

THE
Episcopal
CHURCH



Interreligious Relations: Theology and Guidelines (2021)

Preface

Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; and, love your neighbors as yourselves.¹ Episcopalians take this twofold mandate, affirmed by Jesus himself, with utmost seriousness. It informs our Baptismal Covenant promise to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and [to] respect the dignity of every human being,” [BCP, 305]. Because we have so promised, it is indeed an act of Christian faithfulness to be in openhearted relationship with people whose religions differ from ours. In 2009, General Convention adopted a Statement on Interreligious Relations which set forth a theological and practical framework for such engagement by Episcopalians in our many locations. Such openheartedness has enabled the Episcopal Church, during the past decade to make significant efforts toward dismantling racism and creation of Beloved Community. Much of that work has required a process of serious self-examination with respect to our history and a commitment to genuine acts of repentance and lament in those places where we have failed in the past to behave towards our neighbors in ways that are consonant with the commandment to love them. Recognition that our interreligious encounters must now also be undertaken in the spirit of humility and repentance is foundational to this fresh articulation of a theology of, and practical guidelines for, Episcopal interreligious work.

During this time of reckoning and reframing, here is guidance for Episcopalians on developing and maintaining interreligious relationships with individuals and communities whose worldviews and faith practices differ from ours yet might become companions in our effort to create Beloved Community. While motivated by concerns emerging from the United States context, this statement addresses them in full awareness of the multi-national nature of the Episcopal Church. We are mindful that geographic and socio-political realities cause the challenges of interreligious encounter to vary significantly from place to place; yet Episcopalians hold certain interreligious-relations principles and practices in common.

I. An Episcopal Theology of Interreligious Relations²

Most Episcopalians live in the midst of religious diversity, in relationship with people who embrace lifeways different from theirs. As individuals, the range of attitudes Episcopalians hold about this reality is broad. Since the late twentieth century, The Episcopal Church has taken steps toward articulating a theology of religious diversity and interreligious relations, most notably with the *Theological Statement on Interreligious Relations* accepted by General Convention in 2009. This work draws upon the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, and the fruit of ecclesial consultation, dialogue, and collaboration; actions of General Convention and the Executive Council, pastoral

letters from the House of Bishops, interim pastoral letters from the Presiding Bishop; actions of Standing Commissions; and Lambeth Conference documents as it has attended to and spoken publicly on interreligious matters. Important documents informing this work to date include:

- *Guidelines for Christian-Jewish Relations for Use in The Episcopal Church* (1988)
- *Principles for Interfaith Dialogue* (1994)
- *Interfaith Relations and the Churches: A Policy Statement of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.* (1999)
- Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold's sermon of September 21, 2001
- *On Waging Reconciliation* (2001)
- *Companions in Transformation* (2003)
- *Renewing Our Pledge* (2008)
- *Theological Statement on Interreligious Relations* (2009)

Our concern here is with the distinctive aspects and implications of the attitude toward religious diversity that the Episcopal Church projects as a multicultural, multilingual, and multinational ecclesial body headquartered in the USA and present in at least fifteen other countries. Indeed, the Episcopal Church has a theology of religious difference and interreligious relations.

B. Distinctions

The Episcopal Church's approach to thinking theologically about interreligious concerns has ten distinctive aspects.

1. *Communio oppositorum* (a communion of opposites)

In its very essence as an expression of the Anglican tradition, a Christian *via media* (at once catholic and reformed), The Episcopal Church brings to interreligious relations a unique charism: our commitment to hold difference together.

2. Balance between scripture, reason, and tradition

In the Episcopal approach to religious manyness, our attitude toward scripture is a factor. We affirm that scripture is the human record of God's revelation, and that its authority is mediated by tradition and reason. As Christians in the Anglican tradition, our approach to scriptural interpretation is founded on the teaching of the sixteenth-century Anglican theologian Richard Hooker, as laid out in his *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. Hooker taught that Scripture reveals essential truths about God and ourselves that we cannot learn by any other means—and God expects us to use our minds in order to reason together and thus discover the right way forward. This requires respect for the opinions of other people of good will. Following Hooker, The Episcopal Church seeks to be a community living in obedience to the Word of God revealed through Scripture, to which we bring insights derived from Tradition and Reason when reflecting theologically on interreligious matters. Because we understand Holy Scripture to be at once inspired by God yet the work of human authors, editors, and compilers, we embrace the notion that the Bible contains all things necessary to salvation—but that not everything contained in the Bible is necessary to salvation. We believe the Holy Spirit guides us in our continually growing understanding of the Scriptures, which are always to be interpreted in the widest possible context of God's redeeming love for all people.

