

# WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?

A WINDOW INTO THE INTERFAITH EXPERIENCE  
AND POTENTIAL OF MEMBER CHURCHES  
OF THE CANADIAN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES



CHRISTIAN INTERFAITH REFERENCE GROUP

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## The Canadian Council of Churches

The Canadian Council of Churches is the largest ecumenical body in Canada, now representing 22 churches of Anglican, Evangelical, Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, Protestant, and Eastern and Roman Catholic traditions. We are one of the few ecumenical bodies in the world that includes such a range of Christian churches. The officers and staff of the Council are drawn from the whole diversity of traditions represented by the member churches.

The Canadian Council of Churches was founded in 1944. Member churches believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour, according to the Scriptures. Members seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

## The Christian Interfaith Reference Group

Mandate of the Interfaith Reference Group involves both ecumenical engagement about religious diversity and continued ecumenical engagement with different religions. The foundational work will be in-house engagement with the participation of the member churches focusing on interfaith matters. The group may make contact with different religions, build relationships, and build foundations for addressing common concerns. The programmatic focus of the group is information sharing, education, theological reflection, and building relationships.

Your financial contributions to offset the cost of translation, layout, and printing are gratefully received. A suggested donation of \$10 per copy may be made online at [www.ccc-ccc.ca](http://www.ccc-ccc.ca) or by cheque payable to The Canadian Council of Churches and sent to:

The Canadian Council of Churches  
47 Queen's Park Crescent East  
Toronto, ON, M5S 2C3

Thank you,

Peter Noteboom, *Associate Secretary, Justice and Peace*  
March 30, 2010



# WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?

## A WINDOW INTO THE INTERFAITH EXPERIENCE AND POTENTIAL OF MEMBER CHURCHES OF THE CANADIAN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

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## FOREWORD

“Our multicultural mosaic is accompanied by a multi-religious tapestry. . . .” The opening paragraphs of this survey of the interfaith experience and potential of member Churches of the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC) clearly set the context for this research that was conducted by Mr. Carlos Hugo Parra-Pirela at the behest of the Governing Board of the Canadian Council of Churches in the early months of 2007.

One of the first fruits of this “Who is My Neighbour?” report has been the establishment of a Christian Interfaith Reference Group (CIRG) within the Canadian Council of Churches. The mandate of the CIRG-states that the work of the Interfaith Reference Group will involve both ecumenical engagement about religious diversity, and continued ecumenical engagement with different religions, consistent with past practice of the CCC. The foundational work will be in-house engagement with the participation of the member churches focusing on interfaith matters. The group may make contact with different religions, build relationships, and build foundations for addressing common concerns.

CIRG has identified four dimensions in its approach to this mandate: information, education, theological reflection, and relationship building. The Reference Group is committed to mutual education about the work and views of member churches, and about interfaith relations as they are developing in Canada. Interfaith understanding is critical in today’s society, and approaching this task ecumenically as much as possible can only enrich the process. The Reference Group has been established as a resource to help member churches enhance their relationships with different religions both locally and nationally.

In its initial meetings the Christian Interfaith Reference Group has recognized the rich resource offered by the “Who is My

Neighbour?” report and the importance of the questions posed to the churches by Carlos Parra in his reflection on the interviews. It is our hope that member churches and others interested in interfaith dialogue and action will find here resources for their own discernment and discussion of the gifts and challenges for communities of faith in the multi-religious tapestry of our lives together.

Gail Allan

*Co-chair*

*Christian Interfaith Reference Group*

Jonas Abromaitis

*Co-chair*

*Christian Interfaith Reference Group*



## POINT OF DEPARTURE

Carlos Hugo Parra-Pirela, M.A., M.Div.  
Christian Interfaith Liaison Ecumenical Officer

What does it mean to be Canadian? This continues to be a puzzling question to scholars, policy makers and, above all, to ordinary citizens in Canada. The fact that Canadians come from every corner of the world as a result of waves of immigration makes the answer difficult, since immigrants bring with them to their new land the beliefs and values of their original homeland. At the same time, the problem posed by this question seems itself to become part of the solution. Multiculturalism is becoming a defining feature of Canadian identity and substantially part of the answer to the question. Multiculturalism has been officially acknowledged by the Canadian government through the Canadian Multiculturalism Act.

Religion and culture have been intertwined throughout the history of the world. Therefore a multicultural Canada implies a multi-religious Canada. Our multicultural mosaic is accompanied by a multi-religious tapestry in which old and new fabrics, with a diversity of dark and bright colours, are continuously interwoven. The tragic events of September 11, 2001, still vivid in the collective memory, have not only raised awareness of other religions in our midst but have also unveiled the internal diversity within them, from fundamentalist attitudes to more flexible and accommodating positions. They are also a painful reminder to the world that, in addition to offering purpose and meaning in positive and constructive ways, some religious views can have destructive and devastating consequences.

The multi-religious character of Canada is too important to be ignored by any Canadian institution thinking strategically and taking

seriously its surrounding environment. The Canadian Council of Churches (CCC), founded in 1944, has recognized the relevance of religious diversity in Canada and has undertaken initiatives in this regard. On several occasions, its Governing Board and Commissions have been involved with interfaith issues. A cherished expression of this has been the active and ongoing involvement of the Council in the Canadian Christian-Jewish Consultation and in the National Muslim-Christian Liaison Committee. Worthy of notice in the history of the Council are the consultation *Christian Approaches to People of Other Faiths* in May 1996; a conversation on the theological basis for the churches' engagement in interfaith dialogue and relationships in February 2004; and a series of interfaith questions presented to the Governing Board for discussion in May 2005. These activities were organized by the Commission on Faith and Witness.

More recently the Governing Board received enthusiastically a proposal from the same Commission to undertake a new interfaith exploration within the Council toward the feasibility of establishing an Interfaith Reference Group. This initiative was coordinated by the Interfaith Liaison Committee and monitored by an Interfaith Advisory Committee specifically formed for this purpose. The present study is the outcome of this exploration. The study does not intend to define the terms *interfaith* or *dialogue*. It attempts to show the actual interfaith experience and potential of the member churches of the Council.

Between February and May 2007, 21 conversations took place with representatives of 20 CCC member churches. The conversations followed an interview format, structured around questions (available before each meeting) about the church's experiences, practices, hopes and challenges regarding interfaith relations in general and specifically their need for, and potential contribution to, an Interfaith Reference Group. Setting up the interviews was not an easy task given the busy schedules and geographic locations of these

representatives. However, their flexibility and generosity in making themselves available was sometimes creative and always edifying. Most notable was the appointment with Father Ammonius Guirguis of the Coptic Orthodox Church, which took place on the way to and from a cemetery in the context of a Coptic burial.

This journey became a fascinating pilgrimage filled with awe and reverence at the encounter with every church. In all cases, the representatives made space in their daily ministry to ponder the questions presented by the Council and share answers that could shed light on their church's interfaith discernment. They were not hesitant to articulate their passion and commitment for the faith and mission that have been entrusted to them, displaying a diversity of attitudes and practices regarding interfaith work. Their candid responses to the Council's questions reflect a spectrum that encompasses positions from highly to less involved, optimistic, interested and available in relation to interfaith work in general and specifically a possible Interfaith Reference Group in the Council.

Following the interview phase, answers were analyzed and common themes were identified. This report is organized in sections according to the questions posed to the churches, followed by some recommendations. The recommendations take the form of different scenarios for the CCC to consider in its discernment. Summaries of the interviews are appended at the end preceded by a short profile of each member church.

The relevance of this task was highlighted when one of the officers of the Council referred to it in a conversation, reflecting that the presence of different religions in Canada today is like the presence of computers in the world of technology. We have two choices: to learn about them and live with them or to pretend that our social environment is still the same and be overcome by an unstoppable factor without being prepared to fully operate under our new social reality.

The author is grateful for the support of the churches, and the Council's staff and friends. Without their accompaniment the new, small step offered through this modest report would not have been possible.

## POLICY AND PRACTICE REGARDING INTERFAITH RELATIONS

Given the increasingly multi-religious landscape of Canada from coast to coast, all member churches of the Canadian Council of Churches have been exposed at least indirectly to other religions. However, their response to religious diversity in Canada varies significantly and their experience of interfaith relations shows a spectrum of attitudes and practices that range from being highly engaged to not anticipating any engagement.

### Policy and structure

Fourteen of 20 denominations stated that they have no formal policy regarding interfaith relations. The remaining six have articulated a formal policy, in some cases as a mandate at a global level and in others as a result of reflection and decision-making at the national level. Several denominations stated that although they do not have a formal policy, they have an unspoken one, the fruit of a centuries-old exposure to other religions in parts of the world where they have co-existed. In this context, two of the denominations without a formal policy described their interfaith experience as *a way of life*. In two other cases, an official, unified policy is practically impossible given the primacy of local congregations over any supra-structure and the lack of a denominational organization as such.

About a third of the member churches have a formal structure established, or a person appointed to address interfaith issues. This could be an interfaith office, an interfaith committee or an informational and educational website. At the Canadian level, these offices and/or committees not only address interfaith affairs but

ecumenical relations as well, the latter preceding the former in the title and agenda. Two denominations (not those who described their interfaith experience as *a way of life*) do not have any formal structure to address the interfaith question and perhaps do not even need it, given their inclusive theology. About a quarter of the denominations have paid positions at their national office whose job descriptions explicitly refer to interfaith work. These, and other denominations, have interfaith committees composed of and led by volunteers.

## Practice

For most member churches, the Canadian Council of Churches is the place where they relate formally to other churches and their only interfaith engagement is through the Council's involvement in the Canadian Christian-Jewish Consultation and the National Muslim-Christian Liaison Committee.

All churches have had direct or indirect contact with people of other religions through civic initiatives. All of them expressed their willingness to work together for common concerns such as religious freedom, social justice, peace and environmental awareness. A specific reference was made to the Multi-faith Coalition for Equal Funding of Faith-Based Schools, of which an Orthodox leader is past-chair.

Several churches expressed their discomfort or complete unwillingness to engage in specifically religious events such as prayer or worship beyond their own denominational boundaries, but they stated their willingness to take part in other forms of activities.

A few churches have formal, ongoing dialogues with other religions, specifically Judaism and Islam, and some have published official documents at the national level about these two traditions. One has conducted extensive consultations and education at the congregational level about the Abrahamic religions. Surprisingly, perhaps the most reluctant church with regard to interfaith relations

reported a former practice of pulpit exchange between a pastor and a rabbi in years past.

Two churches pointed out the relationship between what is intended and done at the national level and what actually happens at the local level. In some cases coordination has been possible. In other cases separation has been unavoidable.

## Factors behind policy and practice

Different factors shape the attitudes and practices of the Canadian churches regarding other religions. These factors include theological outlook, collective experiences from the past, degree of stability and priorities, ways of relating to the other, demographic conditions, individual interest or opposition, personal relations and current events.

### *Theological outlook*

The diversity of theological outlook in the Canadian Churches about interfaith relations is on a spectrum from exclusive to inclusive attitudes. While all churches affirm their Christocentric position, some stress it more emphatically than others:

- ❖ “Christ is the only way to salvation. We pray for people of other religions and place them in God’s hands.”

- ❖ “We are committed to being transparently and decidedly Christian and to making our life attractive to anyone.”

On the other hand, some denominations, while affirming their Christocentric life, make inclusive statements regarding the nature of God:

- ❖ “God is too big to be monopolized.”

- ❖ “God is creatively and redemptively at work in the religious life of mankind (sic).”

- ❖ “We are called to acknowledge God wherever God may be, to answer to that of God in everyone.”

Several denominations expressed the tension they experience between the missionary mandate to evangelize the world and respect for other religions. One referred to the Reformed theology concept of *common grace*, different from *salvific grace*, to understand and explain the presence of virtues in non-Christians.

*Collective experiences from the past*

Christianity in Canada transcends the country in terms of space and time. This is particularly relevant through the collective memories of immigrant communities coming from parts of the world in which Christians lived or still live as a minority. In some cases, Christians were, or are still, persecuted. Painful memories from the past are reframed within a new Canadian context in which multiculturalism and respect for diversity are the norm.

*Degree of stability and priorities*

There is a difference between the churches that were established in Canada during the historic formation of Canadian national identity and the churches that arrived during more recent waves of immigration. The former have strong roots and are intertwined with the Canadian fabric, while the latter are at different degrees of adaptation and survival. At this time, however, some of the older Canadian churches are also struggling for survival for different reasons: aging, declining membership and shrinking resources. This affects their priorities and pushes interfaith concerns lower on their agendas.

*Ways of relating to the other*

An interesting commonality among many of the member churches is their use of *concentric circles* as an image of how they relate to other religious communities in term of degrees of proximity or separation. The immediate interlocutor would be the one with whom they have more elements in common. For instance, for the Oriental churches



their closest circle of relationships was other Oriental churches followed by other Orthodox churches. Reformed churches expressed a similar path of engagement: they relate first to other Reformed traditions, then to other Protestant churches and so on. This image of concentric circles applies to other religions, granting primacy for dialogue to the Abrahamic faiths beginning with Judaism and following with Islam.

