
ECUMENICAL / INTER-RELIGIOUS ISSUES

Focus

We live in an increasingly pluralistic world in which people from many diverse faith traditions and people claiming no faith tradition live side by side and must find ways to live peacefully and work cooperatively with one another. Because MCC has been an ecumenical community since its inception, we have experience “being the church” together in just such a context of spiritual diversity. This holy conversation invites participants to explore the sacred value of building and nurturing relationships with others across lines of denomination, background, or tradition.

Note about Terminology:

Ecumenical refers to relationships with other Christian Denominations (e.g. Roman Catholic, Baptist, United Church of Christ, Anglican...) and *Inter-religious* means others of non-Christian faiths (e.g. Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist...)

Testimonies about Ecumenical / Inter-religious Relationships as Gifts from God

The Importance of Building Alliances: My Experience with the North Carolina Council of Churches Contributed by Stan C. Kimer (February 2010)

Over a decade ago, I was very active in MCC working on issues around racial justice. A natural extension of this ministry was getting engaged with the North Carolina Council of Churches’ Racial Justice Committee.

I was warmly received and started to build friendships with the various committee members who came from various other denominations: Episcopal, Methodist, AME-Zion, Catholic, Presbyterian and others. The committee was pleased to have an MCCer at the table on this important discussion and several times I heard favorable comments about how I as an MCCer was indeed concerned on much broader issues of Christian justice than just the LGBT issue.

Over time I was asked to be on the executive board and now serve as First Vice President with intentions to serve as President in the near future. I have built close meaningful relationships with people across many denominations that care about issues such as the working poor, climate and environment, immigration, racial justice and more. As I worked closely with many others on the board, they came to understand my

being a gay man as only one aspect of my personhood and Christianity. And building these alliances garnered support for the time with LGBT issues did come before the council. I was able to share openly about how it hurt me deeply when my relationship is not recognized by other Christians, and this helped the NC Council of Churches board overwhelmingly passing a statement opposing anti-gay marriage amendments to the state or federal constitution.

I look forward to my long continued involvement with the council.

**My Personal Experience with “The Fellowship” –
How Ecumenical Partnerships Transform Us
Contributed by Rev. Elder Nancy Wilson (January 2010)**

Our intentional process of “building a healthy relationship” with The Fellowship began just over two years ago.

There are three things we want to lift up about that experience

1. The first retreat we held with Fellowship and MCC leaders, in which we really laid a lot of cards on the table, expressed our hopes and our fears, was powerful and life-changing for me. The Holy Spirit was ever-present, and when Fellowship leaders left at the end of our time together, the Board of Elders of MCC were so aware that we felt “bereft.” That, already, in some mysterious way, we had become a “we.” I also felt that from then on, whatever I did as Moderator of MCC, I really had to take the Fellowship into account, deeply. A year or so later, at a Fellowship Leadership conference, I watched 200 people have an amazing conversation on sexuality, that reminded me of MCC 20 years ago, but in a very new context! I loved it! It inspired, refreshed and renewed me!
2. I feel very privileged that in this process, Bishop Yvette Flunder has become a friend. There are not a lot of people in the world who do what we do. There is something about the process of a colleague becoming a friend, someone you can trust and tell the truth to, that I needed. Bishop is the kind of person who is close to many people, who invites people into her circle with love, and I feel privileged to be included. Building a healthy relationship, with all the complexities of race and culture, especially religious culture has been challenging. I have grown in my appreciation for the Fellowship’s unique mission, and what collaboration with MCC might really mean.
3. As MCC and Fellowship folks are now often together in broader contexts, we recognize each other as “kin:” as partners and family. This has been true whether we are at a Creating Change Conference, at the HRC Clergy Call, or at Episcopal Divinity School. We have so much in common, so many convergences, while respecting and appreciating our difference. It has been fascinating to watch others observing our deepening connections, and probably wondering “what are they up to?”

I would say that working on this partnership, this relationship, with the Fellowship has been one of the highlights of the last few years for me in ministry.

**Treasuring My Experience with “The Fellowship” – How Ecumenical Partnerships Unite Us
Contributed by Rev. Candy Holmes (January 2010)**

It has been seven years of growing relationship between me and The Fellowship. Attending a Fellowship Leadership retreat in Phoenix, Arizona was my initial exposure. And I knew from that point many years ago until now that this would be a relationship that would refresh and reinvigorate me in ways beyond what I could imagine. There are many examples I could share that reflect what I mean but there is one that stands above the rest.

