

# Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies

A major landmark in the area of inter-religious dialogue came in 1977 at a meeting in Chiang Mai, Thailand where a group of Christians representing many different ecclesiastical traditions drew up **Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies**. These guidelines serve as the basis of interreligious dialogue sponsored by the WCC and many churches around the world.

These guidelines were first published in 1979.

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## Introduction: Dialogue in community

Why the theme "Dialogue in Community"? As Christians live together with their neighbours of other faiths and ideological persuasions the emphasis has come to be placed not so much on dialogue itself as on dialogue in community. The Christian community within the human community has a common heritage and a distinctive message to share; it needs therefore to reflect upon the nature of the community Christians seek together with others and upon the relation of dialogue to the life of the churches, as they ask themselves how they can be communities of service and witness without diluting their faith or compromising their commitment to the Triune God. Such an enquiry needs to be informed both by a knowledge of different religions and ideologies and by insights gained through actual dialogues with their neighbours. The enquiry needs also to take into account the concerns, questions and experiences of the member churches of the WCC.

The Central Committee which met at Addis Ababa (1971) recognized that "the engagement of the World Council in dialogue is to be understood as a

common adventure of the churches". The World Council of Churches comprises various confessional heritages and a wide variety of convictions. The plurality of cultural situations as well as the varieties of religions, cultures, ideologies, political structures and social backgrounds which Christians bring to their common life together play a significant role in the discussions. Political attitudes and economic forces influence the power relationships between communities. In an age of worldwide struggle of humankind for survival and liberation, religions and ideologies have their important contributions to make, which can only be worked out in mutual dialogue.

It is a responsibility of Christians to foster such dialogue in a spirit of reconciliation and hope granted to us by Jesus Christ.

It is easy to discuss religions and even ideologies as though they existed in some realm of calm quite separate from the sharp divisions, conflicts and sufferings of humankind. Religions and ideologies often contribute to the disruption of communities and the suffering of those whose community life is broken. Therefore the statements made here on the relationship between Christian communities and communities of their neighbours should be read with a recognition that they have a place in the total WCC programme which includes major Christian involvement in political and economic stresses and social problems as well as in issues raised by science and technology for the future of humankind. Further, they should also be evaluated in relation to other WCC concerns and in their bearing in such discussions as the unity of the church and the unity (community) of humankind.

It will be noted that the statement and the guidelines touch religions more than ideologies. This is a conscious self-limitation because so far the sub-unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies (DFI) has more experience of actual dialogues with people of living faiths than of ideologies. However, this does not mean that the dialogue programme is not concerned with ideologies. It is part of its mandate, recognizing that religions and ideologies interact and influence each other in the life of the community. The manner in which ideological factors affect religious structures and attitudes has been considered in some of the consultations. Ideological questions touch many parts of the World Council's work. Christian-Marxist meetings were part of the programme of Church and Society for several years. In many countries Christians live and work together with neighbours who hold very definite ideological convictions. In its various programmes on science and technology, the search for a just, participatory and sustainable society, international affairs, development etc., the issues raised by ideologies play an important role. Therefore where reference to ideologies is made in the statement and

guidelines, it is recognized that continuing work in this area cannot be done by the DFI alone but has to be done in cooperation with other sub-units, and drawing on the previous experiences of the World Council as a whole in this matter.

The words "mission" and "evangelism" are not often used in this statement. This is not because of any desire to escape the Christian responsibility, re-emphasized in the Nairobi Assembly, to confess Christ today, but in order to explore other ways of making plain the intentions of Christian witness and service. Christian integrity includes an integrity of response to the call of the risen Christ to be witnesses to Him in all the world.

## **Part I: On community**

### **A. Communities and the community of humankind**

1. Christians begin their reflection on community from the acknowledgement that God as they believe Him to have come in Jesus Christ is the Creator of all things and of all humankind; that from the beginning He willed relationship with Himself and between all that He has brought to life; that to that end He has enabled the formation of communities, judges them and renews them. When Christians confess Him as one Holy Trinity, when they rejoice in His new creation in the resurrection of Christ, they perceive and experience new dimensions of the given humanity which God has given. Yet, the very nature and content of our Christian confession draws Christians to pay the closest attention to the realities of the world as it has developed under God's creative, disciplinary and redemptive rule. So they are led to attempt a description of communities and the community of humankind in the light of a basic Christian confession but in terms which may also find understanding and even agreement among many of other faiths and ideologies.

