

Guidance for religion encounter

**A resource document for the Church of Norway
Adopted by the General Synod 2006**

Preface

The encounter with people of non-Christian religious traditions challenges the Church to theological reflection and practical involvement. Some times religion encounters may be challenging and demanding, but many have the experience that encounters with other religions have made their own Christian faith grow and develop. Christian faith offers confidence to meet people of other faiths without fear and uncertainty, and with a positive anticipation of learning something that may help us develop as human beings and as believers.

There are many dimensions to the Church's mission in the world, and the Church encounters people of other faiths in numerous ways: in diaconal work, in evangelisation, when meeting those who are uncertain of their own religious position and curious about the Christian faith, at common meeting places in society and in organised inter-religious work. This guidance underlines the importance of being open about our intentions in each specific encounter, and that different purposes should be fulfilled in different settings. While our cooperation with other Christian churches is based on our common faith in the triune God, religion encounter has another starting point. We recognise that we do not share the same belief, but we still want to meet in respect and are open to practical cooperation when this is possible. In the following we will focus on the encounter where one seeks to understand and to cooperate with people representing another clearly defined religious tradition (e.g. one of the other world religions).

Although we should be conscious that different purposes belong to different settings, we cannot divide the Church's work into entirely separate fields of work. Christians are called to be light and salt in the world and we will therefore in all we do, hope to witness of the God we believe in. Thus, the attitude with which we meet others is important. When we succeed in meeting others with attitudes presented in this guidance, we may also expect to be met in the same way by others.

This guidance is based on concrete experience in the encounter with people of other faiths, and offers advice on how congregations and individuals may relate to other religions represented in the local community.

This guidance is a resource document reflecting the Norwegian situation, where Christianity is the majority religion.

Faith as a starting point

For Christians openness and respect in the meeting with people of other faiths is based on their faith in the triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit as creator, redeemer and giver of life.

- Independent of faith every human being is created in God's image and called to communion with God as God's servant. God has revealed himself through creation. We may learn about God's grace in and by creation from all human beings in every place.
- "We cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time we cannot put any limit to God's saving power" (World Council of Churches mission conference 1989). In Christ we have seen the face of God. By his death and resurrection Christ has opened to us the way to God.
- "But the Spirit produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control" (Gal 5.22). As the Holy Spirit God is at work through the Church in word and sacrament. But the Spirit keeps confronting us in unexpected ways. The work of the Holy Spirit cannot be limited exclusively to the Church. When meeting what we recognise as the fruits of the Spirit among those who do not share our faith, we may discern some of the Spirit's work among them.

This faith is a good starting-point for the encounter with those who base their life on other traditions and who find their inspiration for religious and ethical reflections there.

Attitudes in the encounter with people of other faiths

Encounters between Christians and people of other faiths cannot be guided by precise rules. People are different just as situations are different. Jesus shows us which attitudes that should lead us in all our meetings with other human beings, also when they do not share our faith: openness, the will to see and listen, honesty, frankness and the absence of force and abuse of power.

These are attitudes and principles we want to aim at in religion encounters, inspired by our Christian tradition and practical experience:

- We seek reliable knowledge and refer to others in a way they may recognise
- We meet individuals and religious traditions at the same time
- We represent ourselves as well as the Church
- We speak clearly about our own faith and are open about our own intentions
- We leave it to the others to state what is important and less important in their religion
- We do not let the majority religion define what it is like to be a minority
- We are inspired and challenged in our own faith by the encounter with others
- We can challenge what we see as problematic in our own religion and in the faith of the others
- We want men and women of all ages to participate in religion encounter
- We cooperate ecumenically
- We expose ourselves to risks and do not hide our own vulnerability

We seek reliable knowledge and refer to others in a way they may recognise

Knowledge is a condition for understanding. It is a sign of respect that one seeks concrete and reliable knowledge of other peoples' faith. Congregations and individuals are challenged to distinguish between professionally founded information about other religions, and negative propaganda.

Religions are continually changing. Major changes may take place when a religious tradition settles in new places or goes from a majority to a minority position, or vice versa. When

meeting immigrants of other faiths it is important to listen to how their faith is interpreted in our country, and not presuppose that their faith will remain un-influenced by the moving across national borders.

