

Supplemental Report The Presiding Bishop's Advisory Committee on Interfaith Relations

Preface

At its January 1994 meeting, the Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations received a request from the chair of the Presiding Bishop's Advisory Committee on Interfaith Relations. By mutual consent of both chairs, the report of the Advisory Committee is printed as a supplement to the report of the Standing Commission so that the Convention may consider Resolution #A033.

CONTENTS

- A. Membership
- B. The Work of the Committee
- C. Goals and Objectives for the Next Triennium
- D. Proposed Budget for the Next Triennium
- E. Proposed Resolutions

A. MEMBERSHIP

The Rt. Rev. David B. Reed, *Chair*
The Rt. Rev. R. Stewart Wood, Jr.
The Rev. Malcolm David Eckel
The Rev. Wadi Haddad, Hartford
The Rev. Elizabeth Zarelli-Turner
Ms. Colleen Mitchell
Mrs. Jane Wolf

Staff

The Rev. Christopher M. Agnew, Episcopal Church Center

Adjunct

Ms. Midge Roof, Episcopal Diocesan Ecumenical Officers

The formation of this committee during the 1992-1994 triennium was a consequence of four circumstances:

- (a). The growth of Islamic and other faith communities across the country is challenging the Episcopal Church to look beyond its normal ecumenical partners to a larger religious context.

- (b). The Presiding Bishop's Committee on Christian-Jewish Relations, beginning under Presiding Bishop John E. Hines, provided a basis for interfaith work but the changing North American context requires a broader scope.
- (c). The already heavy agenda of the Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations was too full to include interfaith work.
- (d). The Lambeth Conference encouraged "the Churches of the Anglican Communion to engage in dialogue with Jews and Muslims on the basis of understanding, affirmation and sharing."

B. THE WORK OF THE COMMITTEE

At its initial meeting in 1992, the Committee heard what the Presiding Bishop expects of it and learned of the ecumenical resources already existing to assist in this task. Linkages between the Committee and National Council of Churches and World Council of Churches were identified, as well as offices of other churches with interfaith responsibilities.

At the second meeting in January 1993, it was decided to focus on Jewish and Muslim relations during this triennium, with the possibility of adding Hindu and Buddhist relations in the future. Relational committees for Jewish and Muslim relations were named, including members of the Committee and additional persons on each.

In June 1993 the Committee approved the *Principles for Interfaith Dialogue*, which constitute the major part of this report. These are to help local communities initiate contacts with groups of other religions. Plans were made for the initial meetings of the two relational committees. It was decided to recommend the addition of another member, knowledgeable on Christian-Buddhist relations, to the Committee in the next triennium.

In January 1994 the Committee prepared this report to General Convention and planned a June meeting of the Relational Committees. It also initiated a process for assembling a basic bibliographical resource and a list of consultants on interreligious matters to be available in local communities.

PRINCIPLES FOR INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Episcopal Churches across the country are finding themselves increasingly aware of religious diversity in their own communities. We now live side by side with organized groups representing many of the great religious traditions of the world who share our concern for peace, justice and the common good.

With them we have the need to affirm spiritual values in a materialistic society and we also have the duty to remove any supposed religious justification for discrimination based on prejudice and ignorance.⁶⁹

⁶⁹We are grateful for permission to quote extensively in this document from *Guidelines for Interfaith Dialogue* produced by the Ecumenical Office of the Anglican Church of Canada, Toronto, 1986.

THE BLUE BOOK

DIALOGUE AS MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

- (1). **Meet the people themselves and get to know their religious traditions.** In many communities there are places of worship of the world's great religions. Several of these religious communities have national and regional organizations, frequently with people who have responsibility for interfaith dialogue and cooperation. There are also bodies that have as their purpose the fostering of better relationships among people of different faith communities.
- (2). **Whenever possible, engage in dialogue ecumenically.** Generally dialogue is best done with representatives of several Christian traditions at the same time. When we seek to explain ourselves to others, the differences between Christians are seen in a different light. An ecumenical approach to dialogue allows us to focus on those things which are essential in Christian teaching. While individual approaches need not be discouraged, a ministerial association or local council of churches might well be the more appropriate body to initiate dialogue.
- (3). **Allow others to speak for themselves.** Too often stereotypes keep us apart from people of other faiths. One obvious way of avoiding this is to let the dialogue partners describe themselves, as we would expect to speak for ourselves. This is not to say that our listening must always be uncritical. Our questions will only be accepted as we show that we want to learn and understand. One way of ensuring this kind of balance is to plan the dialogue together.
- (4). **Be aware of other loyalties.** We always bring into relationships a cluster of theological commitments and cultural loyalties. An awareness of this can help us avoid unrealistic expectations and help focus on central, rather than peripheral, issues. Acknowledgment of our own and others' loyalties can pave the way to deeper sharing.
- (5). **Prepare carefully for dialogue.** Dialogue ventures will be most successful with mutual planning and preparation.
 - a. It is important to approach others with the same kind of respect we would wish to be accorded. They cherish their beliefs and practices as deeply as we do our own, however different they may appear to us.
 - b. Every religious tradition, including our own, has unworthy adherents and unpleasant episodes in its history. True dialogue is not possible if only the best of one tradition is contrasted with the worst of others.
 - c. Issues of separation must be addressed as well as those of unity. Dialogue is not furthered when painful or difficult issues are glossed over. However, this should not be done with an attitude of superiority, or solely in an effort to air grievances. Dialogue should include an awareness of our own contribution to division and misunderstanding.