2. Men and women are all born into relationships with other people. Most immediately there are the members of their families, but quickly they have to explore wider relationships as they go to school or begin work. This may take place in the complexity of relationships within a village society, or within the modern urban centres of town and city which attract ever larger populations. They experience still wider associations within nation, race, religion, and at the same time they may belong to different social classes or castes which condition their ideological outlooks. Then the newspapers they read, the radio and T.V. programmes they hear and see give them an awareness of the multitude of ways in which the lives they live are dependent on people in other parts of the world, where ways of life are amazingly varied. From these, and

many related contexts, they derive their sense of being part of some communities and apart from others. The sense of identity with some communities and of alienation from others is something never completely understood but it remains reality for us all at the many levels of our existence.

3. Within each particular community to which people may belong they are held together with others by the values they share in common. At the deepest level these have to do with their identity, which gives them a sense of being "at home" in the groups to which they belong. Identity may be formed with a long historical experience, or in the face of problems newly encountered; it may express itself in communal traditions and rituals shaped through centuries, or in newer forms sometimes less coherent and sometimes more rigid. Religions and ideologies have formative influence on communities; but religions and ideologies have themselves been shaped by other elements of the culture of which they are part—language, ethnic loyalty, social strata, caste. Some communities may tend to uniformity in this regard, while others have long traditions of pluralism, and it is not infrequent that individual families may share more than one set of beliefs.

4. Human communities are many and varied. They are involved in a constant process of change which evokes their comparison with flowing rivers rather than stable monuments. But if change is always present, there can be no doubt that it has been accelerated in the present times, especially by scientific technology, economic forces and the mass media. Some changes are so rapid and dramatic as to give the experience of the loss of community and of the human isolation which follows. In other instances communities are structured and reshaped: once closed communities being thrown into relationship with others with which they find themselves engaged in the task of nation building; communities formerly of a single cultural identity being opened to a cultural pluralism and plurality of religious systems; communities in which traditional religious systems may undergo far-reaching change, and, revitalized, provide renewed identity and continuity with the past. Amidst these changes many people are alienated from all community and have either given up the quest for community or are seeking it from many sources.

5. An important aspect of this accelerated change has been brought about by the complex network of relationships which has been created between human communities in recent times. More urgently today than ever in the past, the traditions of our individual communities are being drawn towards one another, sometimes into a new harmony, sometimes into a destructive whirlpool in the flowing rivers. The inter-relatedness of human communities brings with it many new challenges to mutual concern and pastoral care, the response to

which, both individually and collectively as communities, will determine the character of the reality of "the community of humankind".

6. The response is often given in the form of ideologies. In fact the accelerated change has made people more sensitively aware of the need for conscious social and political action, because they find themselves in the midst of many ideological projects which attempt in various ways to shape or reshape society. Traditional communities do not escape the impact of ideological thinking and action and their varied responses may bring conflict as well as renewal.

7. There are dangers inherent in this situation, but experience of human inter-relatedness in different local situations deepens awareness of the richness of the diversity of the community of humankind which Christians believe to be created and sustained by God in His love for all people. They marvel and give thanks for this richness, acknowledging that to have experienced it has given many of them an enriched appreciation of the deeper values in their own traditions and in some cases has enabled them to rediscover them. But at the same time they feel sharply conscious of the way in which diversity can be, and too often has been, abused: the temptation to regard one's own community as the best; to attribute to one's own religious and cultural identity an absolute authority; the temptation to exclude from it, and to isolate it from others. In such temptations Christians recognize that they are liable to spurn and despoil the riches which God has, with such generosity, invested in His human creation ... that they are liable to impoverish, divide and despoil.