Through I have been in MCC for over 20 years, some years ago I found that I was still searching for how to connect the fullness of who I am as an African American, religiously progressive Lesbian with my MCC family, African American community, and other religious communities. And I will always remember sitting in a Fellowship Leadership plenary and hearing Bishop Flunder say to the audience something so profound to my spirit I remember it like it was yesterday. It is rare when you can identify such a point in time or event that changes your life and direction. But this did. She said, "Don't let anyone hollow your spiritual self out." Those words reverberated through my entire being like the sound of a clarion. The message was clear as a bell. The questions of connection are not only answered by how one reaches out, but also and perhaps first defined by how one reaches inward to embrace every part of one's personhood. And when this personal work is going on, finding ones way into connection with oneself and with others is a journey of wonderment and joy.

I treasure my personal and spiritual work with The Fellowship as MCC's liaison. The wisdom of this partnering way continues to unfold that it is indeed a good thing for God's family to "dwell together in unity." My ongoing path with The Fellowship is a source of inspiration and provokes me to continually imagine God's table as spacious and full of grace for us all.

Some Centering Quotes on Ecumenical / Inter-religious Issues

"Christians are one in Christ: unity is their birthright, as members of the one body of Christ. Through the modern ecumenical movement, the churches are seeking to live out this truth – to make Christian unity both evident and effective through common confession, witness, and service. They recognize increasingly that just as no member of the body can say to another "I have no need of you," so the churches need each other. They recognize that their unity in Christ is greater than the differences in belief, and the tragedies of history, which divide them."

(Churches Affirming Unity, Overcoming Division, a pamphlet of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches)

"There are many forms of Buddhism, many ways of understanding Buddhism. If you have one hundred people practicing Buddhism, you may have one hundred forms of Buddhism. The same is true in Christianity. If there are one hundred thousand people practicing Christianity, there may be one hundred thousand ways of understanding Christianity. ... It is not difficult to see that sometimes a Buddhist recognizes a Christian as being more Buddhist than another Buddhist. I see a Buddhist, but the way [s/he] understands Buddhism is quite different from the way I do. However, when I look at a Christian, I see that the way [s/he] understands Christianity and practices love and charity is closer to the way I practice them than this [one] who is called a Buddhist. The same thing is true in Christianity. From time to time, you feel that you are very far away from your Christian [sibling]. You feel that the [one] who practices in the Buddhist tradition is much closer to you as a Christian. So, Buddhism is not Buddhism and Christianity is not Christianity. There are many ways of understanding Christianity. Therefore, let us forget the idea that Christianity must be like this, and that Buddhism can only be like that."

(Thich Nhat Hanh, Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers, p. 15)

“Christians as well as Jews look to the Hebrew Bible as the story recording Israel's sacred memory of God's election and covenant with this people. For Jews it is their own story in historical continuity with the present. Christians, mostly of gentile background since early in the life of the Church, believe themselves to be heirs to this same story by grace in Jesus Christ. The relationship between the two communities, both worshipping the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is a given historical fact, but how it is to be understood theologically is a matter of internal discussion among Christians, a discussion that can be enriched by dialogue with Jews.

(Ecumenical Considerations on Jewish-Christian Dialogue, World Council of Churches, 1982)

“In a world where Christians and Muslims live as neighbours and co-citizens, dialogue is not only an activity of meetings and conferences. It is a way of living out our faith commitment in relation to each other, sharing as partners common concerns and aspirations and striving together in response to the problems and challenges of our time. Widely accepted guidelines for genuine dialogue, need to be re-emphasised and reaffirmed. A number of common affirmations are to be renewed taking stock of the previous experience and in the light of a Christian-Muslim appraisal of the current situation. Differences are inherent in the human condition and a manifestation of divine wisdom. In recognition of such differences, interreligious dialogue is based on mutual respect and understanding. It should not be used for a theological debate in which adherents of each religion try to prove religious truth at the expense of the other. ... As Christians and Muslims understand justice to be a universal value grounded in their faith, they are called to take sides with the oppressed and marginalised, irrespective of their religious identity. Justice is an expression of a religious commitment that extends beyond the boundaries of one's own religious community. Moreover, Muslims and Christians uphold their own religious values and ideals when they take a common stand in solidarity with, or in defense of, the victims of oppression and exclusion.”

(Excerpted from Striving Together in Dialogue: A Muslim-Christian Call to Reflection and Action, World Council of Churches, 2000).

