as the many circumstances in which we meet men and women of other faiths. We meet them in our families and among our friends and colleagues, at the corner store and the doctor's office, in community action groups, and at work. We meet in boardrooms and schoolrooms, facing common agendas and concerns. Since God is the Lord of history, we can be open to the presence of God's Spirit in these encounters. They invite us to faithful service and witness.

42. We are aware that our churches are part of the body of Christ throughout the world. Our encounters with people of other faiths here in the United States are informed by the experience and reflection of our sisters and brothers living among men and women of many religious traditions in many nations. We stand in solidarity with each other, taking a role in international dialogue and seeking in our own circumstances to be faithful to the gospel.

43. We do not always agree, however, on how best to love our neighbors. Commitment to justice and mutual respect is the paramount consideration for some. For them the practice of Christian love is the most powerful witness to the truth of the gospel. Others, while not denying the witness of faithful lives, believe that love demands the verbal proclamation of the gospel and an open invitation to all people to be reconciled to God in Christ. Still others understand evangelization as our participation in God's transformation of human society. As we seek to respond to God's call to love our neighbor, we all must seek to avoid ways of interaction which do violence to the integrity of human persons and communities, such as coercive proselytism, which violates the right of the human person, Christian or non-Christian, to be free from external coercion in religious matters. We pray for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that through our life with all men and women, of every religion, color, language, and class, we will be instruments of God to build that time in which "steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other" (Psalm 85:10).

44. Clearly, a basic aspect of our relationship to people of religious traditions other than our own must be to engage in the struggle for justice, as the prophet Amos challenges us: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:23-24). Our actions must be based on genuine respect for all men and women. "The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy" (James 3:16-17). And beyond respect, we are called to love all people so that, by the working of the Holy Spirit, we may "above all, clothe [our]selves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Colossians 3:14).

Interfaith Relations and the Churches

Session VI

Prepare your meeting room

1. Have Bibles distributed for use.
2. Have the Marks of Faithfulness available for reading. If you will read responsively again, ask one participant to be ready to read the underlined lines individually.
3. Determine if you want to use the liturgical service prepared from *Interfaith Relations and the Churches*. If so, prepare copies. Be sure to plan for the time this will require.
4. Organize the questions you will present and discuss in this session.

Prepare for issues you may face during discussion.

Think about possible outcomes of this study series. Be ready for the discussion about recommendations for the future by having talked with other church leaders in advance, as appropriate, in order to prepare the way for possible next steps.

Our Vocation as Christians Among People of Other Religions Traditions

Goals for this session:

- To discuss questions raised regarding living as a Christian with people of other religious traditions
- To consider distinguishing characteristics of faithful discipleship in relation to neighbors of other faiths
- To decide on next steps as this study series comes to a conclusion

Opening

Open the session with a prayer, perhaps thanking God for the hope we experience through God's Spirit.

Experience

Ask participants to break into pairs. Ask them to show each other the object they have brought from home and describe, through talking about it, one thing that they find most nourishing in their own experience of Christian life; ask that they then tell each other about one thing that causes them discomfort or questioning in their experience of Christian life. The task of the non-speaking partner is simply to listen, not to comment or argue. Remember to leave equal time for each partner to share. (5 minutes each)

When you have come together as a whole group, tell the participants: The ways in which we are rooted in our own Christian life—and the struggles we have with it—ground us for living with others. They also play a role in generating some of the questions that arise in regard to Christian discipleship amid religious diversity. Quickly share, and list, the nourishing aspects and the difficulties of your faith journeys. (10 minutes)

Return to the questions identified at the end of the previous session. What kind of study or discussion will be required to address the most urgent or important of them? Has anyone had any important insight to share into any of the questions listed? Tell the group that the remaining questions may help set an agenda for future directions, following the conclusion of this study series; there will be time for future planning at the end of this session. (15 minutes)

Exploration and Reflection

1. Biblical Perspectives

Read Romans 8:14-23. In this passage, Paul speaks of the gift of the spirit given to the “children of God” and about the relationship between these “children of God” and the whole of creation. Do you feel that the phrase “all who are led by the Spirit of God” refers only to Christian believers? If so, what does Paul imply about the relationship between the lives of Christians and the rest of creation? If you feel the phrase refers to a different group, is it wider (i.e., does that group include people outside the Christian fold), or narrower (i.e., not all Christians)?