8. Because of the divisive role to which all religions and ideologies are so easily prone, they are each called to look upon themselves anew, so as to contribute from their resources to the good of the community of humankind in its wholeness. Thinking of the challenge to the Christian faith Christians are reminded both of the danger of saying "peace, peace" where there is no peace and of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount: "Happy are those who work for peace: God will call them His children." (Matt. 5. 9). As workers for peace, liberation, and justice, the way to which often makes conflict necessary and reconciliation costly, they feel themselves called to share with others in the community of humankind in search for new experiences in the evolution of communities, where people may affirm their interdependence as much as respect for their distinctive identities. At the Colombo consultation of 1974 the vision of a worldwide "community of communities" was discussed. Such a vision may be helpful in the search for community in a pluralistic world; it is not one of homogeneous unity or totalitarian uniformity, nor does it envisage self-contained communities, simply co-existing. Rather it

emphasizes the positive part which existing communities may play in developing the community of humankind (cf. para 6). For Christians the thought of a community of communities is further related to the kingly rule of God over all human communities.

## **B. The Christian community: The churches and the Church**

9. Scattered within the world of human communities, we as Christians look for signs of God's kingly rule and truly believe in our community with Christians everywhere in the Church, the Body of Christ. Being fully in the world, the Christian community shares in the many distinctions and divisions within and between the communities of humankind. It manifests immense cultural variety within itself, which we are bound to acknowledge as affecting not only the practice but also the interpretation of the faith by different groups of Christians. This is exemplified in South Asia by Christians who speak of their struggle, within cultures moulded by Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, to express their Christian faith in a spirit at once obedient to the Gospel and related to the cultural context. In Europe and North America the understanding and practice of the Christian faith has been deeply influenced by western culture.

10. Our experience as Christians in this widely scattered community is very varied. There are churches who live in situations of social, cultural and national suppression, where their identity is threatened and their freedom restricted. There are times and places where Christians may have to stand apart from others in loyalty to Christ but this does not absolve Christians who have indulged in the temptations of cultural arrogance and communal exclusiveness, both consciously and unconsciously. Thus they have contributed to the divisions within the community of humankind, and have created antagonisms between different groups within the Christian community itself. Christians, therefore, must stand under the judgement of God. We believe that there is a real sense in which our unity with all peoples lies in our common participation in- all that has so tragically created divisions within the world. It is in this way that we relate to our theme the experience of the empirical churches that they constantly need God's forgiveness.

11. But amidst this complex, confusing and humbling situation we believe that the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ retains its divine given-ness. The Gospel cannot be limited to any particular culture, but through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit sheds its light in them all and upon them all. Nor is the truth of the Gospel distorted by the sinfulness of its Christian adherents. Rather, the Gospel calls them individually and in community to repentance and

confession, and invites them into newness of life in the risen Christ. This reality of renewed Christian community pertains to our very deepest experience as Christians. There are many ways of speaking of this experience. For example:

- our communion in the Church as sacrament of the reconciliation and unity of humankind recreated through the saving activity of God in Jesus Christ;
- our communion with God who, in the fullness of His Trinity calls humankind into unity with Him in His eternal communion with His entire creation;
- our communion in fellowship with all members of the Body of Christ through history, across distinction of race, sex, caste and culture;
- a conviction that God in Christ has set us free for communion with all peoples and everything which is made holy by the work of God.

Though we may express our conviction of the reality of this community in different ways, we hold fast to God in Christ who nourishes His church by Word and Sacraments.

12. We must acknowledge the close relation between our concern for dialogue and our work for visible Church unity. It is not only that the different confessional traditions have been an influence on the different approaches to dialogue and that questions concerning dialogue are seriously discussed within and between churches, but also the contribution of Christians to dialogue is distorted by division among them.

13. In the WCC we experience both the possibility for common confession of faith and worship together and also the obstacles to Christian unity. We are agreed in giving a vital place in our thinking to Bible study and worship; we are able to worship our one Lord in the very different ways of the churches represented among us. Yet we are also aware of problems concerning the authority of the Bible remaining unsolved among us and of the fact that we are not yet part of one eucharistic fellowship. It is not surprising therefore that there is controversy among Christians about the meditative use (rather than simply the intellectual study) of the holy books of other faiths and about the question of common worship between those of different faiths. There is need for further careful and sensitive study of these issues, and we request the DFI to encourage such study among the member churches of the WCC and with our partners in dialogue.