Christianity's Holy Scriptures reveal to us both the invitation and the direction to engage with people of other religions. In Genesis 1:26 we meet the loving God who created all people

and all nations. The awesome majesty of creation bids us humbly acknowledge that the fullness of God's intention is beyond the scope of our limited understanding; God's gracious love is not confined to the Christian community alone. Because of our faith in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, we expect to meet God in our neighbor, whom God commands us to love as we love ourselves (Mark 12:29–31). Indeed, Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan makes clear that our "neighbor" includes those of different religious commitments.

Varying interpretations of the Scripture are to be expected as a direct consequence of our dynamic relationship with the Word of God and our experience of faith over time. The revelation of God in Christ calls us therefore to participate in our relationship with God and one another in a manner that is at once faithful, loving, lively, and reasonable. As Christians, we look to our own Scripture for insight about God. We also understand that wisdom can be found in the scriptures and teachings of other world religions. We appreciate Mahatma Gandhi's assertion that it is everyone's duty "to read sympathetically the scriptures of the world. If we are to respect others' religions as we would have them to respect our own, a friendly study of the world's religions is a sacred duty."³

In the twenty-first century, The Episcopal Church has taken a more explicitly biblical approach to speaking about interreligious matters. The *Theological Statement* (2009) is the first to do this deliberately. That decision was influenced by extensive use of biblical material in the National Council of Churches Policy Statement (1999) and *Generous Love* (2008).⁴ The comparatively short Episcopal Church document *On Waging Reconciliation* (2001) quotes Colossians, Deuteronomy, and Romans.

Renewing Our Pledge (2008) responds to a Muslim document laden with references to and quotations of the scriptures of Islam and Christianity by incorporating some nineteen direct scriptural quotations into its text.

3. The Baptismal Covenant: mandate for love of neighbor

Witness, hospitality, and mutuality are Episcopal interreligious concerns, all of which arise directly from the theme of love of neighbor at the core of the Baptismal Covenant added to the Book of Common Prayer in the 1979 revision. Our interreligious documents make direct mention of the Baptismal Covenant.

Episcopalians are heirs to the notion that praying shapes believing. The corollary is that what is said in liturgy should be observable in a worshipping community's behavior beyond it. Episcopalians reaffirm the Baptismal Covenant throughout the liturgical year. Catechetical in form, the Covenant begins with affirmation of belief in the classical Christian doctrines enshrined in the Apostles' Creed. The congregation then is asked a series of questions about faith-in-action, and answers each question by saying, "I will, with God's help." Through the Baptismal Covenant, Episcopalians promise, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving their neighbor as themselves. They also promise to "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being." Several Episcopal documents, therefore, rest on a notion that the conduct of positive interfaith relations is an action stemming from core Episcopal-Christian identity. Given the promises made and reaffirmed through the Baptismal Covenant, witness is an interfaith concern and practice—but so is the practice of hospitality and mutuality.

4. Baptismal Covenant: mandate to respect the dignity of every human being

Directly related to the Baptismal Covenant is the prominence of neighbor-love as a theme in Episcopal interreligious relations documents. It is foundational to *Guidelines for Christian-Jewish Relations* (1988), which addresses hatred and persecution of Jews. In *Principles for Interfaith Dialogue* (1994), it informs the directive to "approach others with the same kind of respect we would wish to be accorded." It is developed even more in *Renewing Our Pledge* (2008), which responds to a Muslim call for dialogue, and also in the *Theological Statement* (2009). Closely related is the discouragement (if not outright prohibition) of proselytism.

Coupled with the mandate to love our neighbors as ourselves is the instruction of the Ninth Commandment: we are not to bear false witness against our neighbor (Ex. 20:16). The Ninth Commandment's relation to interreligious matters is prominent in The Episcopal Church's efforts to address anti-Judaism. It is latent in the fact that, in the statements most directly related to Islam and Muslims, we find no hint of the anti-Muslim rhetoric so prominent in certain streams of US and European culture during the first decades of the twenty-first century.⁵

5. Radically incarnational

Characteristic of Anglican theology, and prominent in Episcopal thought, radical incarnationalism has direct consequences for interreligious relations. Radical incarnationalism implies that, since everything is God's creation, the material world is good, that the Incarnation encompasses all aspects of life, and that, through Christ, God seeks "the right ordering of all things according to God's passionate desire for justness, for the full flourishing of humankind and all creation"—as we read in the pastoral letter, *On Waging Reconciliation* (September 26, 2001).

