

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

**Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations
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This document explains the guiding principles which the Council on Ecumenical and International Relations intends to follow in its work with interreligious issues on behalf of the Church of Norway. It is intended to explain in a condensed and comprehensive form the basis, definition and purpose of interreligious dialogue as the Council conceives it.

The document is based on the General Synod's resolution 12/06 *Utfordringer i religionsmøtet*, the study guide *When believers meet* (2007, English version 2008), the statement from the Lutheran World Federation consultation in Breklum 2006, *Beyond Toleration*, and the statement from the Porvoo consultation in Oslo 2003, *Guidelines for interfaith encounter in the churches of the Porvoo Communion*

1. THE BASIS. WHY DIALOGUE?

There are both theological and general/political reasons for the Church of Norway to take part in interreligious dialogue.

1.1. The theological reasons

When we make a *theological* analysis of our pluralistic society, we find that the Christian faith provides crucial resources for living together with and meeting adherents of other religions.

God the Holy Trinity

The Trinitarian concept of God involves both pluralism and dialogue. Faith in God the Holy Trinity can therefore provide dynamic and relational models for how dissimilar human beings can live together as one humanity.

Belief in the Holy Trinity implies that principles such as openness, friendship and egalitarianism should govern our relationships to other people, and it gives us the confidence to take people of other faiths seriously.

God the Creator

The Bible and the Lutheran Church teach that every human being was created and is created every day in the image of God. This commits us to treating all human beings as our brothers and sisters and respecting the deep longing that they may have for their Creator. The diversity within the concept of God requires the church to search for traces

of the Holy Trinity in all human beings, also those of other faiths, and to be ready to listen to their experiences of life and of the Divine.

Christ the Liberator

The gospel stories encourage us to cross boundaries in our commitment to justice and love of our neighbour. Jesus liberates and empowers people for purposeful and committed interaction with people of other faiths. In spite of the risks involved, Jesus put the individual first, irrespective of social, political or religious ties.

We know of no other way to salvation than Jesus Christ, but nor can we place restrictions on God's saving acts.

The life-giving Spirit

The Holy Spirit strengthens us and helps us to live out our Christianity in a way that frees us from fear and makes us open for what the future can bring. We pray that the Spirit of God may lead us from mistakes to reconciliation and peace with other people. The fruits of the Spirit are patience, friendliness and goodness. We live in dialogue, hoping that we will penetrate more deeply into the secrets of the kingdom of God.

The task of the church

Jesus tells the disciples, "Blessed are the peacemakers". To make peace and create good relationships is part of the task of the church. Through dialogue that contributes to peace and reconciliation, the church witnesses to its faith.

1.2. General and Political Reasons

We want interreligious dialogue because we believe that this will enrich our society and make an important contribution to peace and reconciliation locally and globally.

We want interreligious dialogue because we believe that this will contribute to developing a society that is open and tolerant, and where human beings are shown respect whatever their religious affiliation.

We want interreligious dialogue because we believe that this will contribute to social and political integration in a pluralistic society. Human rights preclude that anyone is excluded from the public arena because of their cultural or religious affiliation.

We want interreligious dialogue because we acknowledge that Norway is a multireligious nation. Religious and cultural diversity can be of benefit to society if there is a willingness to take part in dialogue. We regard the sociological and institutional significance of religions for society as a resource for integration, community awareness and democracy.

2. THE DEFINITION. WHAT KIND OF DIALOGUE?

2.1. An attempt at a definition

Dialogue is an encounter in mutual trust between equal partners without ulterior motives. In dialogue we do not give up what we hold to be true, but we make an effort to understand the other part on the basis of her own description of reality. Dialogue develops trust which in its turn makes it possible to listen to criticism. We enter into dialogue with a desire to take part in the mutual transformation that the encounter can bring about. Common action on the basis of shared experiences is a crucial aspect of dialogue.

2.2. Basic values

The church's interreligious dialogue should be characterised by critical and open conversations based on a constructive trust that paves the way for understanding.

In order to make this possible, we pledge ourselves to treat all participants in a dialogue with respect, to allow all parties to have equal influence in determining what topics are to be raised and the manner in which they are to be raised, and to aspire to equality among all participants.

2.3. Dialogue and change

Dialogue does not mean finding methods of changing the other participants. Interreligious dialogue is primarily an end in itself and not a means of achieving something else. Even so, dialogue can have a specific end in view, but this must be rooted in the openness, respect and equality that is present in the dialogue itself. The participants in a dialogue can agree on an aim for the dialogue, provided no-one is required to compromise their integrity in order to achieve it. Dialogue can in this way be an instrument for change.

In our interreligious contacts we will seek to fulfil the obligation to show respect for the other part, as well as the obligation to further the cause of the weak. It may be necessary to clarify this tension in cases where different human rights are in conflict with one another.

