

Is Christian Unity a Catalyst for Human Community?: Interfaith Relations and the Ecumenical Movement

By Jay T. Rock

How is a vision for ecumenical relations for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to deal with the reality of life in a religiously plural world, and with the questions and insights that emerge from the church's engagement in interfaith relationships?

This is not a new question for the church. As reported in Acts, one of the first ecumenical councils was largely concerned with how the new church was to relate to the Jewish community out of which it had its being. The issue was an ecumenical one because already different churches were approaching the questions differently, and there was a desire to have some unanimity of approach, and unity in theological understanding. How was the young church to live with cultural differences between predominantly Jewish and predominantly "Gentile"/Hellenistic societies, and with differing understandings of faith and practice that were even then taking shape?

Ecumenical efforts and questions have been intimately intertwined with the work and issues of interfaith relations since the earliest days of our community. Although this situation in which we live may seem to be new, it has many parallels throughout biblical history.... The life, death and resurrection of Jesus took place in one of the most religiously complex environments of the ancient world.

The church of Christ has always lived among people 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 or of none? ... How can we best live a life of faithful witness and service in a multi-faith context?
(from "Interfaith Relations and the Churches, policy statement of the National Council of the Churches of Christ, 1999)

It would be helpful, in fact, to look at the many different approaches to ecumenical and interfaith relations and issues at many historical points in the life of churches and in many different places. That historical view would teach us much about the evolving relation of the two, but time will not allow that in this consultation. We must envision how one church--our own Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—will live with other churches in ways that might lead to tangible expressions of greater unity, and likewise to effective engagement in the ministries of reconciliation to which all Christians are called.

This is a lot to ask. And so, it was intentionally decided that this consultation would not focus on interfaith issues, but would nevertheless be conducted in the awareness that we do share the world with many other communities of faith, and have to do our thinking and planning in that context. For, if it is to have any significance at all, will not what we do to realize an ecumenical vision have some affect on our non-Christian neighbors as well?

It is important to note that this decision was not taken out of fear of interfaith relations, nor out of a sense that such relationships ought not to be on the agenda of the church. Some of us worry that, out of a fascination with interfaith relations, engagement in the ecumenical movement, and specifically in the search for Christian unity, might be tossed aside. Others see, in relations with people of other faiths, a potential for diluting Christian mission, for blunting the clear offer of the gospel's gift of life to the world. But we have, as a church, made clear the appropriateness and urgency of interfaith relations as a part of our discipleship, and of witness as a dimension of those relationships. The decision regarding the focus of this consultative process was made to allow adequate attention to the ecumenical issues, and to mapping an ecumenical path for this time. But that decision was made with a two-fold hope: first, that the questions and insights arising out of our inter-faith work might leaven your discussion; and second, that your reflections and recommendations be made with awareness of their implications for our interfaith work.

Let me begin, then, with a description of the way in which the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) engages in interfaith relations, and some account of the ideas and convictions that ground that work. I hope that this will be sufficient for understanding, and provide a background against which to lift up a number of important questions to consider as we reflect on the ecumenical stance of the church.

The Grounding of Our Interfaith Relations Work

The basis for our Presbyterian engagement with neighbors of other religions has been articulated in the Book of Order, in a number of General Assembly actions, including the "Presbyterian Principles for Interfaith Dialogue" (Principles) adopted in 1999, and in ecumenical documents that Presbyterians helped to shape, such as the Policy Statement on "Interfaith Relations and the Churches" of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (NCCC Policy).

1. Most of these documents share a common beginning point, namely the observation that we Christians are living, in the U.S. and globally, in societies that are marked by diversity of many kinds, including religious plurality. "In this environment, persons and communities affect one another even when they are unaware of doing so" (Principles, #1). A basic affirmation is that is better to be aware and intentional about the inter-religious aspects of our life. "We need to be equipped to meet others in dialogue and witness," including in the following ways:

- We need to explore theologically the significance of Jesus Christ in our present-day pluralistic world.
- We need to learn to articulate our faith (personal and corporate) in ways that can be understood by others, that recognize both our own and others' experiences.
- We need to learn about and understand the religions to which others adhere. Because our witness is relational and dialogical, we ask others to teach us who they are.
- We need to discern idolatries of race, nation, or philosophy that may become demonic forces in human life. Idolatrous ideologies may be present in any religious system, including our own.

- We need to acknowledge that our fundamental relationship is to persons, not to religions and systems.
- We need to listen for others' concerns so that we may minister to human needs in our common public life, interreligious families, and shared religious celebrations.
- We need to recognize that others' religions have brought them comfort, identity, and meaning. We are not called to approach others in judgment but in awareness of God's limitless love and grace. (Principles, #6).

