

AMERICA'S INTERFAITH CONTEXT AND THE CHURCH'S CHALLENGE

The Session of Pine Street Presbyterian Church requests the Presbytery of Carlisle to overture the 223rd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church to:

- Affirm and embrace the religiously diverse nature of the United States of America and the call of the Christian faith to love all of our neighbors – including those of other faiths - as we love ourselves.
- Condemn all religiously inspired and motivated violence, prejudice, discrimination, and hate speech, in particular, those actions based upon anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim behaviors and language.
- Re-affirm our positions as stated in *The Interreligious Stance of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*, 221st General Assembly (2014); *Toward a Christian Understanding of Christian-Muslim Relations*, 219th General Assembly (2010); *A Theological Understanding of the Relationship Between Christians and Jews: A Paper Commended to the Church for Study and Reflection*, 199th General Assembly (1987); *A Study on Islam Adopted by the 199th General Assembly* (1987).
- Call upon all Presbyterians to live repentantly by seeking reconciliation with all religious groups who have been hurt by unjust actions and words of the Presbyterian Church (USA).
- Encourage presbyteries to create interfaith relations committees or task forces to promote interfaith relations, dialogue, and understanding.
- Encourage congregations to engage in interfaith conversations and partnerships in their communities.
- Direct the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly to encourage congregations to utilize the resources of the Office of Interfaith Relations to promote education about other religions and interfaith dialogue.

RATIONALE:

We Affirm and Embrace our Nation's Religious Diversity and Condemn Religiously Inspired and Motivated Violence and Hate Speech, in particular, those Actions based upon Anti-Semitism and Anti-Muslim Behavior and Language.

Our religious traditions and our nation's Constitution are congruent in affirming our society's religious diversity.

First, our nation's Constitution and Bill of Rights were meant to establish a society that guarantees equality and religious freedom for all. As a result, our society is richly diverse in religious expression. In order to be a united nation – *E Pluribus Unum* (out of many, one) – “the many” are to be embraced and honored as residents of this country. Religiously inspired and motivated violent actions, prejudice, and hate speech have no

place in American culture and life. Therefore, we condemn anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim behaviors and language.

In the United States, conflict and increasing rhetoric of hate and the politics of exclusion are evident throughout all levels of society. This rhetoric fuels criminal acts based on hateful bias. According to the most recent FBI statistics on acts of religious bias in the United States, in 2016 54% of all religiously-biased hate crime is described as anti-Jewish, while the second highest is 21% for anti-Muslim hate crime. No other religious group exceeded 4%.¹ Such behavior violates the deep core of the American spirit. It also contradicts Christ's will for the world and the church.

We Reaffirm Our Traditional Positions.

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ taught us that we are "to love one's neighbor as oneself." (Mark 12:31) He taught this without equivocation. As Presbyterians, we embrace Christ's teaching in its full implications of extending God's love to people of other faith traditions. "The Presbyterian Church (USA) long has advocated positive relationships with people of other religious traditions."² Question 52 *The Study Catechism: Full Version* asks: "How should I treat non-Christians and people of other religions?" The answer to the question repudiates any spirit of bigotry, hostility, or hatred directed against people of other faiths:

As much as I can, I should meet friendship with friendship, hostility with kindness, generosity with gratitude, persecution with forbearance, truth with agreement, and error with truth. I should express my faith with humility and devotion as the occasion requires, whether silently or openly, boldly or meekly, by word or by deed. I should avoid compromising the truth on the one hand and being narrow-minded on the other. In short, I should always welcome and accept these others in a way that honors and reflects the Lord's welcome and acceptance of me.³

To welcome and accept others and to denounce all forms of hatred is a historical position that we Presbyterians express with firm conviction in many of our documents and position papers. The hostility toward Jews and Muslims in our society, in particular, calls for the church to reaffirm these historical positions and to stand in solidarity with Muslims and Jews in the face of hateful words, actions, and behavior. Prescient for its time, the 199th General Assembly (1987) called "on the appropriate agencies and governing bodies of the church, and on individual Presbyterians, to identify, expose, and

¹ <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2016/tables-and-data-declarations/1tabledatadecpdf>

² The Interreligious Stance of the Presbyterian Church (USA), 221st General Assembly (2014), p.1.

³ *Book of Catechisms, Reference Edition*, Question 52, Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001, p.84.

counteract the bigotry and prejudice manifested in the United States against Arabs, Islam, Muslim peoples, and Muslim world ...”⁴

Our church has taken this relevant word of 1987 and expanded upon it. In 2010 the General Assembly called upon the church “through its agencies and governing bodies, to support Presbyterians in the practice of faithful witness with Muslims, by ... asking appropriate bodies of the church, and individual Presbyterians, to identify and speak out against bigotry, prejudice, discrimination, and violence against Islam and Muslim peoples of all cultures, especially in the United States.”⁵

We have also re-affirmed our commitment to oppose anti-Semitism. A resolution, adopted in 1990 by the 202nd General Assembly, stated: “We condemn anti-Semitism in the strongest possible terms. While affirming our close spiritual ties with the Jews, we wish to state unequivocally that authentic Christianity can have no complicity in anti-Semitic attitudes or actions of any kind.”⁶

This strong denunciation of anti-Semitism followed a profound document published by the 199th General Assembly in 1987, *A Theological Understanding of the Relationship between Christians and Jews: A Paper Commended to the Church for Study and Reflection*. In this document the church re-evaluated the historic and often harsh relationship that Christianity has had with the Jewish people. It stated that the church elected in Jesus Christ “has been grafted into the people of God established by the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”⁷ Therefore, Christians have not replaced Jews. In addition, the document states, “We affirm that both the church and the Jewish people are elected by God for witness to the world and that the relationship of the church to contemporary Jews is based on that gracious and irrevocable election of both.”⁸ Again in the same document, the church acknowledged in repentance, the long complicity that the church has had with the “teaching of contempt” for the Jews, views which it now repudiates.⁹

These statements of opposition to religiously motivated hate speech and actions require us, in our present context, to remember who we are as God’s people and to call upon the General Assembly to condemn all such hate speech and behavior.