When we present a description of another religion, those who belong to that religion must be able to recognise it. There is a distance between ideals and practice in all religious traditions. It is not fair to compare the ideals of one religion to the practise of another.

We should speak of others the way we want others to speak of us.

We meet individuals and religious traditions at the same time

Religion encounter always implies a meeting between individual human beings. Human beings carry with them their faith and also their culture, their language, their sexual identity and their personal history. A religious faith does not exist independently of its believers. Thus, there is a wide diversity within any religious tradition.

We represent ourselves as well as the Church

Individual human beings understand themselves and are being seen as representatives of the groups forming their identity. Thus, Christians in a certain sense always represent the Church when meeting others. Some times this is explicit because we hold formal positions, other times it is not explicit. This is unavoidable even though one might not want it to be so. The impression Christians leave with others, influences their understanding of the Church and thus also of Christ.

We speak clearly about our own faith and are open about our own intentions

When meeting people of other faiths it is important to be clear about one's own basis and one's own faith. This may create confidence for both parties.

Christians may have various motives when meeting people of other faiths: to seek fellowship, to work for a common goal, to increase one's own knowledge, to care or to evangelise. Basically there is no conflict between missionary work and religious dialogue. However, one has to be conscious and open about what one is doing in which setting. It is an aim to be open to oneself and to others about the motives for the actual meeting.

We leave it to the others to state what is important and less important in their religion

Religion has different cultural expressions, but the line between religious necessities and cultural expressions will vary from person to person. All should be open to talk about what is central to one's own belief, but no one can be forced to accept an understanding of what is the "real core" of one's own religion.

We do not let the majority religion define what it is like to be a minority

Any encounter between human beings implies a power relation. This power relation may be understood differently by those involved. Some Christians in Norway may see themselves as a minority in relation to values and attitudes that are common in society. Still, those who belong to other religious traditions in Norway will normally have a stronger feeling of being a minority. As majority religion Christianity has seen many privileges in Norway and has thus held a superior position. Language and the forms of meeting, dialogue and organisation

influence power relations between human beings. It is not for the majority or those who are at home culturally to decide whether the minority feel that they are accepted.

We are inspired and challenged in our own faith by the encounter with others

We can learn something about others and about ourselves in all encounters. As Christians we are enriched by learning more about how others are facing life's basic questions. Also, precise questions from others may help us become more conscious about the content of the Christian faith and what we hold to be important.

We can challenge what we see as problematic in our own religion and in the faith of the others

All major religious traditions have aggressive undercurrents and have been exploited to support the use of power and oppression. When openness and respect has been established there will be room to bring up such topics. There may sometimes be major conflicts in the understanding of human dignity between religious traditions. These will have to be taken seriously. International human rights have seen the support of representatives of all major religious traditions. This offers a good basis for a dialogue on human dignity across religious borders.

Before challenging other traditions one should be conscious about the abuse of power in one's own tradition, and find out what others see as problematic here.

We want men and women of all ages to participate in the religion encounter

For many people religion regulates the relationship between men and women. At the same time the sexual pattern is changing in many religions and cultures. Inspired by the ideal of gender equality it is a goal that women and men participate on an equal basis when people of different faiths meet. When meeting people of other faiths one should be aware of the limits for contact between women and men. It may sometimes be necessary to request explicitly that women participate in religion encounters.

Religious leaders have traditionally been middle-aged men. One should strive to have also young people of both sexes present when representatives of different religions meet.

We cooperate ecumenically

It is a goal that Christians from different churches cooperate in the encounter with other religions.

We expose ourselves to risks and do not hide our own vulnerability

Openness to others implies making oneself vulnerable. Vulnerability is necessary for all human fellowship, also for encounters across religious barriers. By being open to others one risks being rejected, rebutted or challenged in a way that may shake one's own faith. The life as a Christian sometimes implies to risk this for the sake of the gospel: "... whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8.35).

It may be useful to talk to people in a Christian fellowship about what one experiences as challenging to one's own faith in religious encounters.

Entering many of our churches one passes through a room where people in earlier times left their weapons before meeting fellow believers and God. Before we meet with people of other

faiths, we should mentally leave our weapons – aggressive arguments and prejudices – in such a room.