Read Galatians 5:19-26. This passage contrasts the “works of the flesh” with the “fruit of the Spirit.” What does it tell us about how we might discern where the Spirit of God is at work? How does the passage help us understand how someone who is led by the Spirit will relate to those around him or her? In what ways can this behavior benefit or help the whole of God’s creation?

Does the concern for creation and the hope for its redemption expressed in Romans help us to identify common concerns that we might share with men and women of other faiths? Could any of these concerns be turned into concrete action with people of other faiths? Are some concerns requiring common action better pursued in cooperation only with Christians? What basis do you find for your answers in the passages of Paul?

2. From the Policy Statement

Read the Marks of Faithfulness (Box 3, p. 8) again.

Ask participants to think for a moment about the families they know.

- How do you get people to sit down together at a family meal or come together for a family occasion?
- What is involved for us to be faithful in our family relationships?
- What ideas, attitudes or suggested behavior do you find in Marks of Faithfulness that can help us be faithful in our relationships with people of other religions traditions? What do you think is problematic—or still unclear—in the Marks of Faithfulness? What needs further clarification or discussion?

Reflection

What action or further study might the group like to take, or recommend, in light of these sessions spent in exploring Christian discipleship and interreligious relations? Identify ways to move forward, e.g., to whom to offer specific recommendations.

Closing

Close with a hymn and prayer. Or, you may wish to use parts of the liturgy prepared from *Interfaith Relations and the Churches*, found at www.nccusa.org/interfaith/ifrliturgy.html.

Interreligious Visit

Preparation

1. Review *How to Be a Perfect Stranger* (see last item in bibliography) for tips on going to visit the religious community you have selected. Some of the advice will apply to the leaders' visit to prepare for your later group visit, e.g., standards about women's dress.
2. Prepare information and instruction handouts:
 - a. As you meet with community leaders of the other religion, collect some basic self definitions and information about basic beliefs and practices that they will consider appropriate for you to supply to your members.
 - b. Ask the religious community's leaders about etiquette for your visit and/or arrange instructions taken from a resource such as *How to Be a Perfect Stranger*. Remember that others may assume certain behaviors that you do not understand (e.g., forms of dress, appropriate posture for standing or sitting, patterns of speech or quiet) and may not mention important concerns, especially if they are not accustomed to receiving guests.
3. Obtain a copy of *Interfaith Relations and the Churches* and materials about the sponsoring organization for your study series to take to the leaders of the community you plan to visit. Determine, through conversation with them, if some type of gift will be appropriate when you go to visit with your group.

Encounter of Faiths?

Goals for this session:

To visit one community of another religious tradition in order to

- respectfully observe some aspect of their religious practice and
- talk with members of the hosting community about what it means to live as religious people within their religious tradition

Plan ahead.

The vitality of this part of the study depends to a great extent on the quality of the visits that are arranged. This will require some flexibility of scheduling and careful planning. Unless a very strong relationship already exists, it is essential that one or more of the planners make a prior visit to the community which will be visited, in order to build some minimum degree of trust and to communicate clearly about the intention of the visit and what is desired. You should expect that your visit opens the door to further relationships with the group that is approached and to the possibility of reciprocal requests for hospitality or help. You may want to share a copy of *Interfaith Relations and the Churches*, the NCCC policy statement, with them and briefly explain its relation to what you are doing.

In planning and carrying out a visit, avoid anything that might invite confusion or that could violate the integrity of your group or the host community. Distribute etiquette suggestions in advance through which you provide guidance in this area. The guidance sheet may indicate, for example, that your group will sit at the back of the room in a mosque during Friday noon prayers rather than standing with those who are praying, or, that you will not receive *prasad*—the food given to all worshipers—at the Hindu temple, even though the hosts would have been prepared to offer it. The sheet may also indicate, for example, that your group is expected to avoid confrontational questions that challenge the right of your hosts to be present in your town as a worshipping community. Standards for integrity may vary from group to group, depending on the degree of familiarity and trust that exists in advance.

It may be helpful to begin interfaith contacts by going to visit a community of another religious tradition with which the group has some familiarity, e.g., a Jewish congregation, a Muslim community, or another faith group known by the leaders or participants. If your hosts will be comfortable with your doing so, plan to be present during some kind of community activity such as worship.