#### *Demographic conditions*

Several churches referred to the social location of some congregations as a decisive factor for interfaith dialogue. As some neighbourhoods are becoming predominantly Jewish or Muslim or Hindu or Sikh, relating to people of these religions on a daily basis becomes unavoidable.

#### *Individual interest or personal relationships*

There are churches with no official policy of formal engagement but with some individual members who are committed to interfaith relations at the local level. The interfaith passion and interest of an individual could have an impact at the denominational level and help raise awareness and interest. In one case, a pastor from a member church and a rabbi from a synagogue nearby exchanged pulpits as a result of a personal friendship that allowed trust to be built.

#### *Current events and solidarity*

The most decisive factor in the current interest of the Canadian churches in other religions, particularly Islam, has to do with the events of 9/11. These events made evident both a great ignorance about Islam and a sense of solidarity with Muslim fellow citizens who were victims of discrimination and rejection as a result of ignorance and prejudice. Similar acts of solidarity have taken place toward Jewish fellow citizens when they have been targeted by anti-Semitic attitudes and actions in Canada.



## HOPES AND VISION

When asked about hopes and vision for the future regarding interfaith relations, the churches revealed a diversity of expectations ranging from highly optimistic to moderately resistant. An example of the most ambitious hopes is the eventual foundation of a Canadian Council of Religions for which the Canadian Council of Churches could be a model. Examples from the other end of the spectrum include openness to further discussion but no great enthusiasm, given other pressing priorities and an exclusive focus on church development.

The hopes and vision expressed by the churches could be classified into two main areas: finding common ground with other religions, and engaging other religions in dialogue and cooperation.

### **Common ground hopes**

Seventeen out of 20 churches agreed on the importance of finding common ground between Christianity and other religions in Canada. This common ground could be organized into three different areas: religious rights, theological reflection and shared social concerns.

#### *Common ground regarding religious rights*

This area refers to the position of religion in general in the larger context of Canadian society and culture and it shows a legitimate shared attitude of self-preservation and self-interest.

One church expressed concern about the state of religion in the face of an increasingly secularized society and hoped that different religions could join in affirming the validity of religion. Three churches expressed the need for good relations between religions in order to foster credibility in the midst of religiously motivated violence.

Another church shared its concern about attempts to limit the freedom of religion in Canada and in other parts of the world, citing examples of several episodes of rejection of the use of religious symbols in public spaces. Another example was the recent controversial debate about gay marriage in Canada and the right of some churches to oppose it and refuse the celebration of same-sex religious weddings.

Discrimination against religious minorities is a concern of several churches. This problem was particularly highlighted as a result of the September 11 attacks.

Equal funding for faith-based schools is a divisive issue. While some churches support the separation between religion and education, several minority churches and minority groups from other religions have formed a coalition to fight for funding for their schools. Others wondered if a better approach would be to reject all public funding in order to safeguard a healthy separation between religion and the state in Canada and prevent favouring some churches or religions over others.

#### *Common ground regarding theological reflection*

There is no room for theological reflection without *mutual* education about other religions. *Mutual education* refers to an effective communication process in interfaith education in which Canadian churches learn about other religions in Canada and other religions learn about Canadian churches.

The spectrum of positions is clear on this point. One church was very candid that their only interest in people of other faiths is to pray for them and to place them in God's hands so that they can discover Jesus and find salvation in Him. Towards the other end of the spectrum, several churches adopted a more inclusive attitude. Here is how this hope was articulated by one of the churches: "To align ourselves with the fact that God is active in the world beyond the church and that God is at work in other religions."

One of the Oriental Orthodox churches referred to St. Augustine's wisdom as it was interpreted by Nerses the Graceful, a Catholicos from the 11th century, when he recalled: "in essentials, unity; in doubtful things, liberty; in all things, love." This interviewee proposed the application of this perennial maxim to interfaith relations.

One church hoped to continue paying attention to *the signs of the times* in order to identify the increasing relevance of interfaith matters in the life of the churches.

#### *Common ground regarding social concerns*

Most churches acknowledged the past experience and current validity of joining other religions in public matters and to promote the improvement of society, i.e., to work together for the common good. Social justice is a gospel-inspired imperative for Christians and it also has a significant place in most religious traditions. Even the churches that feel less inclined to be engaged in interfaith dialogue expressed their willingness to join other religions in the fight against poverty, racism and AIDS, to cite just some of the examples mentioned. One church expressed the hope of engaging in good relations as fellow human beings with people of other religions.

## **Process related hopes**

Seven Canadian churches made specific remarks about their expectations regarding the way they should engage other religions in conversation and cooperation. These process-related hopes could be organized into three different areas: motivation and purpose of engagement; the dialogue itself and its participants; and current channels and initiatives.

#### *Motivation and purpose*

One church insisted on the importance of shedding light on the motivation behind interfaith dialogue: *why are we talking?* Equally

necessary is the clarification of the purpose of dialogue: *what is the agenda?* An example of this clarification on the part of this church was its own experience of finding out that Muslims wanted to learn from Christians new ways to approach religious education.

### *Dialogue and players*

Another church pointed out its hope for what it called real dialogue rather than simply getting information about other religions. In order to enter into real dialogue, attitudes of self-interest and arrogance – wherever they may exist – have to be overcome. Real dialogue can only be achieved with a humble spirit. An official text from one of the churches states:

“We should not address others in a spirit of arrogance implying that we are better than they, but rather in spirit of humility, as beggars telling others where food is to be found. In doing so, we point to life in Christ.”

Regarding the players involved in dialogue, three churches hope that the First Nations of Canada who have kept or recovered their spiritual traditions be acknowledged as rightful partners and interlocutors for interfaith dialogue.

### *Current channels and initiatives*

Most churches acknowledged the key role of the Canadian Council of Churches in articulating an ecumenical Christian voice in the interfaith conversation, particularly with Jews and Muslims. For many churches the CCC's formal dialogues are the only window into the interfaith conversation even if they do not participate directly in them. One church hopes that the CCC will continue to be a vehicle for the ecumenical voice of Christianity in interfaith dialogue. Another church expressed its hope to strengthen the existing initiatives through the Canadian Christian-Jewish Consultation and the National Muslim-Christian Liaison Committee.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, one church hopes that a National Council of Religions in Canada may be established, with structures at the national level and representation from local interfaith structures that already exist.





## BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

The barriers and challenges encountered by the member churches of the CCC regarding interfaith relations fall within a spectrum from optimistic to pessimistic. An example from the optimistic end is the absence of any fears given the understanding of interfaith relations as a way of life. At the pessimistic end is the fear that interfaith relations could eventually water down the Christian faith and make the church assimilate into the dominant, secular culture.

The interfaith barriers and challenges of the churches could be classified into three different types: theological, psychological and practical.

### **Theological challenges**

The most mentioned challenges faced by the churches have to do with their own understanding of their faith and their commitment to it. Fifty percent of the churches overlap in concerns such as sending the wrong message that religions are all the same; tension between the Great Commandment of the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all the earth and an interfaith dialogue that respects and values other traditions without intending to convert them; tension between freedom of conscience and the freedom of others; and betrayal and eventually loss of faith as a result of mingling with other religious systems.

Three churches referred to conservative theologies as the source of these barriers. It is significant that these challenges pertain not only to interfaith relations but also to ecumenical relations. Three member churches of the Council candidly shared their internal struggle to remain members of the Council as a result of the diversity of theological opinions and practices across the member churches.

Some churches acknowledged their tendency to build walls around themselves in order to preserve their identity and differentiate from other churches. The model of concentric circles in relationships with other believers could be a good example of this.

Finally, some churches clearly articulated the theological impossibility of worshipping together with people of other faiths.

## **Psychological challenges**

This section groups barriers related to the ability to relate to others beyond one's zone of comfort, post-traumatic effects of abuse and stereotyping.

Three churches identified the natural tendency of human beings to be afraid of the unknown as a factor that affects a willingness to relate to people of other faiths. Despite Christianity's cross-cultural diversity, the fact that some religions developed outside the Western world and absorbed defining elements from cultures sometimes unfamiliar to Western Christianity should also be considered.

Three churches referred to painful memories of traumatic experiences from the past in which they were subjected to discrimination and even persecution as a minority group under some other religion's rule.

Three churches identified prejudice as an obstacle for dialogue, and identified ignorance as the root of prejudice. Two churches spoke of arrogance as a barrier.

## **Practical challenges**

This last section covers barriers related to communication, capacity for engagement and team work.

Regarding communication, one church articulated the following question: Who are the interlocutors of interfaith dialogue? When the dialogue is bilateral between one specific church and one specific group of a particular religion, the challenge is not too big. However,

when Christianity is represented ecumenically, it is a challenge to articulate a common voice about several issues.

In official and formal dialogues another question arises regarding the investiture of an interlocutor to speak with authority. In Christian churches where lines of authority are clearly defined, this does not pose a challenge. In other religions this might prove very difficult.

Language could be another barrier given the diversity of cultures and languages that are vehicles of expression for different religions. It takes time for some immigrant religions to translate and interpret themselves within their new Canadian context.

Another challenge has to do with the capacity for engaging other religions in dialogue when a religious entity is struggling for its own survival. On the part of Christianity, some Canadian churches are aging and decreasing in size, their resources shrinking. Therefore, they have entered into a survival mode. Other churches, recently immigrated from distant lands, are still getting rooted in their new Canadian soil. The latter experience also applies to non-Christian religions that have recently established themselves in Canada. When a church is in survival mode, its main priority is to remain alive.

Some other churches, despite being well established in Canada, do not have interfaith relations among their priorities. Limited resources (time, personnel and money) are allocated elsewhere. This reality relates both to intra-denominational and inter-church team work. One church identified a gap between interfaith initiatives at the congregational level and interfaith directives coming from the leadership at the national level. The same church expressed concern about the pace of its own interfaith work and that of other churches. A question sensitive to ecumenical team spirit is whether the churches can walk together in their interfaith endeavours without one standing out over the others. This question gives rise to another question related to leadership. Given the diversity of positions in the churches

regarding interfaith work, some denominations might be willing to exercise a respectful and inspiring leadership that could help other members of the Council with their own interfaith initiatives.

## CHURCHES' NEEDS THAT WOULD BE ADDRESSED BY A REFERENCE GROUP

The spectrum of positions about interfaith relations in the churches is evident regarding the creation of an Interfaith Reference Group within the Canadian Council of Churches. Most of the churches expressed degrees of interest from moderate to high; two churches conveyed interest with reservations; and four churches expressed very little or no interest. If established, the purpose and objectives of an Interfaith Reference Group need to be clearly defined.

Based on the needs identified by the churches showing interest, the work of an Interfaith Reference Group could be divided into two levels: ecumenical engagement about religious diversity and ecumenical engagement with other religions. The prepositions *about* and *with* are key to the understanding of the difference between these two levels. The first level would limit itself to an *in-house engagement* with the participation of the member churches focusing on interfaith matters. The second level would reach out to other religions, invite them to the table for dialogue and relationship-building, and engage with them on common concerns.

Both levels are ecumenical because in both instances the churches interact with one another. In the first level, the churches become interlocutors for each other. In the second level, the churches become an internally diverse interlocutor representing Christianity in the interfaith arena. Working together on interfaith matters would also enable the smaller churches to be part of a conversation that otherwise they might not be able to participate in due to their more limited resources and influence in the larger context of Canadian society.

## **Ecumenical engagement about religious diversity in Canada**

As happens already in the Commissions on Faith and Witness and Justice and Peace, an Interfaith Reference Group would allow an ecumenical interaction among the member churches in the context of the Council. This interaction could take place at three levels: informational, educational and theological.

### *Informational*

One church highlighted the advantage of having a specific group focusing on sharing information about what the churches are doing regarding interfaith work and how they are doing it. By bringing to the ecumenical table at the Council their interfaith experience and practice, the churches would encourage one another in their interfaith endeavours and offer feedback to each other.

### *Educational*

Most churches agree that one of the main limitations they face is the lack of knowledge and understanding about other religions. One church conceived of the Reference Group as a think tank of the Canadian Churches for Religious Diversity in Canada. The focus of this group would be the study not only of the diversity of religions in Canada today but the internal diversity that each one of them experiences. The awareness that each religion is heterogeneous and that no religion is monolithic should permeate the design and mission of this group. In doing that, the group would help the Canadian churches to overcome stereotyping and demonization of people of other religions, a need that was expressed by three churches. Three churches emphasize the need to learn more about Islam and the Sikh religion. The churches see a Reference Group as a space for interfaith education in which existing educational resources could be shared and new ones generated. These resources should reach the

local level. In the case of new resources, they should ideally be the result of an extensive consultation.

### *Theological*

Several churches identified the need for theological reflection on the religious diversity of Canada and envisioned a Reference Group as a space for it. One church referred to the need for a joint reflection on Christian theologies of religion. Another church stated that an objective of an Interfaith Reference Group should be to foster a spiritual and theological common ground and the understanding that, regardless of our religious identity or affiliation, we all live under the gaze, guidance and blessing of God. Another church stated that a theological reflection on interfaith issues should foster a deepened sense of spirituality, not as something to be owned but as something to be shared. A reference group would also provide space for an ecumenical reflection on missiology and interfaith relations. The centenary of the Edinburgh Missionary Conference in June 2010 could be an extraordinary occasion to engage the churches in this conversation.