Since the nineteenth century at least, Anglican theologians have labored to foreground the notion, found in earlier Christian thought, that, as Urban Holmes puts it, "even if humanity had never sinned, God [still] would have become flesh."⁶ It means that the Incarnation encompasses all

aspects of life—including life’s pain, ambiguity, evil, the entirety of human experience. It reminds us that Christ is the transformer, not the projection, of culture. This embodiment of the holy in the human continues in the church as the Body of the Risen Christ, called to be in the world as a self-emptying, kenotic agent open to dialogue with the other. As we Episcopalians strive to leave behind the Colonial Christ of our past, we embrace the Dialogical Christ who opens himself and gives himself for others, including those of other religious commitments and convictions.⁷

6. The doctrine of creation: humankind created in God’s image

In Episcopal thought, the doctrine of Creation is about God’s will for what is, rather than an explanation of how all things came to be. It begins with the affirmation that all human beings are made in God’s image and after God’s likeness, which is embedded in the Baptismal Covenant. The consequence for interfaith relations is its implication that diversity is a good and that difference can be celebrated.

7. The role of the Holy Spirit

Themes of Creation bring us to pneumatology: study of God-the-Holy-Spirit. In this regard, certain Episcopal interreligious-relations documents remind us that the Holy Spirit, like the wind, “blows where it chooses” (John 3:8), or speak of God-on-the-move, or ponder “what God is up to” in the world.⁸ Others draw upon the Lambeth Conference document, *Christ and People of Other Faiths* (1988), for poetic language regarding the activity of the Holy Spirit.⁹

8. Reconciliation: salvation

Episcopal interreligious theology to makes broad use of the principle of reconciliation—the gathering up of all things into a unity that honors difference. The language of salvation in and through Christ Jesus is fundamental to our understanding sin and how it may be overcome, particularly when we understand salvation as the process of reconciliation that allows difference to stand and to be honored. However, salvation is a peculiarly Christian goal—a goal not necessarily sought by followers of other religions. Acknowledgment of differences between ultimate goals of various spiritual paths opens up rich opportunities for learning and dialogue. In interreligious engagement, we learn from people who see the world’s problems through lenses other than “sin and salvation.” Wisdom offered by other traditions may enrich us Christians, just as we may enrich others with our insights.

Our expectation that we shall discover new insights through interreligious relationships rest upon our embrace of Jesus as “the Way and the Truth and the Life,” coupled with our commitment to respecting the dignity of every human being. In mutual encounters and shared ascetic, devotional, ethical, and prophetic witness, we dare to hope that God will reveal new and enriching glimpses of a reconciled humanity, as well as new insights into how God works in the world through those who practice other traditions. The radically incarnational teaching of the Episcopal Church conveys our confidence that, in the coming of God in Christ, the transformation of all of creation has already been set in motion—and that God, who has been generous in creation, is no less generous in salvation. God’s gracious love is not limited to the Christian community.¹⁰ While the attitudes of individual Episcopalians may range from particularism to universalism, official documents of The Episcopal Church lean toward universalism.¹¹

Reconciliation is the theme within which Episcopal soteriological and eschatological teachings are considered.¹² Salvation happens through Christ: our interfaith documents are clear about this. In his sermon of September 26, 2001, Presiding Bishop Griswold declares: “God’s compassion, God’s mercy, God’s loving kindness, God’s fierce bonding love is the active

principle that effects reconciliation: the gathering up of all things into a unity in which difference is both honored and reconciled in the fullness of God's ever creative imagination."

Eschatologically, we live in the "already but not yet." Our efforts at reconciliation can be seen as attempts to make real in the here-and-now, the future perfection God has accomplished already through Christ. We dare to hope that God is drawing all of creation back to Godself through Christ. It should be clear that The Episcopal Church's teaching on interreligious relations encourages Episcopalians to "offer our gifts for the carrying out of God's ongoing work of reconciliation" toward our mutual flourishing.

9. Trinitarian monotheism

In its approach to interreligious relations, The Episcopal Church's teaching is unabashedly Trinitarian. We insist that the one and only God is Triune. Hence the very life of God is one of mutuality, interdependence, and reciprocity—a divine dance of intimacy in which unity does not require uniformity. The implication for interreligious relations is this: we manifest the reality of having been made in the image and after the likeness of the Triune God by striving to right-ordered relationship with all of creation—and that includes people whose religious convictions and commitments are different from ours.

Trinitarian imagery may not be most helpful when in direct conversation with someone of another religion; yet Trinitarian theology nevertheless offers abundant resources for understanding religious diversity as a good that is integral to creation, rather than as cause for concern and division. It emphasizes mutuality, interdependence, and reciprocity—very much what is meant when the great Buddhist teacher-activist Thich Nhat Hanh says "we inter-are."¹³ The theological principle of participation suggests that to manifest the reality of having been made in the Triune God's image and after the Triune God's likeness requires that we strive "to live in deep, right-ordered relationship with God and all of creation."¹⁴ And, it bears repeating, "all of creation" includes our neighbors whose religious convictions and communities differ from ours.