2.4. Integrity and openness

Dialogue and confrontation are not mutually exclusive. In dialogue, we will speak honestly and openly about aspects of each other that we find difficult to accept, while at the same time listening to the others' point of view and respecting their right to think as they do.

Experience has taught us that dialogue requires clarity and integrity. A dialogue is not the place for compromise with one's own principles. But we also experience that dialogue

puts us at risk: the result of a dialogue is never given beforehand. The others have something to tell us, and vice versa.

Dialogue requires identity, just as identity requires dialogue. In order to encounter the other person, you must know who you are, and because that encounter makes it possible for you to answer new questions about yourself, it enables you to develop your own identity.

Interreligious dialogue contributes to intrareligious dialogue: interreligious dialogue stimulates each party to internal dialogue and reflection. And this reveals internal pluralism and heterogeneity.

2.5. Legitimizing

It takes an effort not to speak to anyone. The church's commitment to interreligious dialogue does *not* imply recognising the other part's views as legitimate, but recognising the other part as a partner in a conversation. But because dialogue can involve approval of those taking part, the church has an ethical responsibility when choosing partners for dialogue.

2.6. Dialogue and mission

Dialogue and mission are not mutually exclusive. Dialogue is an activity we take part in as a missionary church. In dialogue, we share our faith and our understanding of the nature of reality. But religious dialogue is not the place for preaching to convert.

The gospel exhorts us to get to know, have contact with and serve our neighbours. As a missionary church we believe that we are sent to our neighbours in their capacity as fellow human beings. Encounters between religions are an opportunity for all believers to share their faith honestly, to learn more about one another, to make clear where they agree and disagree and to discover similarities and dissimilarities.

3. THE PURPOSE. THE COUNCIL'S AIMS IN DIALOGUE

3.1. Theology

Through its contact with other religions, the church has gathered much valuable *practical* experience. It needs to make possible and encourage more *theological* reflection on the basis of its experience of dialogue.

3.2. Community life

Through interreligious dialogue we want to contribute to peace and reconciliation, both locally and internationally. Interreligious dialogue enriches local communities and motivates people for global dialogue.

Through interreligious dialogue we want to practise diaconal service and work together politically on questions of social and economic globalisation, justice, peace, the challenge of HIV/aids, environmental and climate issues, and refugees and migration.

Through interreligious dialogue we want to focus on relevant questions concerning human rights, religious liberty, discrimination, gender equality, minorities and unjust power structures.

Through interreligious dialogue we want to oppose discrimination and the stereotyping of religious minorities in Norway.

Through interreligious dialogue we want to contribute to strengthening the place of religion and life stances in the public sphere.

Through interreligious dialogue we want to contribute to political alertness in order to be able to deal with any acute problems that can arise in a vulnerable multireligious society.

We want to involve more young people in interreligious dialogue and other interreligious activities. Young people can contribute with unique experiences and resources in such contexts.

3.3. Integration

Not all immigrants are adherents of non-Christian religions, and not all who adhere to other religions are immigrants. Even so, integration is an important aspect of contact between religions.

Through our involvement in interreligious activities we hope to improve the political and social integration of immigrant communities in Norway. Religious dialogue provides immigrants with opportunities to participate in the public sphere.

The important distinction between integration and assimilation must also be emphasised. Both parties in a dialogue are integrated. Integration gives the community new values and impulses.

We must also point out the ambivalence in linking dialogue to integration. Many of the Church of Norway's dialogue partners are already integrated in Norwegian society. The integration aspect does not apply for example to Norwegian Jews or new age movements.

Through our interreligious activities we want to contribute to a more generous and inclusive understanding of national identity.

3.4. Gender

We will seek a balance between the genders among our own participants in the dialogues that we take part in, and we shall request that our partners in the dialogue seek the same balance if it is lacking.

That both men and women take part in a dialogue is a precondition, but not a guarantee, for the dialogue to include a gender dimension. We want a comprehensive and critical focus on gender-specific power structures, and the possible theological reasons for these, in all dialogues – both within the religious communities concerned and in structures for co-operation and communication in dialogue.

We commit ourselves to seeking gender justice in the interreligious activities we are involved in. The concept "gender justice" includes the ideals of legal, social and political equality, and in addition the subjective experience of respect, acceptance and the right to personal freedom of action regardless of one's gender. The pursuit of gender justice can generate tension, for example between juridical equality and personal religious integrity.

3.5. Power

An active analysis of power structures should be part of the basis of the Church of Norway's involvement in interreligious activities. This means that we must constantly examine our own conduct as a majority and be aware of the challenges this presents.

In national interreligious activities, the Council will often represent the majority, when it comes to life stance, politics, economics, culture, history and ethnicity. However, the balance of power can vary in different dialogues, both locally and nationally, and in relation to society as a whole.

As representatives for the majority, we have a special responsibility to contribute to breaking down stereotypes and providing an alternative to the popular conception of adherents of other religions.