“Inter-religious and other inter-cultural dialogue is based on mutual respect and furthers mutual understanding. Each partner in dialogue acknowledges the sincerity of others' convictions, and the process rejects the practice of one group ‘talking about’ others, providing instead a context where all may ‘talk with’ one another. Genuine dialogue implies the recognition of, and respect for, differences. Because we are different, we each have something unique to contribute, and every contribution counts. At the same time, dialogue partners seek to discover and appreciate the common values held by all. A fruitful mutual understanding depends on honesty: both convergences and genuine differences must be recognized and held in a creative tension. We believe that conflicts involving religious and cultural differences are not an expression of an inevitable ‘clash of civilizations’. On the contrary, we believe that dialogue can lead to a vision of justice and peace that is grounded in all our traditions. When we dialogue in good faith the difference becomes a blessing and leads to mutual enrichment. All religions worthy of the name are concerned with the wholeness of life. This includes a transcendental dimension but also a practical duty to treat one's neighbour as one would wish to be treated. In this sense, dialogue is not merely a subject for discussion in conferences or councils but a way of living out our faith in relation to one another. In loving and serving the God we know, we find our common calling to affirm human dignity, uphold human rights, preserve the environment and bring warfare to an end – not least among the religious and political complexities of the Middle East.”

(Rev. Dr. Samuel Kobia, General Secretary of World Council of Churches, Opening Remarks, September 30, 2009)

Holy Conversations: Exploring My and Our Understanding of Ecumenical / Inter-religious Issues

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): In what ways have your views about God or Spirituality been shaped by relationships with people from different religious backgrounds? What Christian people from other denominations have inspired or un-inspired you? What non-Christian people or texts have inspired or un-inspired you?

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): What insights did you have listening to others talk about their ecumenical or interfaith experiences? What are some common grounds that we have with people of different faith experiences?

Additional Thoughts About Ecumenical / Inter-religious Issues

DWELLING TOGETHER IN UNITY:

MCC's Approach to Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relationships

Purpose:

MCC's Statement of Direction challenges us "to proclaim a spirituality that is liberating and sufficiently profound to address the issues of our chaotic and complicated world." Leadership and participation in ecumenical and inter-religious work is a critical component in fulfilling this call. As ecumenical/inter-religious partners, we unite across denominational and religious lines to advocate an inclusive and genuine respect for the sacred worth of all people; to reduce human suffering; and to establish justice, peace and equality in the world.

God has been up to something unique with MCC since our beginnings. We are an inclusive and diverse church for **all** people. We do welcome, affirm and celebrate the goodness and worth of LGBT people and the Queer community. And yet, we are still more. We are about tearing down walls and building up hope. We are about aligning with the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in the world. Neither the church nor the human family is complete without our story of suffering and redemption. We must share our stories and hear the stories yet to be told.

We affirm that Metropolitan Community Church is a Christian Church. The Christian scriptures are central to our worship life. We honor and seek to follow the healing and compassionate example of Jesus, whom we call Christ. We claim our Christian identity and respect others' religious identities. We believe that we are all children of God, and can work together to reduce human suffering and promote human dignity.

We are compelled to work for justice for all creation, including environmental protection, peace, and the end to poverty, racism, oppression for LGBT people, etc. From our beginnings, ecumenism and inter-religious work has been a part our existence. The work done by previous generations of MCC ecumenists has laid the foundation for what we will build in the 21st Century. We are inspired and ready to propel this ministry of opportunity into the global village. Our goal is to make key contributions in the area of ecumenism in the broadest and most inclusive sense. We need not look too far to know that others are watching our work and adjusting theirs based on our witness.

We also believe that much of this work involves recognizing the economic reality of our world. For example, “*Wealth and income has become so much more concentrated both in rich countries and among the rich in poor countries that the United Nations now estimates that the 15 richest individuals are worth more than the combined gross domestic products of all of sub-Saharan Africa.*”¹ How do we continue to lift up the cause of economic justice and address inequalities in the world? How do we continue to stand in solidarity with those suffering with HIV/AIDS, particularly in places where medications are not available? What does God expect of us as ecumenical/inter-religious partners?

There is a need to articulate a theology of Ecumenical and Inter-religious work for MCC. It must take place in the context of a new era of creating open, safe, respectful theological conversations which can support our “unfinished call in an unfinished world.” God our Creator has equipped us to do this good work, and we are at our best when we acknowledge and work for the dignity of all people. God is calling us to *do something*, and we need partners in order to do it effectively. Ours is a shared world, and we must care for it and minister within it collaboratively.

MCC has an ecumenical calling to the whole Christian Church. The Church universal has been wounded by the separation of spirituality and sexuality. We are called to help heal the church’s historical disconnect of body and spirit, which has contributed to the sins of exclusion, racism, sexism and homophobia. Our testimony and the embodiment of a new inclusive community can help heal the larger Christian community.

MCC has much to learn from our Christian colleagues and friends. There are churches, on a local and denominational level open to partnering with MCC in ways that will change the world, the Church and individual lives. We must be willing and open to accept those invitations, and where there is not yet an invitation, to knock at the door. MCC churches globally must be trained to engage with churches in their communities, and refuse to be isolated.