### **Ecumenical engagement with other religions**

At this level, the reference group would coordinate the Council's participation in the existing dialogues with Jews and Muslims and would reach out to other religious minorities in Canada. Indigenous people should also be considered as rightful interfaith interlocutors. The interaction between the churches and other religions could take place at two levels: relationship building and shared mission in common concerns.

### *Relationship building*

The most common need expressed by the churches was to establish a channel through which mutual knowledge between Christianity and other religions in Canada may develop. Other words used by

the churches to convey the same need are: *mutual recognition, mutual understanding and mutual respect*. One church expressed the same idea as overcoming *mutual misunderstanding*. The churches agree that it is not only the churches that have to learn about other religions in Canada, but other religions have to learn about Christianity. Reciprocity is an essential condition for dialogue. A reference group should explore and implement ways to facilitate this mutual acquaintance between Christianity and other faiths in Canada.

This mutual knowledge is primarily possible through a dialogue that is direct and honest. Artificial, “polite” relations should be avoided. One church stated that dialogue should not be limited to common ground regarding shared social concerns. It should also tackle doctrinal elements and ethical dilemmas. This way the dialogue will not pretend to overlook differences but will honour them. Another church brought up the question of authority and the need to engage authoritative voices from religious systems whose lines of authority are not clearly defined. Finally, another church expressed the need to invite erudite members of other religions to the interfaith table so that a dialogue may be theologically sound and deeply insightful.

#### *Shared mission in common concerns*

A reference group would allow the churches and other religions in Canada to articulate a common voice related to common concerns such as the environment, justice and peace. Mutuality continues to be at stake at the advocacy level. Most churches expressed concern about discrimination against religious minorities in Canada. However, some churches also voiced their concern about persecution against Christians in countries where they are a religious minority. It is hoped that an interfaith reference group would foster justice not only in Canada but also at a global level.

Regarding intercultural harmony, one church asked a question about the place of interfaith relations in the context of Canadian



multiculturalism: what is the role of interfaith relations in building a multicultural Canada in which diversity is not only accepted but celebrated? The strategic potential of the answer to this question is enormous not only for Canada but for other nations across the globe.

### **Towards the other end of the spectrum**

One church questioned the advantages of undertaking interfaith dialogue ecumenically. Given the internal diversity of Christianity in Canada in ethical matters such as the pro-life/pro-choice and gay marriage debates, interlocutors from other religions could be perplexed. As experience dictates, dialogue seems to be easier and more fruitful among partners with more clearly defined official positions about these and other matters.

One church expressed a concern that an Interfaith Reference Group might take energy and resources away from the primary mandate of the Council: inter-church relations. Another church voiced its reservation about creating a new structure within the Council given its limited capacity and the scarcity of resources. One church, with its denominational office located in the U.S., stated that although there is interest at the wider, denominational level, there would be minimal interest in an Interfaith Reference Group at the Canadian level. Another church was unable to identify a specific need for a reference group but agreed that needs might be more obvious down the road. A different church identified no tangible benefit from a reference group. Finally, one church acknowledged the importance of learning about other religions at a strict informational level, comparing it to learning about electricity.



## POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION OF THE CHURCHES TO AN INTERFAITH REFERENCE GROUP

If a decision were made to establish an Interfaith Reference Group, most of the Council's member churches would be willing to support it. However, a question remains about their ability to do so. Their responses could be summarized in the following areas: the churches' own interfaith experience; staff and volunteer involvement; and financial support.

### **The churches' own interfaith experience**

Several churches referred to their own exposure to interfaith relations as the main source they could draw from to share with a reference group.

The missionary activity of the historic Canadian churches in different parts of the world has generated significant learning about other religions at the global level. Although this learning pertains primarily to local situations in other parts of the world, some insights could be transferred to the interfaith conversation in Canada.

Particularly significant is the rich, centuries-old heritage of the immigrant churches coming to Canada from parts of the world where they lived together with people of other religions on a regular basis. They refer to it as their ancestral experience of interfaith immersion and a way of life. Some experiences were positive; others negative. Both good decisions and mistakes were made over time. Today the churches can still learn from them.

The churches in the Council that belong to a global network identified current initiatives by leaders at the global level that could become a reference for reflection and action in Canada. Examples are the recent visit of Pope Benedict XVI to Turkey, the environmental commitment of Patriarch Bartholomew, known because of it as the green Patriarch, and the role of Pope Shenouda in relations between Christianity and Islam in Egypt.

One church referred to the humble awareness that the world does not belong to any religion as an important contribution of a reference group.

Another significant insight coming from the older immigrant churches is related to empathy: “Orthodoxy is a unity in diversity. Although theologically we remain true to our beliefs, sociologically we share with Canadian Hindus, Buddhists, Jews and Muslims our common experience as immigrants.” The common experience of having been, and being, newcomers in Canada could help build helpful bridges beyond religious differences. The same church continues: “However, as popular wisdom states, strong fences make good neighbors. There has to be an agenda that is open and clear at the same time.”

Finally, one church referred to the interfaith reflection of some of its theologians as an important input into a reference group.

## **Staff and volunteer involvement**

Half of the churches conveyed the possibility of participation of interested volunteers and qualified resource people in the group. Only two churches referred specifically to staff involvement. One church indicated the importance of fostering a sense of ownership of the reference group on the part of the participating churches.

## **Financial support**

Although they were not specifically asked for financial support, four churches referred to it:

- ❖ “There could be a modest financial contribution.”
- ❖ “Any financial contribution remains to be seen.”
- ❖ “If persuaded of the relevance of the reference group, our leadership would have to re-direct funds from current allocations.”
- ❖ “A financial contribution is not possible at all.”

## POINT OF ARRIVAL; NOT A FINAL DESTINATION

The member churches of the Canadian Council of Churches have spoken. The voice of each church can be heard in its distinctness in the summaries that follow. Through their official representatives they have articulated their voices and shared their experience, structures, hopes, obstacles regarding interfaith relations and their needs and potential contribution to the possibility of establishing an Interfaith Reference Group in the Canadian Council of Churches.

Their experience and opinion reflect a wide spectrum of positions about religious diversity and interfaith work. The churches have been candid in sharing where they are and where they could be.

It is helpful to note that beyond our borders other councils of churches in nations comparable to Canada have put in place structures to address interfaith relations.

*Churches Together in Britain and Ireland* is the successor of the British Council of Churches. The new body, established in 1990, includes the Roman Catholic Church as a full member and extends its geographic scope to Ireland. It has established a *Churches' Commission on Interfaith Relations* with an Interfaith Secretary. This commission constitutes one of 10 areas around which the work revolves. The secretary and an assistant are among a staff of 16 ([www.ctbi.org.uk](http://www.ctbi.org.uk)).

*Churches Together in England* is a national body established in 1990, with 28 member churches, including the Roman Catholic Church. It also has an Interfaith Relationships structure with a permanent interfaith officer, who is one of a staff of 17 ([www.churches-together.net](http://www.churches-together.net)).

The *National Council of Churches in Australia* (NCCA) was established in 1994 as the successor of the *Australian Committee for the World Council of Churches* (1946) and the *Australian Council of Churches*.

It has a membership of 17 churches, including the Roman Catholic Church. Interfaith Relations is one of its departments which relates primarily to the Australian National Dialogue of Christians, Muslims and Jews, launched in 2003, and of which the NCCA is a founding partner ([www.ncca.org.au](http://www.ncca.org.au)).

The *National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA* was founded in 1950 and is structured into five commissions, one of which is devoted to interfaith relations. An Associate General Secretary for Interfaith Relations is the director of the commission ([www.nccusa.org](http://www.nccusa.org)).

Given the information provided, here are possible courses of action:

### **Scenario 1: Keep the status quo**

No changes would be made regarding interfaith relations at the Canadian Council of Churches. The CCC has entrusted its Commission on Faith and Witness to monitor interfaith relations. The Commission would continue to be involved in the existing dialogues while the Interfaith Liaison Committee would continue to raise interfaith awareness among the member churches.

### **Scenario 2: Establish an Interfaith Reference Group within the current budget with modest expectations**

The Council could create a permanent position comparable in scope and responsibility to the part-time, short term position of Christian Interfaith Liaison Ecumenical Officer created for this project. The current Interfaith Liaison Committee could become the starting point of the Interfaith Reference Group (IFRG) with other interested churches appointing their representatives. The mission, vision, objectives and strategy of the IFRG would be clearly defined and proposed to the Governing Board for approval.

### **Scenario 3: Establish an Interfaith Reference Group with more ambitious expectations after a successful fundraising campaign**

Similar to the scenario above, but making the Christian Interfaith Liaison Ecumenical Officer comparable to the Associate Secretaries for the two Commissions of the Council. The current contract of the interfaith officer could be extended for a fundraising phase.

These three scenarios could co-exist with or lead to an additional scenario.

### **Scenario 4: Conduct a feasibility study for an interfaith structure separate from the Council**

If the Council decided not to establish an Interfaith Reference Group, it could still take a leading role in proposing the creation of a separate interfaith organization by convening the official representatives of the religions in Canada to determine the feasibility of such an entity.





## ANGLICAN CHURCH OF CANADA

Interview with the Rev. Canon Dr. Linda Nicholls,  
Coordinator for Dialogue, Ethics,  
Interfaith Relations and Congregational  
Development of the Anglican Church of Canada

Anglicanism came to Canada with the British exploration of North America in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The oldest Anglican parish in Canada is the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in St. John's, Newfoundland, established in 1699. The Church of England in Canada was spread by British settlers in North America as well as through missionaries sent from the British Isles by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and the Church Missionary Society. Its presence was further strengthened by the United Empire Loyalists who came to Canada from the United States after the American Revolution. The path to self-government began in the 1850s with the establishment of the first Canadian synods. In 1893, the first General Synod was celebrated and the first Primate was appointed. In 1955, the Church of England in Canada changed its name to the Anglican Church of Canada. In 2001, it entered into full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. The Anglican Church of Canada is one of the founding members of the Canadian Council of Churches.

### **Policy and practice regarding interfaith relations**

The Anglican ethos is defined by the care of souls in the context of an Anglican parish, which also constitutes the point of reference for geographic organization. There is great emphasis on the responsibility and accountability of the community. There is an attitude of openness connecting with the wider community. The basic substratum for any engagement with the other is to respect the dignity of every human being.

The Anglican Church has taken seriously its relations with people of other faiths. In the '60s and '70s Collects praying for the conversion of the Jews were removed from liturgical books. Regarding Islam, the Archbishop of Canterbury has undertaken several initiatives including an annual consultation at Al Azhar in Egypt. At the global level, interfaith issues were first substantively addressed in the 1988 Lambeth Conference, which led to the creation in 1993 of the Network for Interfaith Concerns (NIFCON).

A spectrum of attitudes within the Anglican community at the local level ranges from proselytizing to adopting a more universal-inclusive position. At this grassroots level, interfaith work depends on individual initiatives. An example is an Anglican parish in Thornhill, Ontario, that showed solidarity to the Jewish community when a Jewish cemetery was vandalized. As a result, there was a letter of support and a sign from the Canadian Jewish Congress on the church's lawn. A sense of gratitude from the Jewish community followed. Although some parishioners disagreed with the CJC's institutional stand on Palestine, this act of Anglican solidarity had a healing effect with their Jewish neighbours. After 9/11 there was also a visit to a mosque as an act of solidarity with the Muslim community. Currently, a Newfoundland priest of Pakistan origin is working hard to foster interfaith understanding among Anglicans in his area. The Diocese of Ottawa has an active Christian-Muslim Dialogue group. There are similar initiatives in large cities. It always depends on passion and energy at the local level.

At the national level, a staff member of the department of Faith, Worship and Ministry is in charge of a portfolio that includes interfaith relations. Along with other Anglicans, this staff person represents the Anglican Church of Canada in interfaith initiatives and is also available to answer interfaith questions. Every diocese has been asked to designate an interfaith officer, who sometimes is also the ecumenical officer.

## **Hopes and visions for the future in regards to interfaith relations**

Not sure if there is an official articulated position. Who takes the initiative? It depends a lot on the staff or local initiatives. There is not an overall vision other than people working to educate. It will not rise to the top of the agenda for a while unless something extraordinary happens.

## **Fears and barriers**

This question was not part of the questionnaire at the time of the interview.

## **Church's needs addressed by Interfaith Reference Group in the Council**

It is necessary to speak together. It makes much more sense. There should be a joint reflection on Christian theologies of religion. A reference group would provide the member churches with the ability to respond to critical world events and to speak with a common voice in a forum that includes global issues. What happens globally has an impact locally. Through the reference group the Council could model dialogue for the wider global community.

## **Church's contribution to Reference Group**

Anglicans would share with people of other faiths their global/national experience, particularly through missionary work and insights from theologians such as Lesslie Newbigin. The Anglican attitude of neutrality allows for dialogue to happen.

There could be staff involvement and the participation of other Anglicans. A modest financial contribution might be possible. Helpful information may be found at [www.anglican.ca](http://www.anglican.ca) and [www.anglicancommunion.org](http://www.anglicancommunion.org).