Some local groups feel confident about meeting with people of other religions, while others find such encounters new and disquieting. If your group is likely to be particularly at ease, you

may want to plan several visits, to be followed by an extended session for reflection. The outline presented here, however, is designed for groups who want to make one visit.

Begin with orientation.

It is most comfortable if you, as a visiting group, arrive at the site of the hosting congregation at the same time. Expect your group members to be prompt. Enter together as a group. Plan to meet for a brief orientation with one of the leaders of the host community. Introduce yourselves to the leader and make a brief statement about your purpose in coming. Arrange for the leader to give a brief orientation—a thumbnail introduction to the community and, most importantly, an explanation of what the group will be invited to observe and who they will be meeting. Try to be clear about the extent of participation that you have mutually agreed in advance will be appropriate.

Observe and converse with respect.

Following the orientation, the group can proceed as instructed to observe the scheduled service, prayer, meditation, or ritual of the community. A conversation can be held afterward with some members of the host community. This should be

arranged in advance and carefully planned with leaders of that community. The length of this conversation may vary but should not be an imposition on the hosts.

A Vatican document released in the year 2000 has said, “Equality, which is a presupposition of interreligious dialogue, refers to the equal personal dignity of the parties in dialogue” (*Dominus Iesus*, section 22). Help your group, in advance, to feel comfortable with the nature of interreligious conversation by talking about the importance of this respect.

It is important that the topic for your discussion be agreed upon with the host group’s leaders. A good question to propose for the focus of discussion is, What does it mean to live as religious people in our respective religious traditions? Other effective ground breakers include topics like prayer, family life, or festivals in the particular tradition you are visiting.

Meet briefly in your own group.

Your group may want to meet together briefly at the conclusion of your visit to review plans for your next session and to close with prayer together. This gathering should occur in some space other than your host community’s facility.

Adapting this Study for Other Situations

FOR A RETREAT OR A ONE-WEEKEND STUDY

Planners will want to arrange a retreat schedule that includes opportunities for free time and relaxed conversation among participants, depending on the nature of the group that will gather. The suggestions below will help planners with the more formal aspects of the program, which need to be envisioned in light of the particular location and objectives of those sponsoring the event.

Pre-study

Obtain or make copies of *Interfaith Relations and the Churches* for each participant. Ask those who have signed up for the study to read it in its entirety in advance. Tell them that you do not expect mastery of the content but that you do want basic familiarity, as an aid to your study time together. This will enable you to concentrate on biblical reflection and theological questions during your time together, rather than simple review of the paper itself.

Opening and worship

Have name tags available unless your entire group is very familiar with one another. Organize an opportunity for participants to introduce themselves by giving their names and sharing one of the reasons or questions that brought them to this study. Review the general objectives of your time together. Tell the group that this will be an opportunity to explore what is involved in living as Christians with Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, and people of other faiths in today's world.

Plan a worship service that makes use of *Interfaith Living and the Churches*, paragraph 35, Matthew 5:1-16, and Matthew 25:31-46 in the context of lifting up Christian discipleship. (See Session I, Exploration and Reflection section.)

Overview

Provide a major session in which a well-organized leader will take the group through the content of *Interfaith Relations and the Churches*, either as a keynote or a thoughtful guided tour. This

could be in the context of the opening worship but need not be. The presenter should be asked to concentrate on the content itself rather than an evaluation of the content. Ask the presenter to note the Trinitarian structure of the major section, Reflections on Theology and Practice, which you will use in your study time together. (No more than 20 minutes)

Mapping

Use the mapping project in Session II. Be sure to do whatever is necessary in advance so that you can get on your map the maximum information possible. Note that the religious situation visualized through the map presents the challenge for Christian discipleship in which we live, i.e., we are called to live faithfully among people of many faiths.

Biblical and theological reflection

Depending on the time available, pick elements from Sessions III, IV, and V that will enable you to look at the themes of community, reconciliation, and human hope as you reflect upon your understandings of God as Creator Father, Son Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit. Make use of at least some of the Experience segments in the Session plans. Pick key passages and questions from the Exploration and Reflection segments. Incorporate questions from the Response segments. Deciding on what to use will be a major task in advance. Plan carefully. Be sure to determine in advance the amount of time you will allow for each element, so that you will be able to complete the work you have projected in advance.