14. As Christians we are conscious of a tension between the Christian community as we experience it to be in the world of human communities, and as we believe it in essence to be in the promise of God. The tension is fundamental to our Christian identity. We cannot resolve it, nor should we seek to avoid it. In the heart of this tension we discover the character of the Christian Church as a sign at once of people's need for fuller and deeper community, and of God's promise of a restored human community in Christ. Our consciousness of the tension must preclude any trace of triumphalism in the life of the Christian Church in the communities of humankind. It must also preclude any trace of condescension towards our fellow human beings. Rather it should evoke in us an attitude of real humility towards all peoples since we know that we together with all our brothers and sisters have fallen short of the community which God intends.

15. We understand our calling as Christians to be that of participating fully in the mission of God (*missio Dei*) with the courage of conviction to enable us to be adventurous and take risks. To this end we could humbly share with all our fellow human beings in a compelling pilgrimage. We are specifically disciples of Christ, but we refuse to limit Him to the dimensions of our human understanding. In our relationships within the many human communities we believe that we come to know Christ more fully through faith as Son of God and Saviour of the world; we grow in His service within the world; and we rejoice in the hope which He gives.

## **Part II: On dialogue**

### **C. Reasons for dialogue**

16. The term "dialogue in community", is useful in that it gives concreteness to Christian reflection on dialogue. Moreover it focuses attention on the reasons for being in dialogue, which can be identified in two related categories.

Most Christians today live out their lives in actual community with people who may be committed to faiths and ideologies other than their own. They live in families sometimes of mixed faiths and ideologies; they live as neighbours in the same towns and villages; they need to build up their relationships expressing mutual human care and searching for mutual understanding. This sort of dialogue is very practical, concerned with the problems of modern life - the social, political, ecological, and, above all, the ordinary and familiar.

But there are concerns beyond the local which require Christians to engage in dialogue towards the realization of a wider community in which peace and

justice may be more fully realized. This leads in turn to a dialogue between communities, in which issues of national and international concern are tackled.

17. No more than "community" can "dialogue" be precisely defined. Rather it has to be described, experienced and developed as a life-style. As human beings we have learned to speak; we talk, chatter, give and receive information, have discussions all this is not yet dialogue. Now and then it happens that out of our talking and our relationships arises a deeper encounter, an opening up, in more than intellectual terms, of each to the concerns of the other. This is experienced by families and friends, and by those who share the same faiths, or ideology; but we are particularly concerned with the dialogue which reaches across differences of faith, ideology and culture, even where the partners in dialogue do not agree on important central aspects of human life. Dialogue can be recognized as a welcome way of obedience to the commandment of the Decalogue: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour". Dialogue helps us not to disfigure the image of our neighbours of different faiths and ideologies. It has been the experience of many Christians that this dialogue is indeed possible on the basis of a mutual trust and a respect for the integrity of each participant's identity.

18. Dialogue, therefore, is a fundamental part of Christian service within community. In dialogue Christians actively respond to the command to "love God and your neighbour as yourself". As an expression of love engagement in dialogue testifies to the love experienced in Christ. It is a joyful affirmation of life against chaos, and a participation with all who are allies of life in seeking the provisional goals of a better human community. Thus "dialogue in community" is not a secret weapon in the armoury of an aggressive Christian militancy. Rather it is a means of living our faith in Christ in service of community with one's neighbours.

19. In this sense dialogue has a distinctive and rightful place within Christian life, in a manner directly comparable to other forms of service. But "distinctive" does not mean totally different or separate. In dialogue Christians seek "to speak the truth in a spirit of love", not naively "to be tossed to and fro, and be carried about with every wind of doctrine". (Eph. 4.14-15). In giving their witness they recognize that in most circumstances today the spirit of dialogue is necessary. For this reason we do not see dialogue and the giving of witness as standing in any contradiction to one another. Indeed, as Christians enter dialogue with their commitment to Jesus Christ, time and again the relationship of dialogue gives opportunity for authentic witness. Thus, to the

member churches of the WCC we feel able with integrity to commend the way of dialogue as one in which Jesus Christ can be confessed in the world today; at the same time we feel able with integrity to assure our partners in dialogue that we come not as manipulators but as genuine fellow-pilgrims, to speak with them of what we believe God to have done in Jesus Christ who has gone before us, but whom we seek to meet anew in dialogue.