Process theologian Marjorie Suchocki argues that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity implies that God's very essence encompasses irreducible difference. Therefore, diversity is eternal. This being the case, she asserts: "then surely religions themselves are irreducibly different." Since, in Christian understanding, all of humanity is made in the image and likeness of God, all of humanity models the Trinity. If this be so, then the implication is that each religious tradition "must remain true to itself, essentially unlike the others, even as it continues its living development." Human beings "are called to become community together not by negotiating our differences, suppressing our differences, or by converting from our differences, but in and through our differences."¹⁵

10. Ecumenically interreligious

As a founding member of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA and a member of the World Council of Churches, The Episcopal Church is committed to conduct of interreligious-relations work ecumenically. Relatedly, we draw upon the thinking of scholars from many streams of Christianity in crafting our own interreligious statements.

C. Implications

We affirm, therefore, that, while individual Episcopalians vary considerably in their understanding of religious manyness, and while it is our charism to be able to hold diverse thought together under one tent, The Episcopal Church's radically incarnational and Trinitarian foundation emphasizes

mutuality, interdependence, and reciprocity—which, in turn, has implications for love of neighbor, for embassy, for hospitality. It is to our theology in action that we now turn.

II. Practical Interreligious Relations Guidelines for Episcopalians

A. Know Our History

When undertaking interreligious work at any level (church-wide, diocesan, or parish; global, national or local), and whatever our geographical context, it is useful to understand the history of The Episcopal Church’s interreligious practices. It is also critical that we Episcopalians know and understand our church’s history with respect to the peoples, groups, religious traditions, or worldviews with whom we wish to engage. Particularly, in this time of racial reckoning, it is crucial for us to be acutely aware of the racist and colonial history of our church’s dealings with people who are not white and not Christian. Only when our efforts are based upon a genuine desire to engage our interlocutors as teachers and partners whose wisdom and experience will ultimately benefit all of us, will our interreligious efforts further our quest to create Beloved Community.

1. Episcopal Involvement in Global and National Interreligious Work

The Episcopal Church’s administrative structure has long included an office dedicated to interreligious work. In addition, interfaith efforts may be initiated by the Presiding Bishop as primate and chief pastor of the church or may be handled by a special committee—most recently, the Task Force to Coordinate Ecumenical and Interreligious Work (2018–2024).

Indeed, engagement in interreligious work through external structures is, as noted above, a hallmark of The Episcopal Church’s approach. Episcopalians were participants in the first World Parliament of Religions in 1893, and in the subsequent Parliaments in 1993, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2015 and 2018. The Episcopal Church was well-represented at the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference—which, though called to discuss cooperation in the global mission field, is credited with birthing the modern ecumenical movement. A participant in the National Council of Churches of Christ since its inception in 1950, The Episcopal Church has provided robust support for its interfaith office. As well, The Episcopal Church collaborates with the World Council of Churches in its ongoing interfaith efforts. The Episcopal Church is a founding member of *Shoulder to Shoulder*, a coalition-based campaign of religious denominations and faith-based organizations and communities, launched in 2010, which strives to end discrimination and violence against Muslims in the United States by enabling faith leaders to take action effectively. The Episcopal Church is also an active member of Religions for Peace-USA. Episcopalians are encouraged to take part in similar efforts, whether locally, nationally or globally.

2. Statements on Interreligious Engagement

As we consider further how best to engage with religious difference in the present, we recall groundbreaking resources developed in past decades and still of usefulness to us. We, therefore, acknowledge *Nostra Aetate* (In Our Time), issued by the Second Vatican Council in 1965, which helped to inaugurate a new era of interreligious engagement. We reaffirm our gratitude for The Episcopal Church’s *Theological Statement on Interreligious Relations* (2009). We reaffirm and commend for ongoing study the 1988 Lambeth Conference document *Christ and People of Other Faiths*, which teaches that interreligious dialogue is coherent with discipleship and mission; its Appendix, entitled *Jews, Christians, and Muslims: The Way of Dialogue*, the first Anglican Communion interfaith document to provide guidance for positive relations with Muslims; and *Generous Love: the Truth of the Gospel and the Call to*

Dialogue—an Anglican theology of inter faith relations, a sophisticated and useful treatise issued by the Anglican Communion Network of Inter Faith Concerns in 2008.¹⁶

3. Episcopal Engagement with Judaism and Jews

Since the middle of the twentieth century, The Episcopal Church has given considerable attention to our relations with Judaism and the Jewish people. *Christian-Jewish Relations: Theological and Practical Guidance for The Episcopal Church* (2021) is the most recent teaching on this topic. We are aware that Christians in the Anglican tradition participated in the centuries-long persecution of the Jewish people with actions that included the forced conversion of Jews to Christianity, the preaching of contempt for Jews and Judaism, and the interpretation of many scripture passages in ways that lead to the demonization of Judaism and the denigration of it as a living religion. We are grateful that, in the latter half of the twentieth century, The Episcopal Church repented of this history, with actions by General Convention promoting dialogue with Jews. In 1988, General Convention issued *Guidelines for Christian-Jewish Relations for Use in The Episcopal Church*, thus officially endorsing a course of action for thinking theologically and behaving ethically. Subsequently, many Episcopalians have reframed their preaching and teaching to emphasize their recognition that contemporary Judaism is a living religion that took shape after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in the year 70 CE, and that has grown and thrived during the centuries since.