Provide opportunity for participants to raise their own questions, but do not allow questions from the group to dominate your reflection. Announce to the group that your goal for the event is to look at material that will help you assimilate the content of *Interfaith Relations and the Churches*. They may need to do further study later in order to examine their own questions fully. For such examination, provide information about denominational statements about interfaith relations and bibliography.

Closing worship

Close with a time of worship. A prepared liturgy created from the content of *Interfaith Relations and the Churches* is available on the NCCC web site www.ncccusa.org/interfaith/ifrliturg.html. You may wish to add an offering of cards on which participants have written the continuing questions they bring before God, the intercessions for others, and/or the commitments they have made for their own acts of discipleship in relation to neighbors of other religions.

If you would prefer, prepare your own worship service. Be sure to include the Marks of Faithfulness, read responsively, as an act of commitment. Seriously consider an act of confession of our complicity as Christians in unreconciled relationships with people of other religions.

Future planning

If you are able, offer an opportunity for those who attended the retreat to go on a later visit to a “congregation” of another religious community in your area. See plans for this activity above.

FOR A DAY WITH CHURCH OFFICERS

In addition to the plans above for a retreat or one-day study, add a time for considering what the implications of the study are for particular Christian congregations—your own congregation, if you are meeting alone. Make specific plans. These may be simply to take the issue of relationships with neighbors to the congregation or to an official meeting of church officers. Or they may be explicit proposals for new programs of the congregation.

If it is appropriate, you might plan a Sunday on which the liturgy based upon *Interfaith Relations and the Churches* could be used by an entire congregation. This would require careful preparation of a sermon that would introduce the concerns of the church officers to the congregation in homiletic form, using some of the biblical material you studied together.

FOR A DAY OF TEACHER TRAINING

In addition to the plans above for a retreat or one-day study, add a time for considering the teaching role of the congregation concerning people of other religions. Look at the issue of socialization

into community prejudices and stereotypes. Ask what you can do to provide your congregation with new information and new exposure to others.

A plan for a visit with another religious community would be important to teachers. This might result in making plans for bringing the congregation’s learners into contact with the same community at a later date. Or it might result in plans for a segment of communicants’ class study to be visiting another religious community and learning about the Christian understanding of our relationships with peoples of other faiths in today’s context.

FOR A JOINT PROJECT WITH A COMMUNITY OF ANOTHER RELIGION

It is important for Christians to talk about their understandings of relationships with peoples of other religions among themselves – making use of Christian scripture and theological resources. An important guideline is that we discipline ourselves to never speak about other people in ways that violate their integrity or our respect for their humanity. Thus, we do not speak about them in ways other than we would be willing to have them hear.

One way to reinforce this attitude is to spend time with others in mutual projects for the well-being of our geographic community and its needs. Following a full period of six studies and a visit, or following a one-day study or a retreat, it would be possible to engage in a joint project with people of another religious community.

Arrange for leaders to meet together to plan, then carry out these plans.

Often groups are able to meet together to share the motivations within their religious community that bring them to community action. What in your scripture calls you to serve others? What is your hope as a result of serving others? What provides you with strength for service when it becomes difficult? Plan ways to share openly concerning these questions.

Groups then need to discuss in detail what they will do together. Be aware that each group may have prior assumptions about what is to be done and the ways it is to be done. No topic is there-

fore too simple for sharing, since this will help expose assumptions that may create later difficulties.

Select a project that has a short timeline as your first activity together. If the project you select is complex, plan for at least two persons from each community to be present at each phase. One community or the other may be the dominant participant in particular aspects, but be sure there is an overlap of participation.

Organize a joint committee for oversight. Plan ways for ongoing evaluation at each stage, then

plan a final, thorough evaluation. Make sure you leave room in these evaluations for whatever each religious community wants to contribute from the perspective of its religious objectives and insights. These are integral to the thinking of participants.

Christians may wish to gather for special evaluation at one or more times and should expect that the partner group may do likewise. In these evaluations, make use of *Interfaith Relations and the Churches*—especially the Marks of Faithfulness—as guidelines for self-understanding.