#### **D. The theological significance of people of other faiths and ideologies**

20. Christians engaged in faithful "dialogue in community" with people of other faiths and ideologies cannot avoid asking themselves penetrating questions about the place of these people in the activity of God in history. They ask these questions not in theory, but in terms of what God may be doing in the lives of hundreds of millions of men and women who live in and seek community together with Christians, but along different ways. So dialogue should proceed in terms of people of other faiths and ideologies rather than of theoretical, impersonal systems. This is not to deny the importance of religious traditions and their inter-relationships but it is vital to examine how faiths and ideologies have given direction to the daily living of individuals and groups and actually affect dialogue on both sides.

21. Approaching the theological questions in this spirit Christians should proceed:

- with repentance, because they know how easily they misconstrue God's revelation in Jesus Christ, betraying it in their actions and posturing as the owners of God's truth rather than, as in fact they are, the undeserving recipients of grace;
- with humility, because they so often perceive in people of other faiths and ideologies a spirituality, dedication, compassion and a wisdom which should forbid them making judgements about others as though from a position of superiority; in particular they should avoid using ideas such as "anonymous Christians", "the Christian presence", "the unknown Christ", in ways not intended by those who proposed them for theological purposes or in ways prejudicial to the self-understanding of Christians and others;
- with joy, because it is not themselves they preach; it is Jesus Christ, perceived by many people of living faiths and ideologies as prophet, holy one, teacher, example; but confessed by Christians as Lord and Saviour, Himself the faithful witness and the coming one (Rev. 1.5-7);

- with integrity, because they do not enter into dialogue with others except in this penitent and humble joyfulness in the Lord Jesus Christ, making clear to others their own experience and witness, even as they seek to hear from others their expressions of deepest conviction and insight. All these would mean an openness and exposure, the capacity to be wounded which we see in the example of our Lord Jesus Christ and which we sum up in the word vulnerability.

22. Only in this spirit can Christians hope to address themselves creatively to the theological questions posed by other faiths and by ideologies. Christians from different backgrounds are growing in understanding in the following areas in particular:

- that renewed attention must be given to the doctrine of creation, particularly as they may see it illuminated by the Christian understanding of God as one Holy Trinity and by the resurrection and glorification of Christ;
- that fundamental questions about the nature and activity of God and the doctrine of the Spirit arise in dialogue, and the christological discussion must take place with this comprehensive reference; that the Bible, with all the aids to its understanding and appropriation from the churches' tradition and scholarship, is to be used creatively as the basis for Christian reflection on the issues that arise, giving both encouragement and warning, though it cannot be assumed as a reference point for partners in dialogue;
- that the theological problems of church unity also need to be viewed in relation to the concern for dialogue;
- that the aim of dialogue is not reduction of living faiths and ideologies to a lowest common denominator, not only a comparison and discussion of symbols and concepts, but the enabling of a true encounter between those spiritual insights and experiences which are only found at the deepest levels of human life.

23. We look forward to further fruitful discussions of these issues (among many others) within our Christian circles but also in situations of dialogue. There are other questions, where agreement is more difficult and sometimes impossible, but these also we commend for further theological attention:

- What is the relation between the universal creative/redemptive activity of God towards all humankind and the particular

creative/redemptive activity of God in the history of Israel and in the person and work of Jesus Christ?

- Are Christians to speak of God's work in the lives of all men and women only in tentative terms of hope that they may experience something of Him, or more positively in terms of God's self-disclosure to people of living faiths and ideologies and in the struggle of human life?
- How are Christians to find from the Bible criteria in their approach to people of other faiths and ideologies, recognizing, as they must, the authority accorded to the Bible by Christians of all centuries, particular questions concerning the authority of the Old Testament for the Christian Church, and the fact that the partners in dialogue have other starting points and resources, both in holy books and traditions of teaching?
- What is the biblical view and Christian experience of the operation of the Holy Spirit, and is it right and helpful to understand the work of God outside the Church in terms of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit?

## **E. Syncretism**

24. In dialogue Christians are called to be adventurous, and they must be ready to take risks; but also to be watchful and wide awake for God. Is syncretism a danger for which Christians must be alert?

25. There is a positive need for a genuine "translation" of the Christian message in every time and place. This need is recognized as soon as the Bible translators begin their work in a particular language and have to weigh the cultural and philosophical overtones and undertones of its words. But there is also a wider "translation" of the message by expressing it in artistic, dramatic, liturgical and above all in relational terms which are appropriate to convey the authenticity of the message in ways authentically indigenous, often through the theologically tested use of the symbols and concepts of a particular community.