This is a remarkable list, which raises any number of questions worth our attention. But perhaps most remarkable is that all these are things we must do simply to equip ourselves to live in the sort of world in which we live.

2. But there also are reasons from within our Christian faith that compel us to engage with neighbors of other faiths. "We are called to relate to people of other faiths in full humility, openness, honesty and respect. We respect both others' God-given humanity and the seriousness of their spiritual quests and commitments. It is our own Christian faith in the Triune God and our intention to live like Jesus, not our cultural standards, that require this of us" (Principles #5).

Building relations with neighbors of diverse faiths is an essential part of our life as Christ's disciples. This is so because of the nature of God, Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit, and because of how Jesus has asked us to live.

- God is sovereign, boundless, never completely known by human beings, and inexhaustibly gracious to all. God is always there before we are. Even when we fail to see or to affirm God's presence in the life of others, or in the world, God is present. "God's Spirit works in surprising places throughout creation and is found even among people who are unaware of the Spirit's presence" (Principles #2). God has also created all people in God's own image. We are called to pay attention to God's work not only in our own lives, but also in the lives of all men and women.
- God has created all humanity to live in beloved community with one another. "Central to the ongoing story of the Bible is God's long-term, patient, merciful purpose of recreating a human community in which the love of God and neighbor becomes a fact of history" (from "Building Community Among Strangers," adopted by the 211th General Assembly (1999). Since we are "made in God's image, we are created to live a life of relationship, and called to claim the unity in our human diversity" (NCCC Policy). As has been said about Christian unity, community among all God's family is a gift already given to us by God. It is up to us to claim this gift, and make it real in our lives.
- This is clear in the living example which Jesus himself gave us in his ministry, and asks us to follow. The church is a sign of God's loving community, and, as disciples, we are to be the means to build such a kingdom. Our calling includes faithful proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ, and faithful cooperation

with others, irrespective of their faith commitments, to build a world of justice and peace.

- It is out of such an understanding of God's grace-filled purpose that the Book of Order states: "The Church is called to a new openness to the presence of God in the Church and in the world, to more fundamental obedience, and to a more joyous celebration in worship and in work" (G-3:0401). The Book of Order also notes that "the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will seek new opportunities for conversation and understanding with non-Christian religious bodies in order that interests and concerns may be shared and common action undertaken where compatible means and aims exist" (G-15.0104). Our life and work involves engagement with others in seeking justice, peace, and human community.
- Jesus is Lord and Savior; Jesus is, in his person, the full revelation of God's love, grace, truth and power. Jesus does not point to the truth, but embodies and lives out and opens the truth as a way of life in relation with God. This reminds us, first of all, that we are each called, as disciples, to embody that same spirit of reconciliation and self-giving love in our own lives. It also should help us to understand that when we are in relation with neighbors of other faiths, in and through us Jesus is present. When we interact with others personally, Jesus is present offering reconciliation and friendship. Through his body, the church, in its simple presence as well as its invitation, Jesus extends his ministry of love. (See Principle #4.)
- "With other Christians we are called to make joyous witness to persons of other faiths in a spirit of respect, openness, and honesty.... As our Christian affirmation meets the faith of others, we are not called to respond in judgment but in awareness of the limitless, saving presence, power, and grace of God. The spirit that is to inform our witness among people of other faiths "[p]resupposes our presence with them, sensitivity to their deepest faith commitments and experiences, willingness to be their servants for Christ's sake, affirmation of what God has done and is doing among them and [God's] love for them" ("Message" of the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism in San Antonio, World Council of Churches).
(From the resolution, "Turn to the Living God: A Call to Evangelism in Jesus Christ's Way," adopted by the 203rd General Assembly (1991)).
- The Spirit sustains each of us, and the entire creation. Through our baptisms, we open ourselves to the power of the Holy Spirit, and ask to be molded, shaped, and used. We ask to be transformed through the power of the Spirit, and as part of this, we join a community that is radically open to everything that is beyond the walls of separation and purity that we are so fond of erecting. The Spirit empowers us to live in respect, openness, honesty and humility with those of other faiths.