Even though, since the end of World War II, Episcopal relationships with our Jewish neighbors have improved significantly, issues arising out of language in our Book of Common Prayer still linger, particularly in some of the liturgies of Holy Week and Good Friday. Sensitivity to those issues is required of all who engage in those special liturgies and who preach and teach the scriptural texts of Holy Week, or as part of Christian formation. Lingering also is the question of how the Episcopal Church may best maintain its longstanding commitment to and support of the modern state of Israel, while also supporting the rights of Palestinians to their own state. The ongoing Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories continues to present significant social justice issues for Episcopalians who support the Palestinian cause. We continue to navigate this contentious issue with a deep commitment to the collaborative and mutually enriching relationships that we have built with the Jewish people over many decades. We also recognize that Episcopalians are not of one mind with respect to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and therefore any interreligious encounter that engages it requires diplomacy and care.

4. Episcopal Engagement with Islam and Muslims

Christian-Muslim Relations: Theological and Practical Guidance for The Episcopal Church (2021) is the most recent teaching on this matter. The Episcopal Church recognizes that, through the centuries, relations between Muslims and Anglican Christians have been complex: often, but not always, contentious.¹⁷ For guidance in respectful engagement with Muslims, it commends *Jews, Christians and Muslims: The Way of Dialogue*.¹⁸ Issued by the 1988 Lambeth Conference of Bishops of the Anglican Communion, it was the first such document on interreligious understanding to engage Islam robustly and openheartedly. With this document as a foundation, the General Convention of The Episcopal Church passed resolutions in 1997 and 2003 that formalized a commitment to dialogue with Muslims from a stance of affirmation for human rights and religious freedom for all people.¹⁹

In 2007, when 138 distinguished Muslim scholars issued “A Common Word Between Us and You,” a landmark open letter to Christian religious leaders around the world, Rowan Williams, then Archbishop of Canterbury, responded to it on behalf of the Anglican Communion,

respectfully and positively, with “A Common Word for the Common Good.” The Episcopal Church was asked to participate in the crafting of that response. It did so by submitting “Renewing Our Pledge” (2008), a didactic document that was also made available to all dioceses. Finally, in 2021, The Episcopal Church produced a document on relations with Muslims paralleling its guidelines for relations with Jews.

5. Episcopal Engagement with Indigenous Traditions

As The Episcopal Church considers how best to engage religious diversity in the twenty-first century, we acknowledge that religious diversity includes the practices, beliefs, rituals and spiritual wisdom of Indigenous peoples. We acknowledge the long-overdue need to address fully and honestly, in all countries in which The Episcopal Church resides, the history of our church’s interaction with Native peoples in the many places where Anglican Christians conducted missionary work. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in North America particularly, as a consequence of missionary efforts, Christians in the Anglican tradition took part in the denigration of Indigenous Americans’ religious and cultural traditions including support for laws which made the practice of such traditions illegal. We participated in the removal of Native American children to boarding schools that often abused them physically, prohibited them from speaking their native language, forbade their engagement in their indigenous spiritual practices, and forced them to convert to Christianity. A recent statement by the Presiding Bishop and the President of the House of Deputies acknowledges this history, mourns “the intergenerational trauma that cascades from it,” and calls for “recognition of wrongdoing, genuine lamentation, authentic apology, true repentance, amendment of life and nurture of right relationships.”²⁰

The Doctrine of Discovery—the theological notion informing The Episcopal Church’s relationship with Indigenous peoples during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries—was disavowed in 2009 by means of a General Convention resolution.²¹ The way had been paved for such a move when, in 1997, General Convention initiated a Decade of Remembrance, Recognition and Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples—a process of repentance on the part of the church that was renewed in 2007 and 2017, with the intention to do so every ten years. The launch of this initiative was accompanied by concerted attempts to reconcile with Indigenous peoples for the serious harm which had been done to them by our Christian forbears.²² Disavowal of the Doctrine of Discovery was reasserted in 2012 by General Convention, which also directed dioceses and parishes to study and reflect on the impact of that doctrine in their own locations.