26. Despite attempts to rescue the word "syncretism" it now conveys, after its previous uses in Christian debate, a negative evaluation. This is clearly the case if it means, as the Nairobi Assembly used the word, "conscious or unconscious human attempts to create a new religion composed of elements taken from different religions". In this sense syncretism is also rejected by the dialogue partners, although there may be some who in their alienation are seeking help from many sources and do not regard syncretism negatively.

27. The word "syncretism" is, however, more widely used than at Nairobi and particularly to warn against two other dangers.

The first danger is that in attempting to "translate" the Christian message for a cultural setting or in approach to faiths and ideologies with which Christians are in dialogue partnership, they may go too far and compromise the authenticity of Christian faith and life. They have the Bible to guide them but there is always risk in seeking to express the Gospel in a new setting: for instance, the early Christian struggle against heresy in the debate with Gnosticism; or the compromising of the Gospel in the so-called "civil religions" of the West. It is salutary to examine such examples lest it be supposed that syncretism is a risk endemic only in certain continents.

A second danger is that of interpreting a living faith not in its own terms but in terms of another faith or ideology. This is illegitimate on the principles of both scholarship and dialogue. In this way Christianity may be "syncretized" by seeing it as only a variant of some other approach to God, or another faith may be wrongly "syncretized" by seeing it only as partial understanding of what Christians believe that they know in full. There is a particular need for further study of the way in which this kind of syncretism can take place between a faith and an ideology.

28. Both these are real dangers and there will be differences of judgement among Christians and between churches as to when these dangers are threatening, or have actually overtaken particular Christian enterprises. Despite the recognized dangers Christians should welcome and gladly engage in the venture of exploratory faith. The particular risks of syncretism in the modern world should not lead Christians to refrain from dialogue, but are an additional reason for engaging in dialogue so that the issues may be clarified.

29. Within the ecumenical movement the practice of dialogue and the giving of witness have sometimes evoked mutual suspicion. God is very patient with the Church, giving it space and time for discovery of His way and its riches (cf. II Pet. 3.9). There is need within the ecumenical fellowship to give one another space and time space and time, for instance, in India or Ghana to explore the richness of the Gospel in a setting very different from that of "Hellenized" Europe; space and time, for instance, in Korea to develop the present striking evangelistic work of the churches; space and time, for instance, in Europe to adjust to a new situation in which secularity is now being changed by new religious interest not expressed in traditional terms. The diversity of dialogue

itself must be recognized in its particular content and in its relation to specific context.

### **Part III: Guidelines recommended to the churches for study and action**

From the experiences of Christians in dialogue with people of living faiths and ideologies and from the statement of the Central Committee on "Dialogue in Community" it is evident that dialogue has become urgent for many Christians today. The Guidelines which follow are built upon the Christian convictions expressed in the first two parts of this statement; the statement and the guidelines should be read together.

It is Christian faith in the Triune God Creator of all humankind, Redeemer in Jesus Christ, revealing and renewing Spirit which calls us Christians to human relationship with our many neighbours. Such relationship includes dialogue: witnessing to our deepest convictions and listening to those of our neighbours. It is Christian faith which sets us free to be open to the faiths of others, to risk, to trust and to be vulnerable. In dialogue, conviction and openness are held in balance.

In a world in which Christians have many neighbours, dialogue is not only an activity of meetings and conferences, it is also a way of living out Christian faith in relationship and commitment to those neighbours with whom Christians share town, cities, nations, and the earth as a whole. Dialogue is a style of living in relationship with neighbours. This in no way replaces or limits our Christian obligation to witness, as partners enter into dialogue with their respective commitments.

These guidelines are offered to member churches of the WCC and to individual congregations in awareness of the great diversity of situations in which they find themselves. The neighbours with whom Christians enter into relationship in dialogue may be partners in common social, economic and political crises and quests; companions in scholarly work or intellectual and spiritual exploration; or, literally, the people next door. In some places, Christians and the church as an institution are in positions of power and influence, and their neighbours are without power. In other places it is the Christians who are the powerless. There are also situations of tension and conflict where dialogue may not be possible or opportunities very limited. In many places people of different living faiths interact not only with each other, but also with people of various ideologies, though sometimes it is difficult to make a clearcut distinction between religions and ideologies, for there are

religious dimensions of ideologies and ideological dimensions of religions, Christianity included. The emergence of new religious groups in many countries has brought new dimensions and tensions to inter-religious relationships. With all this diversity in mind, the following guidelines are commended to member churches for their consideration and discussion, testing and evaluation, and for their elaboration in each specific situation.