## ARCHDIOCESE OF CANADA ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA

### Interview with Father Cyprian Hutcheon, Archdean of the Archdiocese of Canada of the Orthodox Church in America

The Archdiocese of Canada is an integral part of the Orthodox Church in America, which traces its roots to 1784 when a band of Russian Orthodox missionaries from the Valaam monastery reached Alaska, a Russian Imperial territory at the time. In 1840 a diocese was created and a bishop was appointed. With the purchase of Alaska by the United States in 1867, the See was transferred to San Francisco and eventually to New York. The church took root in Canada in 1897 to serve the needs of Ruthenian immigrants from western Ukraine in territory that today is Alberta and Saskatchewan. In 1916, its first bishop was appointed. As a result of the Russian revolution in 1917, the church became self-governing given the difficulties of the mother church in Russia to provide any governance. In 1940, Canada became a distinct diocese and, in 1954, it was elevated to the rank of an archdiocese. In 1970, the church was granted autocephalous status by the Moscow patriarchate. Today the Archdiocese comprises almost 100 communities across the country.

### **Policy and practice regarding interfaith relations**

There is no official policy regarding interfaith relations. The Archdiocese of Canada of the Orthodox Church in America is part of a larger body that covers all of North America, including Mexico. Any official statements and participation are undertaken primarily by the church as a whole. The Archdiocese is a member of the Canadian Council of Churches and it supports the current interfaith engagements of the Council.

## **Hopes and visions for the future in regards to interfaith relations**

The Orthodox Church in America relates to others within a model of concentric circles. It is improving its communication with other Orthodox churches. Then it relates to other Christians. Interfaith relations are not an area in which the church spends time officially. Most engagements with Jews and Muslims are individual initiatives at a local level. Some members would consider taking part in interfaith events, but probably without great enthusiasm. However, the church is open to engage in conversation and cooperation over public issues. In the recent debate in Parliament over the definition of marriage, some bridges were built with other traditions.

## **Fears and barriers**

There is no principle that would forbid any participation in interfaith initiatives. However, there are strong reservations about having worship activities in common. It should also be noted that, as a result of the experience of other Orthodox in countries where they are a minority, there might be some pessimistic views regarding dialogue with Muslims.

## **Church's needs addressed by Interfaith Reference Group in the Council**

Given its small size, the church's efforts are directed at survival. Within the larger picture, inter-cultural harmony should be an objective of this group. At the local level, a reference group might assist in providing information about other religions. Educational materials could be made available, assuming that the content is acceptable. These materials should be more informational than programmatic.

## **Church's contribution to Reference Group**

At the level of individual participation, there could be members of the OCA coming from other parts of the world where Orthodoxy is a minority who might be willing to share their experience. However, this is a North American denomination.

There is a concern. The church does not want any interfaith initiative to compromise the ecumenical engagement. The resources of the Council are so limited that new undertakings could diminish the level of inter-Christian conversation. Ecumenical should be favoured over interfaith.

Helpful information may be found at [www.archdiocese.ca](http://www.archdiocese.ca) and [www.o.ca.org](http://www.o.ca.org).





## ARMENIAN APOSTOLIC CHURCH

Interview with His Grace Bishop Bagrat Galstanian,  
Primate of the Canadian Diocese of  
the Armenian Holy Apostolic Church,  
accompanied by his secretary,  
Deacon Hagop Arslanian

The Armenian Holy Apostolic Church was established in Canada to assist the needs of Armenian immigrants who settled in Canada through the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today there are approximately 80,000 Armenians in Canada, organized in nine parishes across the country and in some small, remote communities known as mission parishes. Originally, the Armenian Church in Canada operated under the jurisdiction of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America and it depended on the pastoral care provided by the latter. In 1966, a permanent priest was appointed in Montreal and in 1967 a bishop was named for Canada. However, it was not until 1983 that the Canadian Diocese was created, followed by the appointment of its first primate the following year.

### **Policy and practice regarding interfaith relations**

The church has suffered a lot since the loss of the Armenian kingdom 600 years ago. After World War I, it tried to recover. However, it became a victim of an atrocious genocide. The death of so many created a huge gap between generations and the result was a very young church. The current Catholicos is only 54 years old and the clergy worldwide is very young as well. Despite being a relatively small church, it is spread from East to West throughout the world. There are Armenian parishes and communities in every single country.

The church is in the process of re-organizing itself and healing the wounds inflicted in the past. This process raises questions about Armenian identity in religious and national terms. Armenian equals Christian. Religion and national identity are inseparable for Armenians. The church understands its moral mission among the Armenian people. However, it is trying to disentangle from the state through a constitutional political separation. This re-definition also includes its relation to the other, not only other Christians, but people from other faiths.

The interfaith experience of the Armenian church has been lived in a spirit of tolerance, mutual understanding and suffering. They have been dominated by the Persians, the Greeks, the Arabs, the Mongols and the Turks. The church has had interesting interfaith experiences in the Middle East. There is a natural relationship with Muslims despite painful memories from the past. The church is also the focal point for Armenians living in Muslim countries.

In 2003, the office for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations was established to coordinate the relation of the Canadian Diocese with the Canadian Council of Churches as well as other ecumenical and interfaith organizations across Canada. The Armenian Church is committed to developing cordial relations with Christian churches and collaborate with Jewish, Muslim and other faiths. Another important purpose of the office is to promote greater understanding of the Armenian Church among other groups and society at large.

## **Hopes and visions for the future in regards to interfaith relations**

The Church hopes to engage in good relationships with people of other faiths as human beings. A prominent Catholicos from the 11th century, Nerses the Graceful, was inspired by an ancient statement attributed to Saint Augustine:

“In essentials unity, in doubtful things liberty, but in all things love.”

The wisdom of this statement has guided the Armenian church over the centuries and it would be worth exploring the extent to which it could shed some light on interfaith relations.

### **Fears and barriers**

Interfaith immersion is a fact and a way of life for the Armenian Church. There are no specific issues to be concerned about.

### **Church's needs addressed by Interfaith Reference Group in the Council**

The mission of this group has to be clearly defined and some questions have to be asked. There is a risk of artificial relationships, engaging the other simply out of politeness. When this happens, it is the end of the relationship. There should be a spiritual and theological common ground fostered by this group which is that we all live under the gaze, guidance and blessing of God. We all profoundly know that our God is the same God for all.

### **Church's contribution to Reference Group**

Presence and commitment for the common good. Ancestral experience of interfaith immersion. Humble awareness that the world does not belong to any religion.

Helpful information may be found at [www.armenianchurch.ca](http://www.armenianchurch.ca) and [www.etchmiadzin.com](http://www.etchmiadzin.com).



# BAPTIST CONVENTION OF ONTARIO AND QUEBEC

Interview with the Rev. Ken Bellous,  
Executive Minister of the Baptist Convention  
of Ontario and Quebec

From its beginning in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation, Baptist identity and practice have revolved around the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the Bible as the final and supreme authority in faith and conduct, baptism by immersion, the priesthood of all believers and the autonomy of each individual congregation. Baptist missionary work began in the Atlantic coast in the 1760s establishing congregations throughout the Canadian territory until reaching the West coast about a century later.

Baptists have formed several alliances in Canada. In 1880, congregations from Ontario and Quebec created the Baptist Union of Western Canada. Increasingly aware of Baptist ministries in other parts of Canada, this Baptist body changed its name into the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec (BCOQ). In 1944, the BCOQ joined with the United Baptist Convention of the Atlantic Provinces and the Baptist Union of Western Canada to form the Canadian Baptist Federation, which would eventually become Canadian Baptist Ministries. The BCOQ is one of the founding members of the Canadian Council of Churches.

## **Policy and practice regarding interfaith relations**

There is no official policy. The BCOQ is not really a denomination. It is a convention. It is not likely that a specific policy regarding interfaith matters will ever develop. Any engagement will be more appropriately fostered at the local level. At the ground level, there

is an engagement with Muslim Somalis. The interaction is not institutional. It is at the practical level. If there is something that could be mutually beneficial, perhaps it could be mutually undertaken. There are some congregational initiatives that have more of a civic character and, therefore, include anyone regardless of their religious background. Through the Baptist World Alliance there are ongoing conversations with other faiths and Christian denominations.

### **Hopes and visions for the future in regards to interfaith relations**

Perhaps a hope would be to undertake a common initiative with people of other religions to speak for the freedom of religious expression in Canada. However, an engagement like this might be more case by case rather than the result of a formal policy.

### **Fears and barriers**

The evangelization of the world is a primary mandate for Baptists, which sometimes appears to result in conflict with other religions. There is an exclusive claim of salvation through Jesus. The evangelistic fervour of the missionary calling limits the openness to other religions.

Some churches even find it hard to understand the Convention's membership in the Canadian Council of Churches. In fact, a couple of congregations have withdrawn from the convention due to the CCC membership. There is a fear among those few that interfaith dialogue might water down the faith.

### **Church's needs addressed by Interfaith Reference Group in the Council**

The impression of many people in our culture about Islam is stereotypical, considering Muslims as terrorists. This needs to be overcome. A reference group might help bring greater understanding

and educational opportunities. It would give us some models of how we can live better together. Our assumptions may be incorrect.

### **Church's contribution to Reference Group**

There are individuals whose heart would be very close to this initiative. Baptists could have a liaison person sitting on a group like this.

Helpful information may be found at [www.baptist.ca](http://www.baptist.ca).





## BAPTIST UNION OF WESTERN CANADA

### Interview with Rev. Jeremy Bell, Executive Minister of the Baptist Union of Western Canada

From its beginning in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation, Baptist identity and practice have revolved around the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the Bible alone as the only source of revelation, baptism by immersion, the priesthood of all believers and the autonomy of each individual congregation. Baptist missionary work began in the Atlantic coast in the 1760s establishing congregations throughout the Canadian territory until reaching the West coast about a century later. Baptists have formed several alliances in Canada. In 1907, congregations from the Western provinces of Canada formed the Baptist Convention of Western Canada, which two years later changed its name into the Baptist Union of Western Canada (BUWC). In 1944 the BCOQ joined with the United Baptist Convention of the Maritimes and the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec to form the Canadian Baptist Federation, which would eventually become Canadian Baptist Ministries. The BUWC was one of the founding members of the Canadian Council of Churches and has recently rejoined the Council.

### **Policy and practice regarding interfaith relations**

There is no official policy regarding interfaith relations. Demographic changes in Western Canada are showing an increasing religious diversity. For example, there is a large Muslim population in the Western provinces. However, this factor is not enough to make interfaith relations a priority.

Interfaith relations have to be approached within the larger framework of the relation between faith and culture. The Christian Church in Canada is grieving because of the loss of status in an increasingly secularized society.

The relation between ecumenism and interfaith relations is also important. Some prominent Christian leaders are kinder to Muslims than to other Christians. Ecumenical relations sometimes could prove harder than interfaith relations. The Canadian Council of Churches itself is a great example. Seven of the member churches are also members of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada. Seventeen members of the CCC could also be considered theologically conservative. Our decision to come to the CCC table is an expression of our commitment to pluralism. We also learn that the fundamentalist right and the fundamentalist left cancel each other out and that the centre prevails. Triumphalist attitudes have to be abandoned and humility has to be embraced for dialogue to happen.

### **Hopes and visions for the future in regards to interfaith relations**

The culture is saying: I feel good about who I am. Therefore, it is important to listen to each other's stories with respect and humility. Hopelessness in dialogue comes when self-interest prevails.

### **Fears and barriers**

There is a fear of assimilation as a result of the loss of identity due to the oppressiveness of the dominant culture. Christians in Canada are recovering from an identity theft as a result of the official endorsement of gay marriage. There is a tension between freedom of conscience and the freedom of others.

### **Church's needs addressed by Interfaith Reference Group in the Council**

A reference group would contribute to the dialogue between faith and culture. A greater understanding of Muslims and Sikhs in Canada would be beneficial. Perhaps the group should focus more on the journey than on the destination.

## **Church's contribution to Reference Group**

The Baptists' own history of suffering as a result of oppression and persecution has helped them develop a prophetic sense of militancy and solidarity. Tommy Douglas, the pioneer of Medicare, was a Baptist. Baptists would come to the defense of anyone discriminated against based on faith grounds.

Helpful information may be found at [www.buwc.ca](http://www.buwc.ca).



## BRITISH METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

### Interview with Rev. Oriel Licorish, Assistant General Superintendent of the British Methodist Episcopal Church

The British Methodist Episcopal Church (BME) has been a home for Christians of African descent in Canada for more than 150 years. Many of its early members found refuge in Canada when fleeing from slavery in the USA. When Black Methodists were coldly received in White congregations, they turned to the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), which came to Canada from the USA in 1838. By 1840, the AME had organized an Upper Canada Conference. However, threats of racial persecution from the USA prompted the creation of a truly Canadian church in 1856 that would claim a British distinctiveness in its efforts to secure and protect its members from racial discrimination. As it has been said and written in several circles, *the BME has been at the forefront on every area of Black activity in Canada.*

### **Policy and practice regarding interfaith relations**

There is no official policy regarding interfaith relations. However, in the past a rabbi from a synagogue nearby was invited to preach to a congregation in Toronto on special occasions for several years. A key factor for this practice was a friendship between the pastor and the rabbi.