In addition to ecumenical work, there is much to be done across religious traditions, regardless of what one believes about the source and nature of revelation, or what text one calls sacred. We are connected by our humanity, concern for each other and a desire to establish peace and equality in our world. Our various religious traditions can support these worthy endeavors. As we claim our rightful place in the human family, we must do so with an attitude of humility and respect.

Historically, under the guise of faith, some religious bodies have claimed ownership of understanding the nature of God, and used violence to enforce their positions. Ecumenical and inter-religious work provides an alternative, a *space* where people from varied backgrounds are invited to share themselves and contribute to a better world. As improved global communication brings humanity closer together, fighting over religious differences increasingly makes no sense. Most religious traditions focus on what brings us together as humanity.

We are encouraged to move beyond fear of mutual dialogue with people from non-Christian traditions in ecumenical and inter-religious work. We must hold as sacred the equality among people of goodwill and sincere faith, respecting their religious traditions. We can then become partners in addressing the evils that continue to plague the human family. This is what it means to “build bridges that liberate and unite.”²

¹ Ian Douglas et al, *Waging Reconciliation: God Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis* (NY: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2002), 87

² MCC’s Statement of Purpose

Ecumenical and inter-religious work is not centered on working toward the spiritual conversion of the *Other*, but rather on mutual dialogue and respect to further the work of justice, compassion and reconciliation.³ Heeding the call to hospitality in scriptures, we welcome the stranger and the other. To welcome all means there is no *other*, only a new *we*. Ecumenical / Inter-religious work breaks down barriers creating an atmosphere where all are present at the table.

MCC functions under a wide umbrella of Christian understanding that requires tolerance for difference and continuous learning and dialogue. More than ever, we are aware that Christians have multiple understandings of Jesus and live and work in a religiously pluralistic world. If we expect to be honored as Christians, then the Buddhist, the Hindu, the Jew, the Muslim, the Agnostic, the Humanist, and all others must also be heard, respected, and honored.

MCC's ecumenical / inter-religious work should not be (covert) stealth proselytizing or an attempt to convert.⁴ Rather, it must be a work that involves mutual respect so that we can hear what the other is saying even as we wish to be heard. The vitality created by this mutual respect serves to enhance our experience of the sacred. In such an environment honest relationships are built, and friends working together can make a significant difference in the world. We must be prepared for radical openness and inclusivity. If we believe the answer to the question, "Would Jesus Discriminate?" is "No!", we must live that out and be faithful participants in the global Body of Christ and the whole human family.

Biblical Passages About Ecumenical / Inter-religious Issues

1 Corinthians 12
Acts 10
Acts 15
Acts 2
Galatians 3:28
John 10:16
John 4:7-24

Luke 10:29-37
Luke 17:17-18
Luke 7:9
Matthew 15:21-28
Matthew 8:5-11
Micah 6:8
Psalm 133:1

³ Work by Bishop Steven Charleston, Episcopal Divinity School

⁴ The Reverend Canon Durrell Watkins, Sunshine Cathedral

Holy Conversations: Seeking, Sharing and Stretching

Points of Reflection (Small Group Reflection): Do you think God calls us to be in relationship with people of other faith traditions? What examples can you think of when Jesus interacted with people of different traditions?

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): How should we interact with other denominations and faith groups that condemn us for our celebration of queer sexuality? What unique gifts does MCC have to offer other denominations or faith traditions? What does MCC as a denomination/movement have to learn from other faith groups?

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): How can we hear, respect and honor “the Buddhist, the Hindu, the Jew, the Muslim, the Agnostic, the Humanist and all others?” In what ways does doing so diminish or enhance our own faith convictions and practices?

Point of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): Is it ever valid to “share the gospel” and attempt to bring people from other faiths to Christianity? If so, how can it be done? How do we balance the evangelistic call with the call to mutually respect and honor people of other faiths?

Pulling it All Together: Praying Across Traditions for Peace

The following prayer authored by Christian, Jewish and Muslim clergy is a resource of the World Council of Churches. It is suggested that the group gather, light a candle, and join together in praying this prayer in unison as a way of closing this Holy Conversation for the current time.

**Eternal God, Creator of the universe, there is no God but You.
Great and wonderful are Your works, wondrous are your ways.
Thank You for the many splendoured variety of Your creation.
Thank You for the many ways we affirm Your presence and purpose,
and the freedom to do so.
Forgive our violation of Your creation.
Forgive our violence toward each other.
We stand in awe and gratitude for Your persistent love for each
and all of Your children: Christian, Jew, Muslim,
as well as those with other faiths.
Grant to all and our leaders attributes of the strong;
mutual respect in words and deed,
restraint in the exercise of power,
and the will for peace with justice, for all.
Eternal God, Creator of the universe, there is no God but You. Amen.**

(Excerpted from Current Dialogue 24/93, p.36)

Additional Resources

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