## **Learning and understanding in dialogue**

*1. Churches should seek ways in which Christian communities can enter into dialogue with their neighbours of different faiths and ideologies.*

They should also discover ways of responding to similar initiatives by their neighbours in the community.

*2. Dialogues should normally be planned together.*

When planned together with partners of other living faiths or ideological convictions they may well focus on particular issues: theological or religious, political or social.

*3. Partners in dialogue should take stock of the religious, cultural and ideological diversity of their local situation.*

Only by being alert both to the particular areas of tension and discrimination and to the particular opportunities for conversation and cooperation in their own context will Christians and their neighbours be able to create the conditions for dialogue. They should be especially alert to infringements of the basic human rights of religious, cultural or ideological minority groups.

*4. Partners in dialogue should be free to "define themselves".*

One of the functions of dialogue is to allow participants to describe and witness to their faith in their own terms. This is of primary importance since self-serving descriptions of other peoples' faith are one of the roots of prejudice, stereotyping, and condescension. Listening carefully to the neighbours' selfunderstanding enables Christians better to obey the commandment not to bear false witness against their neighbours, whether those neighbours be of long established religious, cultural or ideological traditions or members of new religious groups. It should be recognized by partners in dialogue that any religion or ideology claiming universality, apart from having an understanding of itself, will also have its own interpretations of

other religions and ideologies as part of its own self-understanding. Dialogue gives an opportunity for a mutual questioning of the understanding partners have about themselves and others. It is out of a reciprocal willingness to listen and learn that significant dialogue grows.

*5. Dialogue should generate educational efforts in the community.*

In many cases Christians, utilizing the experience of dialogue, must take the initiative in education in order to restore the distorted image of the neighbours that may already exist in their communities and to advance Christian understanding of people of other living faiths and ideologies.

Even in those situations where Christians do not live in close contact with people of the various religious, cultural and ideological traditions, they should take seriously the responsibility to study and to learn about these other traditions.

Member churches should consider what action they can take in the following educational areas:

- (i) Teaching programmes in schools, colleges, and adult education systems to enhance the understanding of the cultural, religious and ideological traditions of humankind; such programmes should, wherever possible, invite adherents of those traditions to make their contribution.
- (ii) Teaching programmes in theological seminaries and colleges to prepare Christian ministers with the training and sensitivity necessary for inter-religious dialogue.
- (iii) Positive relationships with programmes in university departments and other institutes of higher learning which are concerned with the academic study of religion.
- (iv) The review of material used and teachings customarily given in courses of instruction at all levels in the churches, including at theological colleges and seminaries, with a view to eliminating anything which encourages fanaticism and insensitivity to people of other faiths and ideologies.
- (v) The development of church school materials for the study of people of other faiths and ideologies.

(vi) The provision of courses for people who may be sent to serve in other cultures or who may travel as tourists in such cultures to promote their greater understanding and sensitivity.

(vii) Responsible reaction to school text books and media presentations which may prejudice the image of the neighbour.

(viii) The creative use of the media, radio, television etc., wherever possible in order to reach a wider audience in efforts to expand understanding of people of other faiths and ideologies.

### **Sharing and living together in dialogue**

*6. Dialogue is most vital when its participants actually share their lives together.*

It is in existing communities where families meet as neighbours and children play together that spontaneous dialogue develops. Where people of different faiths and ideologies share common activities, intellectual interests, and spiritual quests, dialogue can be related to the whole of life and can become a style of living-in-relationship. The person who asks a neighbour of another faith to explain the meaning of a custom or festival has actually taken the first step in dialogue.

Of course, dialogue between long-term neighbours may be frustrated by deeply engrained suspicions, and men and women will have to reckon not only with the communities they seek but also with the barriers between their present communities.