In addition to these principles, more could be said about particular relationships, and the theological challenges and opportunities they pose for our thinking. See for example the

affirmation that the church's identity is related to the continuing identity of the Jewish people, and that God has elected both to be a light unto the nations, in "A Theological Understanding of the Relationship Between Christians and Jews" (1987). Or note, in "Striving Together in Dialogue" (2002,) the idea that no compromise on basic religious beliefs is required in dialogue, and the challenge that, while both mission and da'wa are essential religious duties for Christians and Muslims, both need to uphold the spiritual and material well-being of all, and thus to clearly distinguish between witness and proselytism. But, in summary, it may be best simply to repeat: "We are called to relate to people of other faiths in full humility, openness, honesty and respect. We respect both others' God-given humanity and the seriousness of their spiritual quests and commitments. It is our own Christian faith in the Triune God and our intention to live like Jesus, not our cultural standards, that require this of us" (Principles #5).

3. What does all of this look like "when it is at home"? It is important to note that the equipping and theological affirmations we have been discussing suggest and lead to certain practices and attitudes. That is, being faithful along these lines has some recognizable traits, or marks, that are informed theologically, and embodied in praxis. One of the more helpful parts of the NCCC Policy Statement lifts up seven such "marks of faithfulness":

1. We will meet with others with depth and presence, following the model of Jesus' relationships. This includes the willingness to be present with another, and to stay present even when uncomfortable issues come up. It involves tenacity, refusing to give up on bridge-building.
2. We will approach others with an open heart and an open mind, taking the risk that we might be hurt, misunderstood, learn new things, or be changed.
3. We will respect each person's and each community's identity. We will meet others as they are, open to the particular ways they describe themselves, and try to be aware of the specificity of their ideas, practices, struggles and joys.
4. We will maintain the integrity of all concerned, allowing others to determine and define themselves, and also remaining true to our own commitments as Christians.
5. We will practice, and expect, accountability and respect that is mutual. This means approaching each other in humility, willing to invite partnership or respond to invitations of partnership for building just and loving communities, and also willing to challenge each other about unjust behavior, or harmful ideas.
6. We will nurture opportunities for joint service or for responding together to human and community needs.
7. We will create an environment and opportunities to think together about who we are as separate people of distinct nationalities, ethnicities, faiths and cultures, and who we are when we come together. We will find ways to celebrate community

together

“We pray for God’s power to live in firm commitment without trampling upon the God-given freedom that Jesus respected and challenged in all persons. In our journey, we are helped by ecumenical partners around the world who, with us, are part of the church yet who live with different cultural values” (Principles #5).

Questions for an Ecumenical Stance

I hope that by this point you already have a number of questions to bring to a consideration of our ecumenical stance from the affirmations and practice of interfaith relations that I have described, in addition to those arising out of your own experience of the church’s engagement with a religiously plural world. The issues are many, and complex.

First, for example, why is it that we have insisted for many years that the church is best served by conducting its relationships with people of other faiths ecumenically? Beyond the fact that, in most cases, such relations are not something that we need to do separately, what value is served by an ecumenical approach? Well, yes it is more hospitable, less taxing, to ask people of other faiths to meet us together rather than separately; and it may also be more beneficial to come to our neighbors in our diversity, to meet them in theirs. But is there also a way in which entering into these relationships as the more unified Body of Christ is more compelling as a witness, or more significant theologically?

It is clear that the churches do not agree on how we should approach relations with people of other religious traditions; interfaith relations are one of the “church-dividing issues.” Therefore, approaches to interfaith relations need more attention, and must remain on the internal ecumenical agenda of the churches. But what, beyond the desire to work through our divisions, really drives the argument for ecumenical engagement in interfaith relations in the world?

Secondly, can we presume that all people stand in some relationship to God? Arguably, we have moved from a theology of hostility toward other religions, to a theology of neutrality, in which we confess that we do not know much about God’s presence in other religious traditions. We affirm that God has made all humanity in God’s own image, and take seriously both the religious searching of others, and their religious commitments. But ought we to move beyond this? Suppose, for example, that God were fully active in other religious traditions and communities; or suppose that the existence of other religions reflects God’s will. What would this mean for our mission, our evangelization, our work for justice and peace, our faith?

In addition, profound questions could and should be raised about the nature of God’s revelation: Can we affirm that some insights of other religions assist us in better understanding God’s revelation in Jesus Christ? Can we acknowledge the possibility of revelation in other religious traditions? (See “The Nature of Revelation in the Christian Tradition from a Reformed Perspective,” Section IX (1987).) Dare we say that we need

interfaith dialogue as a way of discerning, with others, God's presence in our world, and as one way of distinguishing, in all of our traditions, what is authentic from what is spurious or unduly conditioned by extraneous factors such as culture, time, etc.?

