

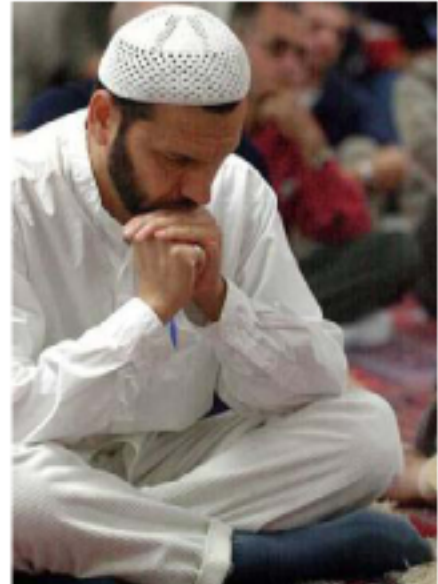
Getting to Know *Neighbors* of Other Faiths



Inter-religious relationships are one of God's special callings in our time. While the Church has always lived in a religiously pluralistic world, the rich diversity of different faiths is more apparent now than ever before.

Christians often find themselves face-to-face with neighbors and co-workers, relatives, strangers, and friends who belong to different religious traditions. This presents us with unique opportunities to witness, love, and serve "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). By learning practical ways to encounter people of diverse faiths, we discover opportunities to learn from them, to live in community with them, to develop mutual respect, and to discover areas of commonality.

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A Theological Rationale for Interfaith Relationships

God and Human Community

As Christians, we affirm that God loves all of creation and that all people are created in God's image (Genesis 1:27). Through God's love, all people are related to one another as children of God. This common humanity and relatedness are gifts from God to the human race. Relating to people of other faiths strengthens community and encourages human flourishing.

Hospitality to the Stranger

Scripture offers many examples of ethical and pastoral incentives for interreligious relationships. The stories of Abraham and Sarah, Jethro, Ruth, and others, remind us to welcome and treat kindly those from outside our own religious communities. The virtue of hospitality to strangers is amplified in Jesus' ministry as he befriends the Samaritan woman and shows in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) that caring for those outside of one's own community is important. In the letter to the Hebrews we read, 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.' (Hebrews 13:2)

Loving God and Neighbor

Indeed, Jesus goes beyond hospitality to suggest that the whole of the law and the prophets are summarized in the commandment to love God and to love one's neighbors (Matthew 22:36-40). Loving others means respecting them, listening to them, and treating them as we would want them treat us (Matthew 7:12). Loving means not only the authentic sharing of truth as we see it, but a deep listening to others. Loving one's neighbors take priority over proclaiming right doctrine or performing formal worship, it becomes the first and guiding commandment for Christians. (See Matthew 5:23-24 and 12:12).

Reconciliation with God

Christians affirm that all people have been already reconciled to God and to others in Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18ff.; Colossians 3:15ff.). Every person embodies something of the divine image and therefore may possess some ray of truth, some aspect of the Mystery of God we know to be revealed in Jesus Christ. Christians know God through Jesus Christ, but understand that all human understanding of truth is inherently limited and conditioned. The reality of God, in contrast, is intrinsically unlimited. God will always be greater than any human can comprehend or any religion can convey.

**Christian Witness and Reconciliation with Others**

Christians have been sent into the world to testify in word and deed to the God we know through Jesus Christ (John 17:18). Yet Christians have not always embodied God's love in their relationships with people of other religious traditions. A lack of understanding and respect for other faiths has often resulted in fear, distrust, and the dehumanization of people in other religious traditions. Christian witness to God's love seeks to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the world. That means conversing with, listening to, learning from, and living peacefully with those in the world who do not confess Jesus as Lord. Listening and sharing sometimes shows God's love better than declarations of beliefs.

**Peacemakers**

As Christians, we are called to be peacemakers in the world. We look for ways to strengthen human life in community. But since Scripture speaks in many voices, it has sometimes been used to discount and divide people of different faiths from one another. Through encounters with people of other religions, Christians hope to find new understanding and to discover fuller and more meaningful ways to live in reconciled communities together.

Person and work of Christ

Through Jesus Christ humanity is invited to speak and respond to God. In Scripture, God not only speaks but listens, not only challenges, but waits. In the death and resurrection of Christ, God brings about the possibility for new relationships between God and humanity and between different human persons and communities. The work of Christ is to break down the walls of separation and alienation between peoples with each other and with God. New possibilities for relationship began in the vulnerability, risk, and faith of Jesus. A new reality is now available now for believers in Christ to make ourselves vulnerable and to take risks in our relationships with people of other faiths.

Spirit of God and Human Hope

Christians affirm that the Holy Spirit, who hovered over the waters when the earth was void and without form (Genesis 1:2), can bring order out of chaos and can reshape warped societies. Relationships with people of other religious traditions are shaped by the Holy Spirit who, like the wind, 'blows where it chooses' (John 3:8). While we do not always understand the Spirit's purposes, we need never be without hope, for we nor the rest of creation are ever without the Spirit of God.