The Episcopal Church now endeavors to interact with Indigenous peoples in a manner that respects the integrity of their religious practices and recognizes that some choose to maintain those practices simultaneously with our Episcopal tradition. We also strive to be sensitive to tensions that sometimes exist between Indigenous persons who have adopted the Christian religion and those who have not.

To ensure the honest conduct of our present-day interreligious work, The Episcopal Church of today owns the painful history of our encounters with Indigenous peoples in various times and places, repents of that egregious activity, acknowledges General Convention’s repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery, and asserts a particular desire to engage in genuine dialogue with Native Americans in a way that respects and honors their spiritual wisdom.

B. Contextualizing of Our Interreligious Work

“The contexts within which the Church ministers around the world vary widely and the potential

for interfaith dialogue will vary accordingly.” So noted 1998 Lambeth Conference report to the Anglican Communion. This same assertion applies to The Episcopal Church itself, which has an institutional presence in at least sixteen countries. Today’s technology enables us to see the earth from space as an orb on which borders and boundaries are fluid, easily fractured, and unstable. The trials of climate change and global pandemic heighten our awareness that the peoples of the earth will either survive together or perish together. Paradoxically our entire world is, at the same time, housed inside the flat screens of computers that provide immediate access to almost anyone or anything at anytime, anywhere on the planet. Crises and conflicts that were once local matters and seemed to be none of our concern are now global. Social strife, political upheaval and violence—predominantly fueled by greed and/or religious fanaticism—are never distant from us. Global pandemic has threatened all of us. Yet, since The Episcopal Church is headquartered in the United States, what happens socio-politically in that context has church-wide implications. Here are three local concerns with global import.

1. Encouragement of Better Understanding of Islam and Muslims

The influence of the three-pronged attack on the United States in September 2001 on interreligious relations is ongoing in all provinces of The Episcopal Church. At the time, the attack had multi-national and interreligious consequences: its victims came from many lands, prayed in many languages, called God by many names. It had a profound impact on Muslims living in the United States, as prejudice and violence against Muslims in America increased in its aftermath. In the wake of that tragic event, Episcopal efforts to learn more about Islam and Christian-Muslim relations were many. For example, numerous workshops were held in dioceses and parishes and dialogical initiatives expanded significantly. In recent years, political actions such as the “Muslim Ban” have exacerbated anti-Muslim bigotry generally and have been hurtful to Episcopalians’ Muslim dialogue partners.

2. Dismantling Racism

The longstanding work of dismantling racism undertaken by The Episcopal Church was reaffirmed and increased in 2020. The COVID-19 global pandemic of 2020–2021 underscored our common humanity to an extent rarely seen in the past, victimizing every race, creed, nationality, religion, and socio-economic level, taking a disproportionate toll on people of color and the poor. Meanwhile, in the United States, a series of highly publicized killings of African Americans at the hands of law enforcement provoked large protests and civil unrest. It also stimulated fresh determination to expose and combat systemic racism, not only in US society at large, but within The Episcopal Church itself, and to work toward racial justice interreligiously.

The process of repentance for the complicity of The Episcopal Church in American society’s systemic racism is long and complex—as is the work towards creating a church free of racism. Indeed, The Episcopal Church’s work on positive interreligious relations will fall short unless the intersection between interreligious understanding and racism is acknowledged. Commitment to eradicating racism within The Episcopal Church and in our larger society includes acknowledging the Church’s role in promoting racism. For example, many Africans and now African Americans were hurt by our church’s participation in white supremacist thinking that supported the institution of slavery itself (which included some people being forcibly baptized as part of their enslavement), the Church was complicit in the Japanese internment camps in World War II, Native Americans were denigrated in Episcopal-established and run Indian boarding schools, and more. In the process, many of these people were robbed of their Indigenous spiritual practices.

In the United States today, as we engage in interreligious encounter with people of the Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Jain, Ruist, African, and American Indigenous traditions (and many others), we also recognize that the racial discrimination encountered in American culture is intricately entwined with the toxic racial discrimination and bigotry that our church was complicit in establishing in this culture during the eras of slavery and Jim Crow. The structures of white supremacy and white privilege that have kept African Americans and other people identified as non-White from enjoying abundance of life in our church and our nation, also impact the lives and experiences of many immigrant communities, both those that are Christian and those of other religious or spiritual traditions. Our engagement with immigrant religious communities in our country today must be undertaken with the recognition that we have been part of a system that discriminates against these communities not only because of their religious difference from the American Christian majority, but also because of the legacy of racism, in the form of anti-Blackness, that impacts their experience of American life today. It is not enough merely to engage in interreligious dialogue or encounter with these communities, but also to be poised to work with them to overcome the racial bias to which they are subjected. Likewise, it is not enough for this work to be done in a bubble; rather, cooperating with interfaith groups allows broader response and understanding of the forces at work.