These are three of the questions that might be raised. However, I believe the most pressing set of questions from the interfaith relations realm for those thinking about the ecumenical vision and activity of the church has to do with the relationship of Christian unity and human community.

To get at this issue, I turn to S. Wesley Ariarajah, a practitioner and student of both interfaith relations and ecumenical life, who served for many years as the Director of the World Council of Churches' unit on Dialogue with People of Other Living Faiths and Ideologies. In his article, "Wider Ecumenism – Some Theological Perspectives," now in the process of publication, Dr. Ariarajah offers a sharp critique of the ecumenical movement and a particular vision for its future.

With appreciation for the many ecumenical successes, and the movement's progress on a number of fronts, he notes a spreading disquiet over the pace of Faith and Order, a lack of clear orientation regarding mission priorities, and the need for a "new rationale, a new methodology, and new partners for social engagement" in our ecumenical life and work. He says,

At the heart of the paradigm on which the ecumenical movement had operated is a sharp distinction between the Gospel and the Church on the one hand, and the world which God intends to redeem on the other. For all its sincere efforts, the missionary movement has not been able to convert the world to Christ. The Life and Work movement has not been able to adequately deal with the problems of the world, partly because it has been marginalized, but also because global issues are too complex for any one community to deal with. And the Faith and Order movement, after working for seventy years on issues that divide the church, has not been able to show the world the unity that Christ brings that transcends all human made divisions. Is this what the crisis of the ecumenical movement is all about? ... Do we need a theological re-orientation that would give us a vocation that is large, relevant, and meaningful for our day?

Perhaps what is needed, Ariarajah says, is a "wider ecumenism" that is focused on bringing humankind together in loving community.

We have, of course, heard and read a thousand times that the Greek word 'oikumene' means the 'whole inhabited earth'; we are aware that "the world is God's first love"—God created it, loves it ("God so loved the world ..."), and intends to bring it to perfection; we confess that God is in the world and that we are partners with God in God's mission in the world; we have spoken of the unity of the church as the 'sign' of the unity and renewal of whole humankind. And yet, the concept of 'wider ecumenism'

creates some disquiet among many in the Christian ecumenical movement....

At the beginning of a new millennium, ... we are faced with the opportunity to rethink the theological bases of our ecumenical commitment. Would we see ourselves as a separated community, or an inalienable part of the human community with our own particular insights in Christ on how God relates to the world, and what God requires of us all? Would we see mission simply as a message that we bring, or activities we do in the world, or mission as participation with God and all others in bringing healing and wholeness, justice and peace, and reconciliation and renewal in the world? Would the unity and reconciliation we strive for only be about the church and its internal divisions, or also about all the brokenness of the world around us? Would we continue to build only a movement that is internal to the life and mission of the churches, however turned toward the world it might be, or would we participate along with others in striving for a human community? [emphasis his]

Ariarajah notes that a case could be made for such an ecumenical vision solely on a sociological basis, and lists a number of factors that might push us in that direction:

- Christendom is no more, and Christian institutional hold of public life in the Western Hemisphere has steadily been on the decline....
- Massive population movements have made almost all the major cities and suburban areas of the world religiously pluralistic. This pluralism is no longer a passive plurality, but an active one in which each of the religious communities has begun ... to assert their right ...to participate fully in socio-political life on their own terms.
- There has been a return of religion into public life and discourse....
- Human interdependence in the areas of economic and social life has increased by a thousand fold because of the globalization of the economic and financial markets and dramatic advances in travel, communication, and pooling of intellectual resources.
- The immediate post-war emergencies and Cold War tensions that precipitated the need for churches to get together and serve the world have given way to extremely complex global economic, social and political problems that the churches are no longer able to address by themselves.
- Much of the work of service, advocacy, solidarity, and concerted action, that were the preserve of the churches and the ecumenical movement, has been taken over by tens of thousands of Non-Governmental Organizations that are often better equipped and funded.
- All the problems of the world—the wide-spread poverty, the ecological crisis, rise of a culture of violence, militarism, etc., etc.—and the effort to address them, call for collaboration of many partners across religious and other barriers. There are no longer any problems that face the human community that can be addressed effectively by Christians alone, or by any other religion acting on its own.
- There has been a massive ‘spiritual revolution’ as well, that has begun to radically change the religious consciousness of many....

Much more could be said [Ariarajah continues], but the implications of these are obvious. Christians today are only one of the forces that are at work in the task of bringing healing and wholeness to the world. At a certain point in history we recognized that the task was too enormous for any one confession or denomination to undertake; today we realize that it is too complex for any one religion or for religions alone to venture into.... We also recognize that Christian ecumenism does not have the resources to meet the global challenges.... Unity achieved within any one religion is not going to change the world situation. No one religion can hope to bring the whole world into its fold to be able to give it a united vision.... The question we face is whether 'wider ecumenism' is consistent with our faith.