### **Hopes and visions for the future in regards to interfaith relations**

We include people of other faiths in our prayers and leave them in God's hands. We don't put them down, but the only way to salvation

is Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth and the life. However, we would be willing to engage and work together in order to eradicate poverty, AIDS and other social problems.

### **Fears and barriers**

There is a concern about articulating a common voice with other traditions. Christ is the only way to salvation.

### **Church's needs addressed by Interfaith Reference Group in the Council**

A reference group could be beneficial for informational purposes. In fact, our Superintendent reads about Islam. However, our objective would be only educational, like reading about electricity.

### **Church's contribution to Reference Group**

None at the moment.

Helpful information may be found at [www.osblackhistory.com/bme.php](http://www.osblackhistory.com/bme.php) and <http://guelph.ca/museumsites/BlackHistory/index.htm>.

## CANADIAN CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

Interviews with Most Reverend John Boissonneau, Auxiliary Bishop of Toronto and Chairman of the Episcopal Commission for Christian Unity, Religious Relations with the Jews, and Interfaith Dialogue of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops;

Mr. Jonas Abromaitis, Coordinator of the Bureau for Ecclesial Relations and Doctrine;

Dr. Sylvain Destrempes, Senior Theologian of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The presence of the Roman Catholic Church in Canada dates to the earliest European explorations and settlements in the northern part of the New World. On July 7, 1534, on the shores of the Gaspé peninsula, a French priest accompanying the explorer Jacques Cartier celebrated Mass for the first time on what was to become Canadian territory. First established in the East and later expanded into the West, the church was one of the entities that helped to shape what Canada would eventually become. Today the Catholic Church comprises more than half of the Christians in Canada. The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops is the assembly of the Roman and Eastern Catholic Bishops of Canada; it became a full member of the Canadian Council of Churches in 1997.

### **Policy and practice regarding interfaith relations**

All policies and practices of the Roman Catholic Church in Canada are situated in the context of the Roman Church worldwide. Its governance in the Vatican ultimately dictates directives on most issues,

which are adapted to the specific situations of different regional and local churches. The Second Vatican Council constitutes a milestone for the development of a theology of religious pluralism and policies for interfaith relations. *Nostra Aetate*, one of the documents of that Council, is a declaration on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions. Two offices of the Roman Curia are directly concerned with this matter: the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, created in 1974, and the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, instituted in 1964.

In Canada, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has established the Episcopal Commission for Christian Unity, Religious Relations with the Jews and Interfaith Dialogue. This commission has published documents against Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. The Conference of Bishops has undertaken bilateral dialogues with other religions, specifically with Jews and Muslims. There are other initiatives conducted by the regional conferences of bishops in Canada.

The Roman Catholic Church is committed to a quest for balance between evangelization and interfaith dialogue. It also states that engaging the other in dialogue is only possible by affirming one's own identity. This clarity about the Church's identity helps to avoid misinterpretations of the Second Vatican Council and makes dialogue truthful and genuine.

## **Hopes and visions for the future in regards to interfaith relations**

The Conference is particularly interested in continuing and strengthening the dialogues with Jews and Muslims. It is important to clarify the agenda and methodology for dialogue. What is the motivation for dialogue? Why are we talking?

## **Fears and barriers**

In its commitment to dialogue, the Conference of Bishops has considered having interfaith observers at its plenary assemblies.



There has been a suggestion to invite a Muslim Imam. However, in wisdom and charity, the Conference pays attention to the particular sensitivity of some of its Eastern rite members whose past experience as a religious minority in the Middle East under Muslim rule may still bring difficult and painful memories. Therefore, they are always consulted in this discernment. It is important to be transparent about the persecution of Christians where they are a minority. It is also relevant to listen to similar concerns in places where Christianity sets the norm.

Engaging other religions ecumenically could also pose a challenge given the diversity of faces that Christianity has in the ecumenical community. Some non-Christian interlocutors have expressed difficulty with dialogue when the Christian interlocutor is so diverse.

### **Church's needs addressed by Interfaith Reference Group in the Council**

The possibility of articulating a common voice on critical issues continues to be a priority as well as engaging in dialogues that are about both doctrinal reflection and social aspects. A concern is that so much of the interfaith discussion is limited to social needs. Although common social concerns can build bridges initially, religious and theological elements have to be part of the dialogue. It is also important to articulate who the other is. Aboriginal religions have to be part of this discussion.

A benefit could be to learn about how the church's work is perceived and to receive feedback. Sometimes it is hard to be self-critical. A group could be a channel to take notice of what others are doing and learn from their successes and failures. It would also allow the smaller churches to become partners in a way they would not be able to do otherwise. However, an important question is what resources are available to the CCC to undertake the constitution of a reference group. Is it wise to be looking at expanding by creating a

new structure? Are the member churches able to appoint additional representatives for a reference group? Is there another way to address interfaith matters?

### **Church's contribution to Reference Group**

Sharing the wisdom and experience of own interfaith heritage. Any financial contribution still remains to be seen given the church's current commitment at that level.

Helpful information may be found at [www.cccb.ca](http://www.cccb.ca) and [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

# CANADIAN YEARLY MEETING OF THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS

Interview with Mr. Peter Harkness,  
Clerk of the Ecumenical-Interfaith Committee of  
the Canadian Yearly Meeting of the  
Religious Society of Friends

The Religious Society of Friends, also known as Quakers, was founded in 1648 as an alternative to organized religion in the increasingly diversified Christian landscape of 17<sup>th</sup> century England. George Fox is among its founders. Quakers claim the possibility of a direct communion with God without the intervention of another human being (a minister), an institution (the church) or a book (the Bible), although some meetings use pastors and the Bible in their worship. It is one of the historic communities committed to pacifism.

Its presence in Canada is the result of waves of immigrants from the American colonies in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, from Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and from both places and elsewhere after World War II. In 1955, one Canadian Yearly Meeting was organized by merging three separate Canadian Yearly Meetings. There are more than a thousand Friends in Canada. Quakers are one of the founding members of the Canadian Council of Churches.

## **Policy and practice regarding interfaith relations**

Quakers are characterized by openness. From its very foundation, the Society of Friends has been encouraged to acknowledge the presence of God wherever God may be. Quaker pioneer George Fox wrote, “Walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone.” Reaching out to people of other faiths is present in Quaker history from an early time. The story of Mary Fisher, a

British woman who traveled to Turkey, met the Sultan and preached to him, is dear to Quakers worldwide. Although early Quakers were very evangelical, and there are still some Quaker communities that are so, there is a general attitude of acceptance and inclusion regardless of belief systems. There is great respect for people of other faiths and a willingness to participate in interfaith activities. There are Quakers actively involved in dialogue groups in different parts of the country.

### **Hopes and visions for the future in regards to interfaith relations**

The Quakers' concern for social justice has made them focus on the reality of Aboriginal people in Canada. There was a special emphasis on this in a recent Yearly Meeting. It is our hope that Aboriginal people may be fully included and considered as key partners for interfaith dialogue and cooperation in Canada.

### **Fears and barriers**

The main barrier Quakers face is their small size as a group. Therefore, there is a lack of personnel to effectively respond to so many demands for engagement. Resources are directed to such other priorities as peace work, environmental awareness and the initiative to end torture.

### **Church's needs addressed by Interfaith Reference Group in the Council**

After 9/11, there was a surge of feelings against Muslims in general. Since they tend to be a visible minority, they are susceptible to mistreatment and discrimination. This alone might justify the creation of a reference group and the Quakers would be supportive. However, Quakers have been very steady in their mandate over the years focusing on the environment, peace and prisons. Unless

interfaith initiatives overlap with this mandate, a reference group might not be as relevant to Quaker priorities.

### **Church's contribution to Reference Group**

If a reference group were based in Toronto, Quakers would be able to appoint someone in the area to be actively involved. Funding would be a limitation given small size and different priorities.

Helpful information may be found at [www.quaker.ca](http://www.quaker.ca).



## CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST)

Interview with the Rev. Dr. Catherine Hubbard,  
Regional Minister of the Christian Church (Disciples  
of Christ) in Canada

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) traces its roots to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when two separate developments in Presbyterian contexts took place on American soil. First, Barton Stone, a Presbyterian minister and the leader of the Springfield Presbytery, led a process of dissolution of all denominational ties in his Presbytery in a quest for Christian unity. Members of the resulting community would simply call themselves Christian. Second, Thomas Campbell, the pioneer of the Restoration Movement that called for a return to the first-century roots of Christianity, and his son Alexander Campbell, a dedicated scholar, writer, speaker and educator, pioneered the formation of the Church of the Disciples. In 1834 the Christian Church and the Church of the Disciples agreed on basic beliefs and objectives, paving the path for full unity as the so-called Stone-Campbell movement developed over the next three and a half decades. In 1968, the Provisional Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was approved.

In 1810, the first Canadian congregation of the Disciples was founded near Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, and later other churches were established elsewhere in the country. From 1943 to 1985, unsuccessful discussions were held about merging with the United Church of Canada. Today the Christian Church in Canada constitutes a region of the larger Christian Church body in the USA. At the same time, the region of Canada has the status of a national church and has independent representation in the Canadian Council

of Churches and in the World Council of Churches. The Disciples are founding members of the CCC.

### **Policy and practice regarding interfaith relations**

The theological openness of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has room for the acknowledgement of, and respect for, people from other religions. God is too big to be monopolized. The awareness of the inclusive nature of God should be the platform for interfaith relations. If we all recognize God as our creator, we all share God's Spirit and our coming together should be seamless. Although the Christian Church is not formally one of the pacifist churches, it acknowledges itself as a peacemaker for other religions and with other religions. No religion should be oppressed and all religions should work together for peace and justice.

### **Hopes and visions for the future in regards to interfaith relations**

We hope to work for the identification of common ground with other religions. All religions foster love and family values in different ways regardless of whoever or however they call God. Even atheists have a moral life. Goodness is inherent in everyone. The ideal church should be a global church, a church of the world.

### **Fears and barriers**

We have become insular in our fight for survival. When we move into survival mode, our vision gets short-sighted. Our denomination is aging. There is fear not only of the unknown, but of the known as well. We are afraid of change. Since we are focused on our own demise, we are unable to direct our attention elsewhere. Our call and mission are far greater than witnessing our own decline.



## **Church's needs addressed by Interfaith Reference Group in the Council**

The Christian Church would welcome a serious exploration of the relationship between interfaith dialogue and the Aboriginal peoples of Canada. A reference group could contribute to a deepened sense of spirituality, not as something to be owned but as something to be shared. Education would be another objective. This should refer not only to learning about other faiths, but it should have a pastoral counseling component to assist our churches in overcoming our fears of the other. The Pauline reference to the abolishment of divisions (slave/free, male/female, etc.) could be read in the light in interfaith relations. However, the most important task of a reference group would be how to frame interfaith relations in the context of the policy and practice of Canadian multiculturalism. In this sense, Canada could set an example to the U.S. and the rest of the world.

## **Church's contribution to Reference Group**

There are some Disciples who would be great contributors to a reference group. As we say, "Unity is our polar star." Why not apply this principle not only to ecumenism but to interfaith relations?

Helpful information may be found at [www.disciple.org](http://www.disciple.org) and [www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ARTA0001610](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ARTA0001610).



## CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA-CANADA

Interview with the Rev. Bruce Adema,  
Director of Canadian Ministries for the  
Christian Reformed Church in North America-Canada

The Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in North America traces its origins to the Reformed faith in the Netherlands, inspired by Calvin's teachings. It was established in 1857, when four churches of about 130 Dutch families in Michigan separated from the Dutch Reformed Church around doctrinal, devotional and liturgical differences. With the arrival of new immigrants from Holland, new energy was injected into the denomination.

The presence of the CRC in Canada was given a great boost by the arrival of Dutch immigrants after World War II. Despite the culture clash generated between Dutch Americans (more focused on personal piety) and the Dutch Canadians (more interested in the social ramifications of the gospel), the development of a bi-national church was possible and continues to today.

### **Policy and practice regarding interfaith relations**

There is no official policy regarding interfaith relations. There is an Ecumenical Charter that was revised in the 2006 Synod. Ecumenical for the CRC means relations with other Christian churches and groups. When it comes to relating to other Christians, there are two categories: First, the CRC feels a close affinity to churches that are confessionally within the Reformed tradition. The practice of pulpit exchange is common with these churches. Next in line of proximity are the churches which the CRC recognizes as "Christian," meaning they hold to the basic tenets of the faith as articulated in the Apostles'

Creed. Some of these churches are in dialogue with the CRC, such as the Mennonite Church Canada. The CRC values a warm, collegial and supportive relationship with these churches.

The CRC is an active member of the Canadian Council of Churches and of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada. Although the CRC can be called “evangelical” in that it places a very strong emphasis on biblical fidelity, it also identifies with the historic churches in the vision of impacting the world at the level of government, education, industry, etc. It is committed to social involvement and it believes that God’s will for restoration and renewal applies to every area of life.