3. White Supremacy and Christian Nationalism

On January 6, 2021, with the pandemic still raging, the United States Capitol building was stormed by armed insurrectionists in an attempt to overrule the outcome of a free and fair presidential election. Some insurrectionists carried crosses; others carried flags bearing the words “Jesus 2020.” Some wore t-shirts and hoodies emblazoned with anti-Jewish slogans. In short, the action was a display of Christian Nationalism: a potent combination of political rhetoric and behavior with racism, anti-Jewish bigotry, and a distorted version of Christian theology coming together—based largely upon the foundation of white supremacy.

While, through public prayer and other gestures, the insurrectionists made clear their belief that their actions were condoned by God and were necessary in order to reclaim the United States as a “Christian” country, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry firmly repudiated them by endorsing a statement put forth by the organization *Christians Against Christian Nationalism*, of which the Episcopal church is a member saying, in part:

As followers of Jesus, his command to love our neighbors means neighbors of every type, of every faith, not just our own. Through our baptism and in our democracy, we are called to a way of love that creates a community in which the dignity of every human being is recognized and respected, and where all can have an equal say in the governing of our civic life. The violence, intimidation and distortion of scripture associated with “Christian nationalism” does not reflect the person and teachings of Jesus Christ, and so I stand with fellow leaders in the Christian community and call for a better way.²³

Given our frequently renewed promise to “seek and serve Christ in all persons,” for Episcopalians, “a better way” begins with recognizing that bigotry is fed by systemic discrimination in which religion and race are tightly interwoven.

In September 2020, the House of Bishops Theology Committee issued *White Supremacy, Beloved Community and Learning to Listen*—a statement which makes clear the extent to which our Anglo-Saxon forbears instantiated white supremacy and a posture of anti-Blackness in our American culture. The work of improving interreligious understanding in the twenty-first century goes hand-in-hand with our efforts toward repudiating white supremacy and overcoming racism—

including the stanching of anti-Asian, anti-Latino/Latina, and anti-Native behavior. In recognizing the dignity of all people in our interreligious work, we are demonstrating yet another way to speak against racism, while also building relationships spanning both religious and racial lines.

C. Toward Our Mutual Flourishing: the effort continues

Wherever in the world The Episcopal Church is present, four issues—ongoing anti-Jewish bigotry (which is on the rise all over the world), anti-Muslim bigotry, systemic racism, and treatment of indigenous peoples—inform and complicate interreligious work. Episcopalians in the Caribbean, South America, Europe, Africa, and Asia are encouraged to name the unique ways those issues manifest in their contexts and to acknowledge other factors that may be even more complexifying for them. In each country in which The Episcopal Church is institutionally present, its members are encouraged to consider what occurrences and issues are categories in urgent need of extra self-scrutiny. Additionally, Episcopalians do well to learn and tell stories of interreligious understanding, collaboration, and resilience that have emerged in their context.

Because we promise, through our Baptismal Covenant, to strive for justice and peace among all people, we embrace the work of cultivating positive interreligious relations as part of the larger mission of creating Beloved Community wherever in the world we find ourselves. Interreligious friendships enable us to learn about and from our neighbors, to make common cause with them for the greater good, and—by experiencing practices beyond our own Christian tradition—to develop a more vibrant understanding of God. Therefore, we encourage interreligious relationship-building, information-sharing, community-service, advocacy, and celebration—activities that nurture and sustain mutual understanding, respect, and trust.

We believe that adherents of disparate religions must stand together in solidarity with all who are suffering—that, together, we witness to the dignity of every human being. In these ways, presence becomes a courageous mode of peacemaking in a violent world. Our promise to strive for justice requires that we support ecumenical and interreligious initiatives that encourage encounter, dialogue, advocacy, and community service. All are imperative for resolving tensions whose root causes may be social, environmental, economic, or political, but to which religious difference may be an exacerbating factor.

D. Building Beloved Community

When need arises for problem-solving or deeper understanding, we commend *dialogue*. From the Greek for *talking through*, dialogue is a potentially transformative, formal, structured, conversation, the method for which is dialectical, reciprocal, empathetic, and courteous. Interreligious dialogue fosters growth in the mutual understanding so necessary for making common cause with regard to peace, social justice, and religious liberty.