We Call Upon Presbyterians to Live Repentantly and Seek Reconciliation.

While we recognize the call to be prophetic, we also know that we too are held accountable for our thoughts and actions. “The Presbyterian Church (USA) often has

⁴ A Study on Islam Adopted by the 199th General Assembly (1987), 31.327.1.f

⁵ Toward an Understanding of Christian-Muslim Relations, 219th General Assembly (2010), p.23.

⁶ Commissioner’ Resolution 90-13, 202nd General Assembly, 1990.

⁷ A Theological Understanding of the Relationship Between Christians and Jews, p. 6

⁸ Ibid, p 10.

⁹ Ibid, p 12

fostered a love for people of other religious traditions, but many times we have not. The first is cause for celebration, thanking God for the grace to be faithful. For the second, the church resolves to do better.”¹⁰ A prophetic people must be a repentant people. For the sake of being credible in our witness, it is important thus for us to note where we are estranged from people of other faiths and seek reconciliation where possible. The quest for social justice in our world is “one of the most compelling reasons for interreligious activity” and calls us “to explore interreligious opportunities for truth and reconciliation work, including formal acts of repentance for unjust actions of the church, past and present.”¹¹

We Form an Action Plan to Encourage Interfaith Dialogue and the Formation of Bodies and Organizations within Presbyteries and Congregations that Engage in Such Dialogue.

In the present context of division in our society, we urge the General Assembly to reaffirm the necessity of dialogue and engagement with people of other religions. We believe that a concerted effort by Presbyterians to foster interfaith understanding can help in reminding Americans of our national identity as a religiously pluralistic and diverse nation. Dialogue leads to understanding and the discovery of our common humanity. Let us be clear, however, that dialogue in no way compromises our own faith convictions. All people, including Christians, have a worldview, a perspective; and to say, “I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth [and] in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord,” means indeed that we have a particular perspective. Good interfaith dialogue requires that partners in conversation know where they stand and how they see the world. This is where we begin conversations, not from some *a priori* conclusion that we are all talking about the same thing, because we do not always believe the same thing or even mean the same thing, even if we use similar words. To engage in interfaith dialogue never requires selling out, compromising, or distorting our theological position only to arrive at some imagined common ground.

At the same time, interfaith dialogue is not about polemically defeating adherents of other faiths or trying to convince them that they are wrong and we are right. Religious scholar Diana Eck says that interdependence is a fact of global life, but that the world:

“... is not yet interrelated in the sense of actively and intentionally creating the international, intercultural, and interreligious relationships that will sustain a world in which we depend on one another as much as we do. We share our communities and our world with men and women who worship in various ways, who base their judgments on differing authorities, who recognize differing revelations, who speak of God in strikingly different ways or do not speak of God at all. Our task is to learn

¹⁰ The Interreligious Stance of the Presbyterian Church (USA), 221st General Assembly (2014), p.1

¹¹ Ibid, p.4.

to collaborate with one another on issues that none of us can solve alone.”¹²

If co-operation and dialogue can take place among states and economies, cannot the world’s religions do the same? We may not all agree on theology and issues, but we can agree to love one another. To love one another means to love those of other faiths too, pilgrims with us in the journey of life. We love them because God loves them and gave his Son for them. We love them regardless of their religion. We love them because “God is love” (1 John 4:8), and “those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also” (1 John 4:21). Theologian Keith Ward has written:

Love entails making an attempt to understand and respect, so far as possible those who differ [on matters of belief]. So Christians have a duty to encourage inter-faith conversation, and this is especially important in areas where ethnic and religious markers of identity coincide and increase the dangers of social violence.¹³

Understanding others is key to mitigating the volatility that religion can ignite. Appreciating another religious perspective can lead to greater understanding and cooperation in solving problems.

To accomplish this end, we ask the General Assembly to encourage presbyteries to create interfaith relations committees or task forces to promote interfaith relations, dialogue, and understanding. We ask the General Assembly to encourage congregations to engage in interfaith conversations and partnerships, and we ask the General Assembly to direct the Stated Clerk to encourage congregations to utilize the resources of the Office of Interfaith Relations to promote education about other religions and interfaith dialogue.

Conclusion

We call upon the General Assembly: 1) to affirm and embrace our nation’s religious diversity and condemn all religiously inspired and motivated violence, prejudice, discrimination, and hate speech, in particular, those actions based upon anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim behaviors and language; 2) to re-affirm our traditional positions on interfaith relations; 3) to call upon all Presbyterians to live repentantly by seeking reconciliation with all religious groups who have been hurt by unjust actions and words of the Presbyterian Church (USA); and 4) to form an action plan to encourage interfaith dialogue and the formation of bodies and organizations within presbyteries and congregations that engage in such dialogue.

¹² Diana Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2003, p.213.

¹³ Keith Ward, *Christianity: A Guide for the Perplexed*, London: SPCK, 2007, p.90.