Theologically, the CRC holds the concept of *common grace*, which is different from the concept of *saving grace*. Saving grace is God’s gift to those who confess Jesus as Lord, whereas common grace is poured out upon the whole world. The concept of common grace is helpful when considering people of other faiths. It allows the Church to acknowledge and celebrate the presence of noble virtues, such as justice, fairness, and compassion in people who are not Christian. That kind of grace is theirs. They have much to contribute. However, that kind of grace does not lead to salvation. As a denomination, the hope is that interactions between people of different faiths will be friendly and courteous, and that those outside of the Christian Church will recognize the faith and hope resident in the hearts of Christ’s people. The CRC wants to be transparently and decidedly Christian and to make the way of Christian discipleship attractive to anyone. This denomination is convinced by the gospel, but does not want to be arrogant or insensitive, as that benefits no one and certainly does not lead to the expansion of the Kingdom of God.

### **Hopes and visions for the future in regards to interfaith relations**

The CRC hopes to be able to cooperate with people of other faiths in common concerns, particularly in freedom of religion and social

justice issues. Discrimination against religious minorities should be unacceptable. For example, persecution or attacks against Jews or Muslims are contrary to the basic principle of Christian love. If there were discrimination against Muslim schools, the CRC would stand with them against the injustice they face.

## **Fears and barriers**

There is always resistance to going beyond one's zone of comfort. There was a time in which the CRC had three levels of looking at others, particularly other Christians. First, looking into a mirror, that is relating to churches very similar to the CRC. Second, looking at other Reformed churches. Third, looking at non-Reformed churches, such as the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic. Historically, the CRC built up thick walls and confesses its tendency to be a little arrogant. A strict understanding of the faith was the norm. A question still remains in many circles: How can we have fellowship with churches that ordain homosexuals, if that is seen to be contrary to the teachings of scripture? However, the Canadian branch is more on the edge. As a member church of KAIROS, the CRC sees itself as articulating the voice of Christian common sense.

## **Church's needs addressed by Interfaith Reference Group in the Council**

Better understanding of our neighbors.

## **Church's contribution to Reference Group**

The CRC currently has a member in the Muslim-Christian Liaison Group. The CRC has scholars who could make themselves available to take part, and would value the opportunity.

Helpful information may be found at [www.crcna.org](http://www.crcna.org).



## COPTIC ORTHODOX CHURCH

### Interview with Father Ammonius Guirguis Coptic Orthodox Church in Canada

The Coptic Orthodox Church was officially established in Canada in 1964 when His Holiness Pope Cyril VI, the Patriarch of the See of Alexandria and the leader of the Coptic Orthodox Church, sent clergy from Egypt to North America with the purpose of serving the spiritual needs of Coptic Egyptians settled in the Toronto area. Following the original foundation of the Church of St. Mark in Scarborough (registered in the Province of Ontario in 1965), other Coptic communities were organized throughout Canada and the United States. Today there are about 24 Coptic Orthodox churches in Ontario, Quebec, Alberta, British Columbia, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick.

Shortly after their arrival in Canada, the Coptic clergy began to interact with leaders from other Christian denominations, developing important ecumenical relations that eventually led to the membership of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the Canadian Council of Churches.

### **Policy and practice regarding interfaith relations**

The Coptic Church in Canada does not have a formal policy regarding interfaith relations in Canada. All official policy-making depends on the direct consultation with Pope Shenouda III, the current Patriarch of the Coptic Church, since a bishop for Canada has not been appointed yet. The bishop of Canada is the pope himself, who keeps permanent contact with the Coptic churches in Canada and visits them regularly. Any interfaith practice in Canada is inspired by the model of Christian-Muslim relations in Egypt and the wisdom

and leadership of Pope Shenouda. Muslims and Christians in Egypt are fellow country people. They are friends and they send each other good wishes for special occasions, including religious feasts. Something similar is expected to develop in Canada.

As an immigrant community in Canada, the Coptic Orthodox Church's main priority is to support Coptic Egyptians in Canada in their process of getting settled and integrated into their new country and to provide a spiritual home for them in Canada. However, the Coptic Orthodox Church is also inserted in the ecumenical web of Canada and is open to dialogue and interaction with other Christians within a model of concentric circles, from the closest to them historically and theologically to the least close. The Coptic Orthodox Church is in full communion with other Oriental churches. It is engaged in close interaction with Eastern Orthodox churches, usually exchanging speakers. It holds official dialogues with the Roman Catholic Church at the level of the Patriarchate and has been an active member of the Canadian Council of Churches. Through its active membership at the Council, the Coptic Orthodox Church has been supportive of the Council's involvement in interfaith initiatives such as the Canadian Christian-Jewish Consultation and the National Christian-Muslim Liaison Group. However it has never undertaken any bilateral dialogue on its own in Canada given the fact that its needs and priorities lie elsewhere.

### **Hopes and visions for the future in regards to interfaith relations**

As part of its insertion in multicultural Canada, the Coptic Orthodox Church is ready to be engaged in interfaith initiatives to promote the common good and positive values in society within the realm of ethics and morality, but not for specifically religious activities.

### **Fears and barriers**

A specific concern when it comes to shared initiatives with people of other faiths is to send the wrong message that we are all the same.



## **Church's needs addressed by Interfaith Reference Group in the Council**

There would be no tangible benefit for the Coptic Orthodox Church other than showing zeal to be in peace with members of other religions. The Coptic Church does not want to be isolated in the context of multicultural Canada and would support the initiative.

A reference group should foster not only the knowledge of other religions among Christians, but the knowledge of Christianity among people of other religions.

## **Church's contribution to Reference Group**

The rich Coptic heritage would be available for other people to learn about it and from it. The next three paragraphs are the result of additional research made by the interviewer about the heritage mentioned by Father Guirguis.

From its very foundation in Egypt, the Coptic Orthodox Church has been engaged in interfaith relations. Although the Coptic Church traces its origins to St. Mark, the disciple of Jesus and one of the evangelists, it acknowledges that, prior to the ministry of St. Mark, there were Jewish communities settled in Egypt from which they first learned about Jesus of Nazareth and the community of his disciples. Some Coptic historians and theologians affirm that Judaism was the first channel through which they heard about Jesus. However, according to the gospel tradition of St. Matthew, Jesus himself dwelled in Egypt as an infant with Mary and Joseph, finding refuge there from Herod's persecution. This journey and the dwelling of the Holy Family in Egyptian lands is a cherished jewel that the Coptic Orthodox Church treasures and holds very dear to its heart.

A remarkable Christian community blossomed in Egypt, having the learned city of Alexandria as its See. Alexandria became one of the ancient patriarchates of Christianity, together with Jerusalem, Antioch and Rome. Theological, catechetical and liturgical developments gave the Coptic Church a unique place in the larger

context of Christianity.

The Islamic conquest of Egypt posed a critical challenge to the Coptic Orthodox Church. For the past 14 centuries, Egypt has been a symbol of Islamic-Christian coexistence. It has been a long, bitter-sweet history of relations with cycles of respect, tolerance, restrictions and persecutions. With the emergence of the modern Egyptian identity after the revolution in 1919, Muslims and Coptics have reached out to one another against the religious intolerance of extremist groups. Respectful and cordial relations have been fostered under the leadership of Pope Shenouda. “Egyptian Christians look highly on Islamic civilization and its contributions to human heritage,” he said, adding that Islam is a religion of tolerance and mercy (Egypt State Information Service, [www.sis.gov.eg](http://www.sis.gov.eg)).

Perhaps the Coptic Church in Canada could model what has been done in Egypt for a long time. The church would also make available its facilities for meetings related to Council activities.

Helpful information about the Coptic Orthodox Church may be found at [www.coptic.net/EncyclopediaCoptica/](http://www.coptic.net/EncyclopediaCoptica/), [www.copticpope.org](http://www.copticpope.org), [www.copticchurch.net](http://www.copticchurch.net) and [www.stmark.toronto.on.coptorthodox.ca/copts.asp](http://www.stmark.toronto.on.coptorthodox.ca/copts.asp).

# ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX TEWAHEDO CHURCH

Interview with L.K. Father Messale Engeda  
and Mr. Alemaye Zenebe,  
Ehtiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in Canada

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church was established in Canada in 1984 with the arrival in Toronto of clergy from Jamaica, where the church had been previously established. It serves the spiritual needs of the approximately 40,000 Ethiopian Orthodox immigrants in Canada. Since 2007, there has been a bishop responsible for the Greater Toronto area. The church became a member of the Canadian Council of Churches in 1985.

## **Policy and practice regarding interfaith relations**

There is no official policy regarding interfaith relations. However, the church has an unwritten policy in multicultural Canada: to engage with everyone for common concerns regardless of their identity. Interfaith relations are not about doctrine. The church respects other religions as it expects to be respected in its faith and doctrine. At a practical level, the church engages other immigrant communities in solidarity to support each other in shared challenges.

As an immigrant church, the Ethiopian Orthodox community is still getting rooted in Canada. Its main priority is survival. It is still in a formation period. Without enough financial resources, it stretches itself beyond its capacity. Despite its limitations, it has established a Canadian Ethiopian organization to help newcomers in their settlement process.

When it comes to relating to other communities on religious grounds, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church reaches out to its sister

Oriental churches, with which it is in full doctrinal communion while keeping its autonomy. Through its active participation in the Canadian Council of Churches, it supports the interfaith initiatives of the Council. However there are no official initiatives with people of other faiths.

### **Hopes and visions for the future in regards to interfaith relations**

The primary hope is that we can all live together in harmony and solidarity. The Ethiopian church has a centuries-old tradition of peaceful interaction with Jews and Muslims while keeping its own identity. The church has the flexibility to welcome whatever may fit as long as it does not interfere with its core beliefs.

Religions have an important role in Canadian society. They continue to appeal to the heart of those in need of meaningful spiritual support. As an example, it is the church's experience that in mental health facilities patients are more willing to share their problems with their religious care providers than with their doctors.

### **Fears and barriers**

When becoming a player in multicultural Canada, the Ethiopian Church has to face the barriers of ignorance and prejudice as well as the disadvantages of being an immigrant community. There is little knowledge of Ethiopia in the West. The Western attitude about Africa sometimes reflects arrogance and most of the time ignorance. Many people still think of Africans as pagans to be converted without knowing that Africa is home to some of the finest and earliest expressions of Christianity, with a rich and deeply rooted philosophical and theological tradition.

A concern when interacting with some evangelical communities is precisely their lack of historical awareness and their exclusivist approach to salvation. This concern could easily be transferred to our relations with people of other faiths.

## **Church's needs addressed by Interfaith Reference Group in the Council**

The objectives of a reference group could be to gain more knowledge and understanding about other practices and policies; to respect the policies of others; to appreciate the differences between churches; and to connect interfaith with gender, the environment, human rights and peace by engaging in common initiatives regarding these issues.

## **Church's contribution to Reference Group**

Christ was not brought to Ethiopia by modern missionaries. On the contrary, Christianity has flourished and developed in Ethiopia from biblical times. Therefore, there is a rich tradition to be shared. Even prior to Christianity, Ethiopians held dear to their heart ancient traditions that led them to claim ties to the Ark of the Covenant as well as to King Solomon through the Queen of Sheba and their descendants.

Regarding interfaith relations, the Ethiopian church has a long history of interaction with Jews and Muslims that could offer some insights into multi-religious Canada. This would be something to be explored in the context of a reference group. In the Koran there is a reference to Ethiopia – “no Jihad for Ethiopia” – as a result of the Prophet Mohammed's connection to it. This reflects the peace potential of good relations, communication and dialogue.

As new immigrants in Canada, members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church bring not only problems to their new land, but also new experience, perspective and talent. Interfaith work for the Ethiopian Church is not so much about policy as it is a way of life. Jews, Christians and Muslims have coexisted in Ethiopia for centuries. They have been neighbors and friends regardless of their religious differences. Their different religious affiliations only became evident in situations such as a wedding or a funeral. When the food was served, then they would separate and gather according

to their religion. Otherwise, they experienced each other as the same in the most natural way.

Helpful information about the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church may be found at [www.eotcholysynod.org](http://www.eotcholysynod.org).

# EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN CANADA

Interview with the Rev. Paul N. Johnson,  
Assistant to the National Bishop  
of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada  
for Ecumenical and International Relations

The first Lutheran worship in North America took place in 1619 and was conducted by a Danish pastor near Churchill in northern Manitoba in the context of an European expedition searching for the Northwest passage to the Far East. Canada's first Lutheran congregation was St. George's in Halifax, founded in 1755. After the American Revolution, many Americans of German background came to Canada. Eventually, waves of German and Scandinavian Lutherans also came to Canada directly from their homelands.

The organization and development of the Lutheran presence in Canada has been closely tied to Lutheran Church bodies in the United States. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) was organized in 1986 through the merger of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada (ELCC, originally constituted in 1966) and three synods of the Canada Section of the Lutheran Church in America (LCA). Shortly after its constitution, the ELCIC became a member of the Canadian Council of Churches.

## **Policy and practice regarding interfaith relations**

The ELCIC is very open to as much as it can practically accomplish. It is involved in the Canadian Christian-Jewish Consultation and the National Muslim-Christian Liaison Committee. A Lutheran Muslim Relations Committee has been established within the Ecumenical and International relations portfolio. As a member of the Lutheran

World Federation (LWF), the ELCIC is nurtured by the interfaith experience of fellow Lutherans across the globe, who are immersed in areas densely populated by people of other faiths in Africa, East Asia and South East Asia. As an example, there are four million Lutherans in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country. The ELCIC is also a member of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and a supporter of that organization's interfaith endeavours.