Resources

1. Plans for particular sessions make reference to web sites. In particular, note the availability of www.nccusa.org/interfaith/ifresources.htm where *Interfaith Relations and the Churches* and companion resources are available for reading and downloading. You are asked not to sell copies you make from your downloading.
2. Resources from denominations should be secured from the central offices of particular denominations or from local resource centers of these denominations. If you need help in determining where to call or write, contact Interfaith Relations, National Council of Churches, 475 Riverside Drive, Room 870, New York, NY 10115 (phone 212/870-2560).
3. Ask persons from other religious communities to suggest materials about themselves for your reading—books, magazines, pamphlets, web sites. These will give you an opportunity to discover how communities want to be known.
4. The annotated bibliographies that follow have been prepared by members of the Commission on Interfaith Relations of the National Council of Churches for sharing. They refer to materials that are basic though substantial, from various perspectives. (The NCCC Commission has dealt primarily with relationships with Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists—reflected in the bibliographies that follow. Its fourth area of emphasis, traditional Native American religions, should be referred to denominational offices for bibliographic recommendations.)

Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations

Azzam, Abd-al-Rahman. *The Eternal Message of Muhammad*. New York: Mentor Books. 1964.

This is an excellent book for those who want to read a single book on Islam. It is written by an Arab politician. It shows how Islam interacts with the concerns of personal, social and political life and would be particularly useful for someone seeking to understand the role of Islam in the arena of public life—an important consideration in light of current world events. The book includes an overview of the history of Islam along with a presentation of its faith and practice.

Cragg, Kenneth. *The Call of the Minaret*. Second Edition, Revised and Enlarged. Maryknoll: Orbis Books. 1965.

This book has long been a standard introduction to Islam, written by a former Christian missionary bishop to Egypt. It provides an excellent overview of Islamic faith and practice and some historical background. The author has often been accused of "Christianizing" Islam—most apparent in the fact that the legal dimension of Islam is not given the centrality that most Muslims would give to it and that the author is concerned with what Islam says (or doesn't say) about matters many Muslims consider peripheral. In spite of these problems, there is authenticity in the presentation.

Esposito, John L., ed. *Voices of Resurgent Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1982.

This book allows the reader to view the kaleidoscope of approaches and agendas that are so often lumped together under the title "Resurgent Islam" or "Islamic Revivalism." The extracts from Muslim sources are well chosen and provide the reader with a deeper understanding of what is happening in the Muslim world today, an understanding that often belies media presentations. Though the book is a bit dated now, it provides an important introduction to the breadth of the Islamic movement and allows the reader to grasp some historical forces that underlie the contemporary situation.

Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck, ed. *The Muslims of America*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1991.

The sixteen essays in this book by Muslim and non-Muslim researchers deal with the history, organization, challenges, responses, outstanding thinkers, and future prospects of the Muslim community in the United States and Canada. They also discuss American Muslim self-images, Islamic education, the status of Muslim women in America, American Muslims' political activity, and the impact of American foreign policy on Muslims in the United States.

Mallon, Elias D. *Neighbors: Muslims in North America*. New York: Friendship Press. 1989.

A series of nine interviews with representative North American Muslims allow the reader to understand the attitudes, problems, hopes, and fears of the richly diverse Muslim community now living in North America. The interview format is very readable and makes the reader conscious that we are dealing with real men and women when we discuss "Muslims."

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Ideals and Realities of Islam*. Boston: Beacon Press. 1972.

This is excellent for the person who says, "I want to read one book on Islam." The author is a Shi'ite Muslim with an education in Western philosophy. The book, however, is equally acceptable to Sunni Muslims, the majority Muslim community, who simply ignore the chapter on Shi'ite Islam. The style is readable and deals thematically with all major aspects of Islamic faith and practice. It is particularly eloquent in its presentation of the spiritual dimension of Islam.

Speight, R. Marston. *God is One: The Way of Islam*. New York: Friendship Press. 1989.

This book provides a lucid and accessible introduction to Islamic faith and practice, including historical background and discussion of Islam and Muslims in the modern world. It is richly illustrated and includes reference to Islamic contributions to science, art, medicine, architecture, and literature. It also gives an impression of the significance of Islam as a world religion. The major lack, as with most introductions to Islam written by Christians, is a section dealing specifically with Islamic law.

Christian-Muslim Relations

Kateregga, Badru D. and David W. Shenk. *Islam and Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1981.