Ariarajah then goes on to pull together a number of theological insights from our Christian tradition that would lead us to consider an ecumenical vision that has, at its center, a search "to heal the world from the inside."

1. Exclusive views that appear to reject all other ways of believing come up against our theology of God:

Was not God active in the world before our experience of God in Christ? Does our affirmation of the reality of the risen Christ require us to believe that God has abrogated God's ongoing relationship with the world? The church developed the doctrine of the Trinity precisely to guard against Christomonism, and to affirm God's presence and activity in the world at all times, in all places, and in manifold ways. If God's concern is to gather up the whole creation without everyone required to become part of the covenant community, should the ecumenical movement have lesser goals? If we believe God to be active in the world, can we refuse to cooperate with God or refuse to discern God's activity in the lives of people, despite the different ways in which they respond to God's presence with them?

2. In adhering to the idea of "salvation history"--God's salvific action operating only within the history of Israel, first, then in the life of the church-- and in rejecting any meaningful presence of God in the religious experience of others, did the church make God "the prisoner of God's own actions in Jesus Christ"? "The result," says Ariarajah, "was the division of the world into the 'saved' and the 'unsaved'. Christian missions became the only channel for God's salvific relation to the world."

Wider ecumenism takes the doctrine of the immanence of God, the belief in the incarnation, and the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit with the seriousness it deserves. It is based on the conviction that God's unconditional and generous love has embraced all of human life; that the Spirit of God is active in the world. The cross is both a specific participation of God in human history and the proof of God's continuous solidarity and identity with the sufferings

of the world. It is based on the confidence that the Reign of God has in fact broken into human life and that we, along with all others, should participate in setting up the signs of the Kingdom.

3. Is there not after all a problem with a theology and missiology that in some way argues that the Christian calling separates us from the larger community?

Jesus used images of salt, the leaven in the dough, the light on the candle stand, and the seed that is sown as images for those that are to become partners with him in healing the world.... The dimensions of Jesus' own teaching and ministry influence the call to a wider ecumenism. It is an attempt to define a place for the Christian community within the human community, not as 'outsiders' bringing a message or rendering a service, but as 'insiders' who are well aware of their specific identity, but see themselves as partners and co-workers with all others in seeking the reconciliation and renewal of the whole human community. It seeks to establish the meaning of Christian witness not as an isolated activity but as something that happens in our common life.... Touched by the grace of God in the life, death and resurrection of Christ... we are in the world because God is there bringing about its healing with and without us.

And so, Ariarajah says,

The Trinitarian faith of the church is intended to enable us to maintain this balance between the particularity of our God-experience in Christ and the reality of the presence of God in the world. And the conception of God as Holy Spirit was intended to preserve the freedom and mystery of the Godhead so that it would not be reduced to Christomonism. If the concept of the Trinity is not just a 'doctrine' but our understanding of who God is and how God relates to the world, then we cannot be 'outsiders' to the world theologically and spiritually. Incarnation is the reversal of alienation between God and the world. But is the ecumenical movement ready for a truly Trinitarian basis for the way it looks at and acts in the world?

There is of course a need for continued attention to bringing the churches together. The search for Christian unity requires attention. There is a place for what Ariarajah calls "inner Christian ecumenism"; it is a necessity. The question is, How will Christian ecumenism be understood in relation to the building of human community? Can it be envisioned, as he suggests, as a circle within the larger circle of a wider ecumenism, with God at the center of both?

How will Christian ecumenism be pursued in relation to the healing of the world that is God's intention for all? How will the reconciling efforts of our community be related to the efforts and commitments of those of many religions and convictions who share this planet with us?

Or, to put it differently, what can and should be the relationship between the Christian "household" and the household of God? Will persons we see as "other" have a place among us only if they become one of us? Can we learn to be guests in the house of others? Can we and those "others" learn to be guests together in the world house?

Are we nurturing the growth of the ecumenical tree so that it becomes a beautiful, organically unified, and self-sufficient tree? Or are we tending the ecumenical tree in ways that will enable it to produce leaves that will be for the healing of the nations? Do we need to transform our thinking and our practice in order to embrace what it might mean for us and the "others" to tend such a tree of healing together?

This paper was read at the Ecumenical Consultation called by the General Assembly Committee on Ecumenism, Louisville, Ky., September 27-29, 2007.