### **Hopes and visions for the future in regards to interfaith relations**

The ELCIC would like to do more work, enabling its people to live together in peace and work together for justice with people of other faiths in Canada and around the world; the ELCIC sees ecumenical efforts as one way it can expand its own work.

A present priority project for the ELCIC is "Meeting Our Muslim Neighbours," currently in early stages. It is hoped eventually to provide resources for every congregation in the church, particularly those who share community with Muslims, in order to establish relationships of deep friendship on an ongoing basis.

### **Fears and barriers**

Again, shrinking resources – personnel, financial, and time – all make it harder to accomplish some of the things we might like to do.

### **Church's needs addressed by Interfaith Reference Group in the Council**

Practical resources for interfaith work at the grassroots level, and a means for networking communally and ecumenically for interfaith work... a tall order.

### **Church's contribution to Reference Group**

What the ELCIC is able to do through the CCC and through the efforts of volunteer personnel.

Helpful information may be found at [www.elcic.ca](http://www.elcic.ca).



## GREEK ORTHODOX METROPOLIS OF TORONTO

Interview with  
the Rev. Archpriest Father Peter Avgeropoulos,  
Director of Inter-Church Relations of the  
Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Toronto (Canada)

Immigration to Canada from Greece started in the early 1900s and currently there are approximately 350,000 Greek Orthodox Christians in Canada. Shortly after the arrival of the first immigrants, churches were established in Montreal, Toronto and Thunder Bay. By 1960, the number of churches had increased to 13. These communities were under the spiritual and canonical jurisdiction of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America with offices in New York City. In the same year, a bishop was appointed for Canada and, in 1979, the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Toronto (Canada) was created. There are currently 78 Greek Orthodox communities across the country.

### **Policy and practice regarding interfaith relations**

The Metropolis has been actively engaged in interfaith initiatives for common concerns. An example of this is the leadership role that Bishop Sotirios, the Metropolitan of the Diocese of Toronto, had as the chair of the Multi-faith Coalition for Equal Funding of Faith-Based Schools in Ontario. This example reflects a positive attitude towards interfaith cooperation and it also shows great consistency with the global Greek Orthodox leadership of His All Holiness Bartholomew, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, whose commitment to the environmental cause has gained him the title of “Green Patriarch” and has engaged the Greek Orthodox Church with people of other faiths in a very positive way worldwide.

It is relevant to mention that a World Religions course is included in the curriculum of the Toronto Orthodox Theological Academy, a school created to train Greek Orthodox candidates for the priesthood (information found by interviewer in further research).

## **Hopes and visions for the future in regards to interfaith relations**

Despite its openness towards interfaith initiatives, the Metropolis' priorities lie elsewhere: to continue to offer support to Greek Orthodox communities across the country as they face the challenge of enculturation in Canada. When it comes to relating to others, the engagement takes place in concentric circles that go from the closest to the most distant. First, the Metropolis reaches out to other Orthodox. Greek, Antiochian, Ukrainian, Russian, Romanian and Serbian Orthodox bishops have constituted a council that meets once a year. Next, the Metropolis relates to the Oriental churches. After that, the Metropolis engages other Christian traditions, and beyond. The CCC is a permanent forum for the ecumenical engagement of the Metropolis. It is also a window into the interfaith initiatives in which the Council participates. The hope of the Metropolis is to continue to engage other traditions for common concerns.

## **Fears and barriers**

The history of the Greek Orthodox Church is filled with both good and hostile relations with Islam. The historical consciousness of the Greek people carries the despair of living under Islam. For many, it was primarily a negative experience. For Islam, other religions were considered heretical and first-borns were treated as taxes and forcibly converted into Islam for service in the army. However, at a personal level, there are many positive experiences of good relations between Greek Orthodox Christians and Muslims through friendship. The openness of the Canadian context helps heal the wounds from the past and focus on the positive potential of interfaith relations.

## **Church's needs addressed by Interfaith Reference Group in the Council**

A reference group should foster tolerance and understanding and help correct misunderstandings on all sides. The stature of the CCC at the international level should allow addressing the issue of parity regarding religious freedom in Muslim countries. Do Christians enjoy the same rights in predominantly Muslim countries that Muslims enjoy in predominantly Christian countries?

## **Church's contribution to Reference Group**

As stated above, the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople is building interfaith bridges at the global level around the environmental cause. This could certainly be an inspiration for initiatives in Canada. It is important to foster a sense of ownership of the reference group on the part of the participant churches. Unfortunately, there are not enough qualified people that can provide representation and speak with authority.

Helpful information may be found at [www.goarch.org](http://www.goarch.org), [www.ec-patr.org](http://www.ec-patr.org), [www.ecupatriarchate.org](http://www.ecupatriarchate.org).



## MENNONITE CHURCH CANADA

Interview with Dr. Robert Suderman and the Rev.  
Sven Ericksson,  
General Secretary and Denominational Minister  
respectively  
of Mennonite Church Canada

Mennonite Church Canada acknowledges itself as a descendant of the Anabaptist tradition inspired by the teachings and example of Menno Simons (1496-1561), a faithful follower of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is one of the historic peace churches committed to non-violence and pacifism.

The presence of Mennonites in Canada is the result of waves of immigrants from the U.S. and Europe, particularly from Russia. These waves led to the creation of different Mennonite conferences across Canada, some of which had ties with the U.S. A process of integration started in 1989 and crystallized in 2000 with the inauguration of the Mennonite Church Canada in Alberta. Mennonite Church Canada has 232 congregations and 34,000 baptized members. It has been a member of the Canadian Council of Churches since 2007.

### **Policy and practice regarding interfaith relations**

There is no official policy regarding interfaith work as there is very limited engagement in inter-religious relations at the official level. However, this is not due to opposition. On the contrary, there is official encouragement to be engaged. A recent statement of purpose portrays it when it states:

“God calls, equips and sends the church to engage the world with the reconciling gospel of Jesus Christ.”

It is not to embrace nor to confront, but to engage. This could apply to relations with people of other faiths. There is a more explicit reference provided by the Faith and Life Committee that identifies interfaith dialogue and understanding as one of its three priorities.

At the grassroots level, interfaith relations are happening in real life. Members of the Mennonite church are immersed in multicultural neighborhoods. They are surrounded by synagogues and mosques. At the level of the local congregations, some are proactively pursuing dialogues with rabbis and imams. A recent book by Mennonite author Brice Balmer, *Meeting Our Multifaith Neighbour*, collects some of these experiences.

### **Hopes and visions for the future in regards to interfaith relations**

As Dr. Guder reminds us in his work *Missional Church*, God is active in the world beyond the church. God is at work in Judaism, Islam and other religions. Our hope is to align ourselves to it.

### **Fears and barriers**

Fear comes from ignorance. There have been some critical responses to Brice Balmer's book, saying that it is too open. This criticism highlights the question about the relationship between evangelism and dialogue. Does dialogue mean giving up the mandate to convert people? It is important to discern and clarify what is the intent of dialogue. The leaders of this enterprise are primarily the pastors. How do we have them engaged in dialogue with their counterparts in other religions? After 9/11 there were gestures of solidarity. How could that become a normal behavior?

### **Church's needs addressed by Interfaith Reference Group in the Council**

A reference group should function as a *think tank*. Attention should continue to be paid to Islam, but not exclusively. The Sikh community

is very relevant too. The group should specialize in diversity. The church has a great need to understand the great diversity within other religions in order to avoid inaccurate and unfair simplifications and stereotyping. Religious traditions are not homogeneous. Religions are not monolithic. The churches have to be coached in developing a strategic savvy: how to connect with the other in a way that is helpful and not naïve and offensive? At the same time, the churches should learn how to portray their own diversity. There are some misrepresenting images about Christianity in the multi-faith milieu. A recent article related Christians to gun possession in North America. Who has the public voice about what it means to be Christian? It is important to present the meaning of Christianity with clarity.

### **Church's contribution to Reference Group**

Mennonite Church Canada is engaged in more than 40 countries. It is interacting with other faiths and learning from this global interaction. Its presence in the Middle East is particularly relevant for interacting with Jews and Muslims. Canadian Mennonite University offers a learning tour to Israel and Palestine with an interfaith learning component. Some professors are writing joint papers with people of other faiths. The Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre has brought Muslim theologians from Iraq. The church has gone to Iraq as well. This experience could be put to the service of a reference group.

Helpful information may be found at [www.mennonitechurch.ca](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca).





## PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA

Interview with the Rev. Mark Lewis,  
Convener of the Ecumenical and Interfaith  
Relations Committee  
of the Presbyterian Church in Canada

Presbyterianism in Canada traces its roots to the late 1500s and early 1600s with the arrival of the Huguenots in the earliest French settlements in Quebec. The modern Presbyterian Church in Canada traces its Canadian roots to the arrival of Scottish Presbyterians in Nova Scotia in the mid-1700s. The primary theological influence for the Huguenots was John Calvin, and for the Scottish Presbyterians, John Knox. As more congregations were established, they became organized into four distinct Canadian Presbyterian Churches until they joined together as the Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1875. For the next 50 years the PCC continued to grow and became the largest Christian denomination in English speaking Canada. In 1925, some 70% of its congregations joined with the Methodist Church of Canada and the Congregationalist Union to form the United Church of Canada. The remaining 30% has carried forward the historic presence, identity and continuity of Presbyterians in Canada. The Presbyterian Church in Canada is a founding member of the Canadian Council of Churches.

### **Policy and practice regarding interfaith relations**

After the events of September 11, 2001, a greater awareness of the importance of learning about people of other faiths developed. As a result, the International Affairs Committee presented the report *Reconciliation and Hope in a Multi-Faith World* to the 2003 General Assembly. This document focuses on Islam and Christian Muslim

relations. In 2004, the committee on ecumenism changed its name by adding the word “interfaith” and became the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee. This Committee presented to the 2007 General Assembly a recommendation to adopt an interfaith mandate that encourages Presbyterians “to acknowledge, understand and appreciate other faith traditions and be in good relationship with persons who belong to other religions.” The recommendation was adopted, reflecting the increasing commitment of the PCC to interfaith issues.

Prior to the recent focus on Islam, there was an ongoing dialogue with the Jewish community. Both relationships are expressed in the PCC commitment to the Canadian Christian-Jewish Consultation and the National Muslim-Christian Liaison Committee.

In 1994, the PCC also articulated an official confession in which it expresses its regrets for its participation with other Canadian churches in encouraging the Canadian government to ban some spiritual practices through which Aboriginal peoples experienced the presence of the creator God. This act opens a window to acknowledge the validity of Aboriginal religion and its rightful participation as an important player in Canadian multi-faith initiatives and networks.

## **Hopes and visions for the future in regards to interfaith relations**

It is the hope of the PCC that the current interfaith initiatives will grow stronger in the future.

## **Fears and barriers**

Fear, prejudice and ignorance on part of conservatives of all faiths. In the PCC, there is a diversity of opinions about people of other faiths. However, openness seems to be the attitude of the majority.

Although Jews and Muslims are regarded by Christianity as theological cousins, Jews have a special place in the Church that

Muslims do not have. Therefore, it would be convenient to start any interfaith initiative with the Jewish community before moving further.

Dichotomy between congregations and leadership.

### **Church's needs addressed by Interfaith Reference Group in the Council**

Good and simple educational resources. Documentation promoting understanding, appreciation and respect for all religions.

### **Church's contribution to Reference Group**

PCC would be receptive and supportive of an interfaith reference group. There is desire within leadership. Excellent resource people with a keen interest in interfaith relations would be available to offer support.

Helpful information may be found at [www.presbyterian.ca](http://www.presbyterian.ca) and [www.csph.ca](http://www.csph.ca).



## REGIONAL SYNOD OF CANADA REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA

Interview with the Rev. Siebrand Wilts,  
Stated Clerk of the Regional Synod of Canada  
Reformed Church in America

The Reformed Church in America traces its origins to the establishment of New Amsterdam, currently New York, by Dutch colonists in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Although their primary objective was commercial, the settlers brought their church with them. For more than a century, these reformed communities conducted worship in Dutch. English was first used in 1764. In 1819, the church incorporated in the USA as the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church and, in 1869, it changed its name to The Reformed Church in America (RCA).

The presence of the RCA in Canada is also linked to Dutch immigration. The American Revolution contributed to the settlement of Dutch Loyalists along the St. Lawrence River. In the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, new waves of Dutch immigrants in Canada generated new congregations. In 1993, they were organized into the Regional Synod of Canada comprising three classes (the plural of classis): Ontario, Canadian Prairies and British Columbia.

The RCA has about 300,000 members who claim to be “reformed and always reforming.”

### **Policy and practice regarding interfaith relations**

The RCA considers itself evangelical, ecumenical and reformed. Different members place emphasis on one aspect more than on the others. However, the three aspects portray a fairly strong policy on the uniqueness of Christ. In addition to its CCC membership, the RCA is also a member of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada.