This book, written jointly by a Christian missionary in East Africa and an East African Muslim, presents the Christian and Muslim perspectives on particular themes in a series of short essays. The themes include God, prophets, scripture, sin, salvation, community. While the scope of the book makes it impossible for either author to reflect the rich diversity of his own tradition, the book is an interesting introduction and starting point for people who want to know what Christians and Muslims feel they have uniquely to say to each other about their experience of and understanding of God.

Kimball, Charles. *Striving Together: A Way Forward in Christian-Muslim Relations*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books. 1990.

This book provides an excellent introduction to the history and current state of Christian-Muslim relations. Most of the major themes of the encounter between Christianity and Islam in the contemporary world are dealt with and the reader is enabled to put them into both historical and social/political perspective.

Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. *Interreligious Documents I: Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims*. Prepared by Maurice Borrmans, trans. R. Marston Speight. New York: Paulist Press. 1990.

This book is more than its title suggests. It puts the contemporary state of Christian-Muslim relations into historical context while explaining the contemporary social and political situation of Christian-Muslim encounter. It is particularly good concerning the human dynamics involved in interfaith dialogue, and much of what it says about the nature and practice of dialogue would be useful to Christians engaged in any kind of interfaith or ecumenical dialogue.

Buddhism and Christian-Buddhist Relations

LaFleur, William R. *Buddhism: A Cultural Perspective*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. 1988.

This is one of the better general introductions to the Buddhist tradition. It includes material about modern controversies and the role of the arts along with the standard historical and doctrinal introductions.

Strong, John S. *The Experience of Buddhism: Sources and Interpretations*. Belmont, Ca: Wadsworth. 1994.

This book is a general introduction to Buddhist history. It also includes original translations of Buddhist texts that allow the reader to frame his or her own response to Buddhist thought and history.

Kalupahana, David J. *A History of Buddhist Philosophy: Continuities and Discontinuities*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. 1992.

An excellent history of Buddhist thought that makes difficult material about as comprehensible as it ever will be. The book is particularly useful for those with some previous university training.

Fields, Rick. *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America*, 3rd edition. Boston:

Shambhala Publications. 1992.

The fascinating story of the emergence of Buddhism in America. This book almost reads like a novel.

Gross, Rita. *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis and Reconstruction of Buddhism*. Albany: State University of New York Press. 1993.

Probably the most comprehensive study of the past and present roles of women in Buddhism. The material is fascinating both for its history and theological reconstruction. This work demonstrates the vital character of North American Buddhism.

Lester, Robert C. *Buddhism: The Path to Nirvana*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press. 1998 reprint.

This is another good introduction written by a scholar of the Theravada or Southern Buddhist tradition.

Mitchell, Donald W. *Spirituality and Emptiness: The Dynamics of Spiritual Life in Buddhism and Christianity*. 1991.

This book presents the spiritual roots of both traditions. It is written from an ecumenical Roman Catholic position and illustrates how the arts of meditation have been an important topic of Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

Judaism and Christian-Jewish Relations

Limburg, James. *Judaism: An Introduction for Christians*. Augsburg Press. 1987.

This book is recommended as a basic survey of topics including Jewish identity, worship, and teaching. It also discusses the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. Questions are included which make the book valuable for group study.

Wynen, Stephen M. *Settings of Silver: An Introduction to Judaism*. Paulist Press. 1989.

Rabbi Wynen provides a very informative and readable introduction. The first two sections deal with Jewish self-definition, observance, and belief, while sections three and four cover Jewish history into the present. It is a very helpful book.

Shermis, Michael and Arthur Zannoni, eds., *Introduction to Jewish-Christian Relations*. Paulist Press. 1991.

The ten essays in this book offer helpful introductions to the central issues of contemporary Christian-Jewish relationship. They include, among others, discussions of understandings of scripture, the Holocaust, Israel, Jesus, feminism, and education.

Fisher, Eugene, ed., *Interwoven Destinies: Jews and Christians Through the Ages and Visions of the Other: Jewish and Christian Theologians Assess the Dialogue*. Paulist Press. 1993 and 1994 (respectively).

These volumes make available the excellent historical and theological lectures which made up the Ninth National Workshop on Christian-Jewish Relations (1986 in Baltimore). Fisher's bibliography in *Visions* is itself a useful resource.

Efroymson, David P., Eugene Fisher and Leon Klenicki, edd. *Within Context: Essays on Jews and Judaism in the New Testament*. Liturgical Press. 1993.