Some concrete challenges in religion encounter

The encounter with people of other faiths may take place in many different ways and with different purposes. Here are some pieces of advice and some reflections on topics that may arise in concrete situations:

Reconciliation between religions

When we facilitate meetings between people of different faiths, one aim is to increase understanding and thus reduce tensions between religions. This aim may sometimes be explicit. Religious conflicts may feed on genuine tensions as well as on hostile images based on misunderstandings. If we start from experience common to all human beings, misunderstandings may be solved, prejudices exposed and genuine disagreement revealed. This forms a basis for reconciliation. Reconciliation does not imply making others more like ourselves, but to live in dialogue with existing differences.

Common action for the sake of fellowship

Dialogue on ethical issues may form a good basis for joint action in local as well as national matters. A number of basic values are common to religions. According to Lutheran theology ethics springs from God's revelation through creation, thus being open for general reflection. Some times one will find that apparently identical values are different when it comes to applying them in practise. It is important to be open about this.

People of different faiths often find that their beliefs motivate them to joint action. They may for example engage in social or diaconal work locally, strive to influence political decisions in certain matters or work to enhance peace and human rights in Norway and internationally. Such engagement is an aim in itself, but may also contribute to enhancing fellowship between people. Despite difference in faith one may agree on joint practical goals. Human rights are a good basis for joint action.

Families with several religions

When two persons of different faith decide to live together, challenges may arise both for the couple themselves and for their surroundings. These challenges may be linked to marital ceremonies, to child birth and death, to the upbringing of children and the teaching of religion, to the use of the family's resources and to sex roles.

Christians belonging to such a family's network should support the family and assist the couple in finding good solutions. It will be natural to support the Christian family member so that he or she may keep his or her faith without shying away from the obligations of cohabitation. Based on the Christian understanding of baptism it will be problematic to resign from teaching the Christian faith to children that the parents have chosen to baptise.

Particular challenges will arise should the couple decide to leave each other.

Prayer

When people of different faith meet, the issue of praying together may come up. It will be useful to differ between inter-religious prayer (where people of different faiths pray together), multi-religious prayer (where people of different faiths pray different prayers at the same

place and time) and to be present when other people pray. There will be differing attitudes to what is right to do, among Christians as well as among those belonging to other religious traditions. The setting will be decisive: There is a difference between private prayer and prayer in a publicly announced meeting, between prayer in a national crisis situation and prayer linked to rituals for couples of two religions.

To be present at the prayer of people of other faiths need not be problematic to a Christian, and in some situations multi-religious prayer may express fellowship as well as division in a cross-religious situation. At times even inter-religious prayer may feel right, for example in an acute crisis in an inter-religious family. But inter-religious prayer must not take place at the expense of the integrity of the Christian person. If that is the case one should not participate.

As for prayer it is of particular importance to respect the fact that people, Christians as well as others, draw the lines differently as to what they want to participate in. In any case it is important that occasions where prayer takes place are well prepared, so that all who are present may clarify in advance whether and how they can participate with full integrity.

Freedom of religion and conversion

Everyone is influenced by the meeting with others. The fact that one's own faith has developed and changed through the encounter with other religious traditions may be seen as a result of meeting something that is strange and new, as well as a fruit of the work of the Holy Spirit.

Where people of different faith meet there will always be a possibility that somebody will want to change his or her religious affiliation. Conversion is a human right, and any use of threat or punishment against a convert is unacceptable. It is also unacceptable to apply pressure or to induce someone to convert.

To change religious tradition may be a difficult and painful process, both for the convert and for family and friends, and will have consequences for a number of social relations.

The Church must respect conversions both away from and to Christianity. The Church joyfully receives all who seek the Christian faith, with respect and the offer to teach them about our faith. Before accepting adults to baptism, those who represent the Church must be certain that the wish to convert has been considered thoroughly over a certain time, and that it is not motivated by irrelevant reasons. Both recent converts and their families may need extra follow-up. In some cases recent converts may, due to their particular experiences, obstruct open and confident relations between people of different faiths. But we also see that recent converts may be good in building bridges between religions.

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