Ecumenical relations are dealt with by the General Synod Office in the United States. At the denominational level, the RCA is highly interested in interfaith relations. This interest has been particularly fostered by the events of 9/11. The 2006 general synod considered a motion to investigate and provide resources about Muslims.

However, the engagement of the RCA in interfaith relations is not new. Its wide missionary activity has put it into contact with other religions, particularly with Judaism and Islam in the Middle East. There, the RCA is involved in a ministry of hospitality and reconciliation with Palestinian Refugees regardless of their religious identity. It is particularly noteworthy the participation of the RCA in the creation of the Al-Amana Centre in Oman, whose purpose is “to build bridges of understanding and cooperation between religions to work together for the common good of all.” The Sultan of Oman was a special guest of the RCA and addressed the General Synod. Equally noteworthy is an interactive resource for Christian Muslim relations at the RCA website, a helpful place to learn about Islam and Muslims in North America.

The Canadian Synod is allowed to get involved in regional initiatives. RCA classes are involved in the Ontario Multi-faith Committee on Religious and Spiritual Care.

### **Hopes and visions for the future in regards to interfaith relations**

There is not a particular interfaith vision of the RCA in Canada. The priority is church development, getting the message across. There are no resources for more at the regional level. There is discouragement to get too involved in ecumenical affairs.

### **Fears and barriers**

The small size of the RCA in Canada is a major limitation to engage in any initiatives beyond its priorities. There are only 46 churches across Canada. On the other hand, the theological profile of the

Canadian synod tends to be more traditional. However, there is a growing awareness that Christ's kingdom is larger than the evangelical community.

### **Church's needs addressed by Interfaith Reference Group in the Council**

There would be minimal interest at the Canadian level.

### **Church's contribution to Reference Group**

Long history in the Middle East working with Jews and Muslims. Commissions have written reports on interfaith relations.

Helpful information may be found at [www.rca.org](http://www.rca.org).





## SALVATION ARMY

### Interview with Major Jim Champ, Interfaith Relations Officer of the Salvation Army in Canada

The Salvation Army began in England in 1865 through the charitable work of London minister William Booth among the poor on the streets. Although his original intent was not to found a separate denomination, he soon realized the challenge posed by bringing the destitute and the homeless into the life and worship of existing congregations. Therefore, he established a church for them: the East London Christian Mission. This original foundation expanded and today the Army is active in over 110 countries.

The Salvation Army was established in Canada in 1882. Throughout its more than 120 years in the country it has become the largest non-governmental direct provider of social services in Canada today. The Salvation Army is one of the founding members of the Canadian Council of Churches.

### **Policy and practice regarding interfaith relations**

The Salvation Army is considered to be the *roll-up-your-sleeves* branch of the Christian church, constantly actualizing the mandate of *helping anyone, anytime, anywhere*. The specific reference to *helping anyone* reveals its commitment to a non-discriminatory vision of providing assistance to anyone regardless of creed or religious affiliation. However, all the service work of the Army emanates from its Christian identity and mission, which is non-negotiable.

There is no formal policy regarding people of other faiths and the Army's official participation in interfaith activities is fairly minimal. The only engagement is indirect through the Canadian

Council of Churches' involvement in dialogues with Jews and Muslims, of which the Army is supportive. Nevertheless, at the local and individual level, there is informal, sometimes even unintended, engagement in interfaith work in hospital settings and community events. For example, in Lawrence and Warden (Toronto), there is a community event two or three times a year that engages people from all directions. A similar exposure to religious diversity takes place at the Scarborough Hospital in Toronto.

### **Hopes and visions for the future in regards to interfaith relations**

Although there is not much engagement yet, interfaith dialogue is of interest to the Salvation Army and there is potential opportunity for further discussion.

### **Fears and barriers**

Interfaith dialogue should not be a threat but an opportunity. However, we have to be transparent.

### **Church's needs addressed by Interfaith Reference Group in the Council**

Since The Salvation Army is not specifically engaged in interfaith work right now, needs might become more obvious down the road. Learning about other religions is certainly important. However, it has to be two-sided. We share this country and the understanding should happen both ways. The objectives of dialogue should be established clearly.

### **Church's contribution to Reference Group**

The Salvation Army has an open policy of not targeting any specific group by race, ethnicity, etc. We are seen as partners and we are trusted. Regarding interfaith engagement, the challenge is to make dialogue part of the priorities and part of the job description of

a paid position. For this and any type of financial contribution, interfaith work has to captivate people's interest. Any financial contribution at this time would imply a redirection of funds from the current allocations.

Helpful information may be found at [www.salvationarmy.org](http://www.salvationarmy.org) and [www.salvationarmy.ca](http://www.salvationarmy.ca).



## UKRAINIAN CHURCH OF CANADA

Interview with Father Bohdan Hladio,  
Chair of the Presidium of the Consistory of the  
Ukrainian Church of Canada,  
and with Father Ihor Kutash,  
Pastor of St. Mary the Protectress Parish in Montreal  
and Lecturer at St. Andrew's College in Winnipeg

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada was founded in 1918 as a distinct Canadian institution by Ukrainian immigrants in the Canadian prairies with the purpose of maintaining the faith of their homeland in their new land. In 1951, it became a Metropolia with three eparchies and, in 1990, it was received into the jurisdiction the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. It has approximately 32,000 adherents (including approximately 11,000 dues-paying adult members) distributed in 65 congregations/parochial districts across Canada, and is served by approximately 100 clergy, of whom approximately one-third are retired. Its membership comprises between 20 and 25 percent of the total active and engaged Canadian Ukrainian population.

### **Policy and practice regarding interfaith relations**

There is no official policy, nor awareness of any official statements regarding interfaith affairs. However, the last two consistory meetings encouraged engagement and participation. The church is not actively pursuing dialogue in a macro scale. Cases are looked at on an *ad hoc* basis. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church has interacted with the Jewish community. It has taken part in a ritual commemoration of the Shoah. It has also been part of an interfaith school board advisory group in Hamilton. Theologically, the Ukrainian Church

would never have common liturgies with people of other faiths. Socially, the Ukrainian Church would take part in interfaith events.

## **Hopes and visions for the future in regards to interfaith relations**

The relationship of the church with the world requires genuine communication with people of other faiths without any coercion to change anyone's perspectives. There is a creative tension between the evangelical imperative or divine mandate to preach the gospel and the fact that the church would decry any attempt at coercion of non-Christians into conversion. People should be free to make choices.

The church also favours real dialogue over simply getting information about people of other faiths. It is one thing to read about them, but another thing entirely to meet and talk to a living representative.

## **Fears and barriers**

Three different types of barriers could be identified:

- a. Linguistic: until recently, the Ukrainian church has been a community of immigrants.
- b. Theological: the truths we hold will prevent us from standing together theologically with people of other faiths.
- c. Basic human failings: People are afraid of difference. Sometimes diversity makes them feel insecure. Ultimately, it may have nothing to do with a person's faith.

## **Church's needs addressed by Interfaith Reference Group in the Council**

A reference group would facilitate the sharing of informative resources, which will eventually help to understand others better and to foster mutual recognition and respect. The understanding has to

be mutual and it should, hopefully, contribute to the elimination of stereotypes and demonizations.

There could also be a benefit at a practical level related to rites of passage in other traditions. A daughter of a parishioner married a Hindu person. A situation like this is usually perceived as a very negative thing. However, it would help the relatives to know what happens in a Hindu wedding ceremony.

Some educational material from a reference group could be helpful, particularly if they are the result of a consultation.

### **Church's contribution to Reference Group**

Orthodoxy is a unity in diversity. Although theologically we remain true to our beliefs, sociologically we share with Canadian Hindus, Buddhists, Jews and Muslims our common experience as immigrants. However, as popular wisdom states, strong fences make good neighbors. There has to be an agenda that is open and clear at the same time.

We would be concerned about talking about others without them being present. We need erudite non-Christians at the table.

Helpful information may be found at [www.uocc.ca](http://www.uocc.ca).





## UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

### Interview with Dr. Gail Allan, Program Coordinator Interchurch and Interfaith/Ecumenical Officer of The United Church of Canada

Founded in 1925, The United Church of Canada is the fruit of the active ecumenical discernment undertaken by several Christian denominations in Canada at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to achieve organic unity. The Methodist Church of Canada, the Congregational Union of Canada, two-thirds of the Presbyterian Church in Canada and the general Council of Union Churches from Western Canada agreed to form the United Church, which later welcomed two other denominations: the Synod of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Bermuda and the Canada Conference of the Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1930 and 1968 respectively. The history of the United Church is entwined with the development of Canada during the past century. The United Church is the largest Protestant denomination in Canada and it is a founding member of the Canadian Council of Churches.

### **Policy and practice regarding interfaith relations**

The very ecumenical nature and genesis of the United Church has permeated its history and its openness to people of other faiths. In its early discernment about its identity, the United Church saw itself as not only united but uniting. The United Church has embraced its vocation and mission to be an instrument for unity. This united/uniting role is conveyed in a document released in 1936. Although this attitude is primarily related to other Christian churches, it paved the way for the United Church's willingness to acknowledge the importance of cooperation with people of other faiths.

The missionary activity of the United Church also contributed to its theological reflection on other religions. In the 1960s, the Commission on Mission stated that God is creatively and redemptively at work in the religious life of humankind. This awareness has permeated the United Church's internal dialogue and decision-making in the midst of its own theological diversity. When faced with the need to assert its Christological position, the United Church has reminded itself of social interpretation of the gospel by often adding to its statements the following saying: "in a pluralistic world in which we are called to love the neighbour." This need has its roots in the Social Gospel movement, which shaped the United Church from its early days.

The interfaith work of the United Church is being done both on its own and through ecumenical bodies. Two important milestones of the United Church's commitment to people of other faiths are the documents *Bearing Faithful Witness* and *Mending the World*. *Bearing Faithful Witness* is the result of an extensive consultation about United Church/Jewish Relations with a focus on how not to perpetuate biases. The document was circulated to congregations, went to two General Councils and was approved in 2003. *Mending the World* is the fruit of a 1988 ecumenical agenda research project on a renewed understanding of ecumenism. It contains the United Church interfaith policy based on a commitment to whole world ecumenism, seeking the unity of the Christian community and respectful relationships with other faiths for the healing of the world. After extensive consultation, the document was accepted in 1997. The inclusive character of *Mending the World* was a challenge for some ecumenical partners. In 1997, the General Council also proposed additional work on Islam and Aboriginal Spirituality. In 2003 a study guide on United Church/Muslim relations was created: *That We May Know Each Other*. After circulation among congregations and Muslim interlocutors, a statement on United Church-Muslim

relations was approved by General Council in 2006, encouraging both parties to work together in the pursuit of justice. The process for the Aboriginal reflection has been different - more internal.

The initiatives above reflect a very strong commitment from the United Church to educate its members about other faiths. Also at the national level, there is active participation in the Canadian Christian-Jewish Consultation and in the Muslim-Christian Liaison Committee. United Church staff have given leadership in efforts to create a council of faiths. Staff also represent the United Church on the Board of World Conference on Religion and Peace. At the local level, this commitment varies from congregation to congregation across the country and from person to person in congregations. There is individual, active involvement in interfaith initiatives. The Edmonton Interfaith Centre for Education and Action is an example. There is a sense of commitment to be locally involved.

### **Hopes and visions for the future in regards to interfaith relations**

That some kind of national council of faiths may be established. That interfaith work may happen locally as well as nationally. That we can discern together ways in which we could work together for the mending of the world.

### **Fears and barriers**

Given the strong commitment of the United Church to interfaith work, the challenge is how to relate to the other when doing this work, how to work together.

### **Church's needs addressed by Interfaith Reference Group in the Council**

A reference group would bring us together, would enable some types of justice work to find channels into a multi-faith environment. An example is the interfaith leaders letter on Darfur. The group would

help the Council to join with other faiths, recognizing that despite theological differences we can still discern how we can be together and what would be possible to do. It would create a space for very practical outcomes, to support each other as well as a bridge between both Commissions of the Council. How can we place ecumenical and interfaith relations within a justice framework? The group could also provide an avenue for theological reflection at the Faith and Witness commission on interfaith and mission. In 2010, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Edinburgh Missionary Conference will be celebrated and a global planning committee has been formed. The group could facilitate a Canadian reflection on Mission and Interfaith Relations.

### **Church's contribution to Reference Group**

Extensive interfaith experience and reflection. Staff time for active participation. Resources produced by the United Church. To invite, not impose vision on others.

Helpful information may be found at [www.united-church.ca](http://www.united-church.ca).

## APPENDIX

The Canadian Council of Churches  
Le Conseil canadien des Églises

### **Questions for Interfaith Discernement**

To help us prepare for the interview with the Christian Interfaith Liaison Ecumenical Officer, please reflect on the following questions.

1. What are your church's policies and practices in regard to interfaith work?
2. What are your church's visions and hopes in regard to interfaith work in Canada?
3. What barriers and challenges has your church encountered when considering interfaith work in Canada?
4. What would your church need from a Christian Interfaith Reference Group, if the Council were to establish one?
5. What would your church give to a Christian Interfaith Reference Group?
6. What else would you like brought to our attention as these questions are pondered and discussed?