This volume provides for a particular need in Christian churches. It is especially valuable for those who need to prepare materials which present the Christian understanding of Judaism to others within the Church. It includes guidelines for teaching and provides valuable insights for both teachers and preachers.

Holtz, Barry W., ed. *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*. Summit Books. 1984.

This volume is for those who want to find their way deeper into the texts that form Jewish life. Excellent introductions to reading the Talmud, the Jewish prayer book, mystical texts, the Jewish approach to the Bible and more. The time spent getting acquainted with this material is well worth the effort.

Plaskow, Judith. *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*. Harper and Row. 1990.

This is a valuable exploration of male-female relations, gender roles, sexuality, and women's leadership in the community within Jewish history and tradition. Valuable in helping Christians understand how the Jewish world grapples with issues of concern to all.

Official and Semi-Official Church Documents on Christian-Jewish Relations

The positions and guidance of the churches on Christian-Jewish relations are collected in a number of different publications:

Croner, Helga, comp. *Stepping Stones to Further Jewish-Christian Relations and More Stepping Stones*, Paulist Press/Stimulus Books. 1977 and 1985, respectively.

Ditmanson, Harold, ed. *Stepping Stones to Further Jewish-Lutheran Relationships: Key Lutheran Statements*. Augsburg Press. 1990.

The Theology of the Churches and the Jewish People: Statements of the WCC and its Member Churches, WCC Publications. 1988.

Guidelines for Christian-Jewish Relations for Use in the Episcopal Church. Forward Movement Press. 1988.

Interfaith Marriage

Dovetail: A Newsletter by and for Jewish-Christian Families. \$25 for a one-year subscription (six issues). Call 1-800-530-1596 for subscriptions, at \$25/year, or see www.mich.com/~dovetail.suborder.html for lists of past issues still available.

This independent newsletter attempts to balance and respect the perspectives of both Jewish and Christian partners and their children in interfaith marriages. Articles are written by interfaith couples as well as therapists, clergy, and academics. Issues addressed in past issues include: interfaith wedding ceremonies, media coverage of Jewish-Christian families, conversion, grandparents of interfaith children, religious education and intermarried clergy.

Interfaith Marriage: A Resource by Presbyterian Christians.

53pp., \$1.50. Available from: PDS, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY 40202-1396, 1-800-524-2612.

This extremely useful booklet is the first of its kind to be published by a Protestant denomination. It contains a review of the historical and sociological context of intermarriage and Christian, Jewish, and Muslim views on the subject. It also includes case studies and sample liturgies. While the booklet "is intended to assist Christian pastors, chaplains and pastoral counselors; interfaith couples and their families; and Christian congregations and seminaries in dealing with issues related to interfaith marriages and relationships," it is primarily directed to those who find themselves counseling interfaith couples and their families.

Mayer, Egon. *Love and Tradition: Marriage Between Jews and Christians*. New York: Schocken Books, 1987.

Mayer, the director of the Jewish Outreach Institute, is the preeminent sociologist studying Jewish-Christian marriage. He draws on case studies and surveys to discuss the motivations for intermarriage, the ways in which some couples have chosen to reconcile their relationships with their families, communities and traditions, and the ways in which the children of these unions view their ethnic and religious identities. Written from the perspective of a Jew concerned with both Jewish survival and fair treatment of interfaith couples, this book provides solid background and thoughtful discussion for interested clergy.

Etiquette for Interreligious Visitation

Magida, Arthur J. and Stuart M. Matlins, edd. *How to be a Perfect Stranger: A Guide to Etiquette in Other People's Religious Ceremonies*, Volumes 1 and 2. Woodstock, Vt.: Sky Light Paths. 1999.

NCCC Policy Statement

Breiner, Bert. "A Brief Theological Introduction to the Policy Statement." Published at www.nccusa.org/interfaith/ifresources.html. Undated. National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

"Interfaith Relations and the Churches." Adopted by the NCCC, 1999. Published at www.nccusa.org/interfaith/ifresources.html or available in hard copy at Interfaith Relations, National Council of Churches, phone 212-870-2560.

Thomas, Margaret O. "A Liturgy Based on 'Interfaith Relations and the Churches.'" Published at www.nccusa.org/interfaith/ifresources.html. 1999.