- d. By engaging in dialogue we Christians are not being asked to compromise our faith that God was revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. Our understanding of our own faith should be clear, so that the Christian perspective can be fairly presented to dialogue partners. Dialogue, however, should not be a subtle form of proselytizing, but an occasion for mutual sharing.

DIALOGUE AS COMMON ACTION

- (1). **Deal with issues related to living together as part of the human community.** This may well be the basis upon which dialogue begins. Our planet is too small and the problems confronting it too great for people of faith to attempt to work in isolation or from a position of conflict. Some matters on which an interfaith approach is possible include:

- a. Joint approaches to government on matters of economic, social, political, and cultural concern.
- b. Urging respect for human rights and religious freedom, not only for ourselves, but for others also.
- c. Coordinated efforts to deal with global issues such as world peace, the environment, or hunger.

- (2). **Foster efforts at education and communication among people of different faiths.** Education is both a consequence of and a way into interfaith dialogue. The effort to learn and understand will bring us into closer contact, while that contact will lead us to want to share our learning with others.

- a. In our pluralistic society it is important that people have an appreciation of the rich religious heritage of those who make up our community. People are pleased, for example, when their major religious festivals are acknowledged. These can provide the occasion for learning more about the faith concerned.
- b. Sustained contact with people of other faiths can begin to break down false images with which many of us have grown up, and to which we are still often exposed. Efforts should be made to challenge such stereotypes wherever they may be encountered, including those in our own educational and liturgical material.
- c. Among the places where such educational efforts can be focused are schools, universities, seminaries, church schools, and other institutions for adult education.
- d. Inaccurate media coverage of minority religious groups can be detrimental. Positive relations should be developed with the media so that their potential

for increasing public awareness about people of different faiths can be fully utilized.

- e. Efforts should also be made to educate travelers about the religious traditions and sensibilities of the people in the countries they visit, and to encourage them to share their experiences on their return.
- f. Representatives of other faith groups should be consulted and, where possible, involved in the preparation of educational materials that portray their history, beliefs, and practices.

(3). **Share spiritual insights and approaches to worship that respect the integrity of each tradition.** There is much that religious people can share in an atmosphere of learning and openness. However, people of other traditions are no more anxious than we are to engage in acts of worship which blur very real differences of theology or world view. Neither do they relish the appropriation by others of their religious symbols or sacred texts.

- a. Attendance at another community's acts of worship should always be accompanied by careful preparation and an opportunity to ask questions afterward, preferably answered by members of that tradition.
- b. Christians who are present during the worship of another faith community may be unable to participate fully in everything that is said and done. Nonetheless they should attend with the attitude that the event is an important part of the spiritual life of the participants.
- c. Prayer for people of other religious traditions is valuable, especially during times of particular need or when it is for better relationships with them. Some Christians feel that they should pray for the conversion of others to Christ, while others would argue that this should not be done. In any event, it is God who converts people. Christians themselves are far from fully understanding or obeying God's will. It is inappropriate to single out any one religious group as being in particular need of conversion in a way that fosters prejudice.

C. GOALS AND OBJECTIVES FOR THE NEXT TRIENNium

- Formation and education on basics in congregations and dioceses with the assistance of the EDEO network and through local models of interfaith work, publications, advisory consultants and curricula in seminaries.
- Linking with interfaith work of ecumenical bodies and other Christian communions.

INTERFAITH RELATIONS

- Developing the three relational committees with Jews, Muslims and Buddhists to maintain and enter into contacts with leaders.
- Supporting the Presiding Bishop's ministry of relations with other religious communities.

D. PROPOSED BUDGET FOR THE NEXT TRIENNIUM

Even before the Committee was formed a 35% budget cut limited the scope of work that might be contemplated for the 1992-1994 triennium. Ground work has been laid, however, through the initial meetings and it is hoped that there will be sufficient budget in the next triennium not only to make the two relational committees functional but also to begin addressing a third world faith community expanding in our country. To this end, the Committee is requesting the sum of \$10,500 in 1995, \$13,300 in 1996, and \$14,000 in 1997 from the General Church Program Budget.

E. PROPOSED RESOLUTION

Resolution #A033

Principles for Interfaith Dialogue

- ¹ *Resolved*, the House of _____ concurring, **That *Principles for Interfaith Dialogue* be**
- ² **approved and that the congregations and dioceses of this church be encouraged to**
- ³ **develop relations with peoples of other faiths following these guidelines.**