We encourage dioceses, congregations, and other organizations of the Episcopal Church—on their own, or in partnership with other Christian Churches or in consultation with other provinces of the Communion—to enter into dialogue with people of other religious traditions, mindful of advice given by the great Harvard scholar, Krister Stendahl, who taught that, in seeking to understand another religious tradition:

- (a) Take questions about it to its adherents, not to its enemies;
- (b) Compare the best of our own tradition's beliefs and practices and the best behavior of adherents of our tradition to the *best* of theirs; resist the urge to compare the best in our tradition to the worst in theirs;
- (c) Leave room for “holy envy”—the possibility of being captivated by some aspect of a tradition not our own, thus delighting in its beauty or wisdom.²⁴

In every context, we Episcopalians may have neighbors whose backgrounds, beliefs, and practices differ from ours and who have much to teach us. Opportunities abound for developing creative relationships with people who embrace other religions, yet are searching, as are we, for justice, peace and sustainability. Our theological and ecclesial heritage offers resources for participating in this interreligious quest. Interreligious companionship and collaboration is integral to God’s mission. We prepare for it by fulfilling our Baptismal Covenant promise to “continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.”

¹ See Mark 12:29–31; Book of Common Prayer (1979), Catechism, page 851.

² An adaptation of portions of Lucinda Allen Mosher, *Toward Our Mutual Flourishing: The Episcopal Church, Interreligious Relations, and Theologies of Religious Manyness* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012).

³ <https://www.mkgandhi.org/voiceoftruth/unityofallreligions.htm>.

⁴ *Generous Love: the Truth of the Gospel and a Call to Dialogue—an Anglican Theology of Inter Faith Relations* (2008) is a report of the Network of Inter Faith Concerns of the Anglican Communion.

⁵ Both the *Preface to Guidelines for Christian-Jewish Relations* (1988) and *Renewing Our Pledge* (2008) (the response of the Episcopal Church to the Muslim initiative *A Common Word*) mention the Ninth Commandment.

⁶ Urban T. Holmes, *What Is Anglicanism?* (Wilton, Connecticut: Morehouse-Barlow, 1982), 28.

⁷ Paul Knitter, “What about Them? Christians and Non-Christians,” in *Essentials of Christian Theology*, ed. William C. Placher (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 317.

⁸ See particularly, the NCCC policy statement *Interfaith Relations and the Churches* (1999), and the Episcopal Church’s mission vision statement *Companions in Transformation* (2003).

http://www.tituspresler.com/global_mission/companions/CompanionsInTransformation-Text.pdf

⁹ See both *Renewing Our Pledge* (2008) and the *Theological Statement* (2009).

¹⁰ See the *Theological Statement* (2009), the *NCCC Policy Statement* (1999), and *On Waging Reconciliation* (2001).

¹¹ “In any event, it is God who converts people;” says *Principles for Interfaith Dialogue* (1994).

¹² Reconciliation is a notion foundational to the *Guidelines for Christian-Jewish Relations* (1988). The *NCCC Policy Statement* (1999) devotes paragraphs 31–35 to it, asserting, “Through Jesus Christ, Christians believe God offers reconciliation to all.”

¹³ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace* (Berkeley, California: Parallax Press, 1987), 87.

¹⁴ Dwight J. Zscheile, “Beyond Benevolence: Toward a Reframing of Mission in the Episcopal Church,” *Journal of Anglican Studies* 8, no. 1 (2009): 100.

¹⁵ Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *Divinity & Diversity: A Christian Affirmation of Religious Pluralism* (Abingdon Press, 2003), 69.

¹⁶ The year 2008 also saw the release of two other significant interreligious relations documents: “A Common Word for the Common Good”—the official reply of Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, to “A Common Word Between Us and You,” a pan-Muslim call for dialogue with Christians promulgated in October 2007; and “Relations with Other World Religions” (Section F of the 2008 Lambeth Conference Indaba Reflections).

¹⁷ See Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, second edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020); Nabil Matar, *Islam in Britain 1558–1685* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Nabil Matar, *Turks, Moors, & Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

¹⁸ “*Jews, Christians and Muslims: The Way of Dialogue*”: http://nifcon.anglicancommunion.org/resources/documents/lam88_ap6.pdf.

¹⁹ General Convention, *Journal of the General Convention of ...the Episcopal Church, Philadelphia, 1997* (New York: General Convention, 1998), p. 769; General Convention, *Journal of the General Convention of ...The Episcopal Church, Minneapolis, 2003* (New York: General Convention, 2004), p. 477f.

²⁰ Statement on Indigenous boarding schools by Presiding Bishop Michael Curry and President of the House of Deputies, Gay Clark Jennings (July 12, 2021),

²¹ General Convention, *Journal of the General Convention of...The Episcopal Church, Anaheim, 2009* (New York: General Convention, 2009), 371–72

²² General Convention, *Journal of the General Convention of...The Episcopal Church, Philadelphia, 1997*, (New York: General Convention), 87.

²³ (<https://www.christiansagainstchristiannationalism.org/statement>),

²⁴ For an account of the origins of Krister Stendahl's three rules, see Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others* (New York: HarperOne, 2019), 64–66.