*7. Dialogue should be pursued by sharing in common enterprises in community.*

Common activities and experiences are the most fruitful setting for dialogue on issues of faith, ideology and action. It is in the search for a just community of humankind that Christians and their neighbours will be able to help each other break out of cultural, educational, political, and social isolation in order to realize a more participatory society. It may well be that in particular settings such common enterprises will generate interreligious committees or organizations to facilitate this kind of dialogue-in-action.

*8. Partners in dialogue should be aware of their ideological commitments.*

Dialogue should help to reveal and to understand the ideological components of religions in particular situations. When Christians find themselves in communities with neighbours of other living faiths they may have common or diverse ideological convictions.

In such situations partners need to be sensitive to both religious and ideological dimensions of the ongoing dialogue. Where Christians find themselves in communities with people of secular ideological convictions, the dialogue will at least expose shared contributions in a common search for the provisional goals of a better human community. Here dialogue may begin as a kind of "internal dialogue" seeking to bring to explicit reflection and discussion issues in the encounter of the Gospel both with ideological factors in various communities where Christians find themselves, and with the ideological assumptions of Christians themselves.

*9. Partners in dialogue should be aware of cultural loyalties.*

Dialogue and sensitivity to neighbours need to be developed in the area of relating Christian faith to cultures. This applies especially to those places where traditional and popular culture has been unduly despised and rejected by the churches. A culture should not be romanticized or made into a false absolute but it may often challenge and enrich the expression of the Christian faith. After careful interpretation and discrimination local cultures may make meaningful contributions in symbols and liturgy, social structures, relations, patterns of healing, art, architecture and music, dance and drama, poetry and literature.

*10. Dialogue will raise the question of sharing in celebrations, rituals, worship and meditation.*

Human communities draw together, express, and renew themselves in ritual and worship, and dialogue presumes an attitude of respect for the ritual expressions of the neighbours' community. Dialogue at times includes extending and accepting invitations to visit each other as guests and observers in family and community rituals, ceremonies, and festivals. Such occasions provide excellent opportunities to enhance the mutual understanding of neighbours.

Working together in common projects and activities or visiting in homes and at festivals will eventually raise the very difficult and important question of fuller sharing in common prayer, worship or meditation. This is one of the areas of dialogue which is most controversial and most in need of further exploration.

Whether or not any such activities are undertaken, dialogue partners will want to face squarely the issues raised, sensitive to one another's integrity and fully realizing the assumptions and implications of what is done or not done.

## **Planning for dialogue**

*11. Dialogue should be planned and undertaken ecumenically, wherever possible.*

Member churches should move forward in planning for dialogue in cooperation with one another. This may well mean that regional and local councils of churches will have a separate commission on dialogue.

*12. Planning for dialogue will necessitate regional and local guidelines.*

As the member churches of the WCC consider, test and evaluate these guidelines they will need to work out for themselves and with their specific partners in dialogue statements and guidelines for their own use in particular situations. The WCC can best assist the member churches in their specific dialogues by itself concentrating upon the world-wide features of the Christian dialogue with people of particular religions and ideologies. For this purpose, the WCC will arrange appropriate consultations at the world level.

*13. Dialogue can be helped by selective participation in world interreligious meetings and organizations.*

There are now many organizations linking world religions and seeking to enable them to cooperate for various purposes, such as the struggle for peace and justice in the community and among the nations. Christians involved in dialogue need to be selective in their participation in the meetings arranged by such organizations. Christian representatives should guard the mutual recognition of and respect for the integrity of each faith. On occasion it may be necessary for Christians to make clear that their participation does not necessarily signify acceptance of the underlying assumptions of a particular meeting or organization. Christians will normally avoid being identified with alliances against other religions or against ideologies as such. The WCC will be willing to provide consultant-observers for selected meetings of this kind but will not at present take a direct official part in the organizational structure of world interreligious organizations.

To enter into dialogue requires an opening of the mind and heart to others. It is an undertaking which requires risk as well as a deep sense of vocation. It is

impossible without sensitivity to the richly varied life of humankind. This opening, this risk, this vocation, this sensitivity are at the heart of the ecumenical movement and in the deepest currents of the life of the churches. It is therefore with a commitment to the importance of dialogue for the member churches of the WCC that the Central Committee offers this Statement and these Guidelines to the churches.