

The Interreligious Stance of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)



As approved by the
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
221st General Assembly (2014)

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Introduction

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) long has advocated positive relationships with people of other religious traditions. We have seen these relationships as a specific instance of Christ's universal command to "... love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" and to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt. 22:37, 39). This statement affirms that tradition.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) often has fostered a love for people of other religious traditions, but many times we have not. The first is cause for celebration, thanking God for the grace to be faithful. For the second, the church resolves to do better.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has not always agreed on how to do better. Disagreements over how to respect people of other religious traditions often have been sharp. Yet as we become increasingly aware of the world's religious diversity, all areas of the church are called to relate positively to people of other religious traditions.¹

Many things draw us together in respect for those who have religious commitments different from our own, including the example and person of Jesus Christ, the evident need for religious peace, the necessity of meeting human needs in a world of poverty and want, and the biblical call to solidarity amid our diversity.

Other things, though, work to pull us apart, including our sometimes self serving theologies (both pluralist and exclusivist), misplaced goals (such as an overemphasis on statistical growth), and triumphalistic attitudes.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) acknowledges that among ourselves we will disagree on how to relate to others even as we strive together to understand Jesus' commandment amid a world with people of many different religious traditions. The stance offers help to chart the way forward.

Biblical Backgrounds and Teachings

Interreligious appreciation must arise out of one's most profound religious beliefs. For Presbyterians it must arise out of interpretation of the Bible, the church's confessional statements, Reformed theology, and the lived experiences of the church.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, the Israelites found themselves dwelling with Canaanite, Moabite, Babylonian, and Persian peoples among others and influenced by their religious understandings. The stories of God's gracious activities through Abraham (Genesis 12–17), Joseph (Genesis 37–50), prophets, matriarchs, and patriarchs toward other peoples of the region are part of a growing understanding of God's love. God's love is particularized later to cities such as Nineveh (Jonah 3) and to empires such as Assyria and Egypt (Isaiah 19:23–25). And teachings abound: all humans are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27), all have access to God through God's covenant with Noah (Genesis 9:8–17), strangers are to be treated with hospitality (Leviticus 19:33–34), and God has province over all the nations (which the Psalms tell us repeatedly, e.g., Psalms 47:8).

As the followers of Jesus spread to the cultures of the Roman Empire, they were challenged and influenced by Greek philosophies, Roman emperor worship, Gnostic teachings, and mystery religions of the day. In this setting the writings of the New Testament made crucial contributions that continue to be our guides. As we have indicated above, Jesus' Great Commandment sets the standard for all of our relationships; furthermore, the Gospel writers and letter writers all expand on the language of God's love (e.g., 1 John 3, 5).

Much of what we learn about how to relate to people of other religious traditions comes from the letters of Paul. Paul focused on taking the gospel to all people. Paul's sermon to the Athenians in Acts 17 has provided many with insights helpful to interreligious relationships. As a missionary, Paul encountered a great diversity of religions. Paul took seriously the quest: What claims do people of different religions make on one another as they live in accordance with what they believe to be true? Paul's answer was to honor both our commitments to Christian conscience and our commitments to Christian hospitality.

These passages come to us in the context of other biblical texts. Not all references are loving. Israelites are instructed to destroy Canaanite religious shrines (Deut. 12:2–3), and Paul uses negative terms to describe religious ideas of Jews and Gentiles (1 Cor. 1:22). Some Christians use similar statements to condone disrespecting the religions of other people. Overall, however, the biblical intent is clear: God loves all people—and we are to do likewise.

To be sure, not all the religious resources of the Presbyterian tradition were written to address our current interreligious context. Consider, for example, parts of the *Book of Confessions*. As might be expected, little is written in the confessions that acknowledges the religious plurality in which most of us live today. In fact, the confessions contain elements of polemics, even between Christians, that are inappropriate to today's context. Moreover, The Second Helvetic Confession makes direct negative references to our Jewish and Muslim neighbors, their beliefs and practices (*Book of Confessions*, 5.014, 5.019–5.020, 5.176, 5.225).

To move in a positive direction in our interreligious relationships and dialogue, these particular texts and the perspectives of our religious neighbors must be acknowledged. As God alone is the Lord of the conscience, the church renounces human judgment in favor of repentance over the harm we have caused our religious neighbors. We repent, but we do not forget, lest we perpetuate unhealthy relationships of division among our neighbors and ourselves.

It is important to reject harmful stereotypes of Jews and Muslims. We also must acknowledge the importance of authentic relationships with people of any religion. Although the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to this point has invested most of its interreligious efforts in relationships with Jews and Muslims, the PC(USA) believes in the importance of relationships with people of every religion.

The Confession of 1967 marked a turning point for Presbyterians in their quest to have loving relationships with people of other religions. It discusses the positive engagement of the church with people of other religions. It reminds the church that in its encounter with other religious traditions it may discover “parallels between other religions and his [sic] own and must approach all religions with openness and respect” (*Book of Confessions*, 9.42). The confession calls the church to a greater spirit of reconciliation, part of which is an acceptance of human difference.

Foundations for the Future

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has been active in interreligious efforts during at least the past four decades as religious plurality has become an issue of prime importance in North America. The general approach to interreligious relations in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has given priority to relationships with people rather than traditions—with Muslims rather than Islam, for example. Statements by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have provided direction to church leaders and guidance to local congregations.

The guidance and direction these statements offered have been and continue to be supported by an Office of Interfaith Relations, which was established in 1988 and has functioned since as a catalyst and a platform for affirming and commending the efforts of Presbyterians in interreligious engagement. Together these actions of successive General Assemblies have established six basic building blocks that serve as a foundation for today's interreligious initiatives:

Building Block #1: The Church. In our pluralistic society, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) recognizes that it must work with others because of the sure faith that the church, through the power of the Spirit, is a sign and means of God's intention for the wholeness and healing of humankind and of all creation.

In A Brief Statement of Faith (1991) the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) affirmed, “In sovereign love God created the world good and makes everyone equally in God's image . . . to live as one community” (*Book of Confessions*, 10.3, Lines 29–32). The ecclesial implications of this affirmation inform one of the “Presbyterian Principles for Interfaith Dialogue” (211th General Assembly [1999]): “We are called to work with others in our pluralistic society for the well-being of our world and for justice, peace, and the sustainability of creation. We do so in the faith that, through God's Spirit, the Church is a sign and means of God's intention for the wholeness and unity of humankind and of all creation.”

At its best, the Christian Church makes God's gift of community visible in human life, recognizing that God is at work in all of God's creation. This requires relationships with people belonging to a multiplicity of faith commitments as well as those belonging to none.

Building Block #2: Ecumenical and Interfaith. Presbyterians develop relationships with people of various faiths in ecumenical and interfaith contexts wherever possible.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s interest in interfaith relations has been intimately related to its ecumenical commitments. The 199th General Assembly (1987) called for engagement with those of other religious traditions through "ecumenical and interfaith channels and organizations whenever possible" (Minutes, 1987, Part I, p. 494, "A Study on Islam," B.3.e.). This was an extension to interreligious relationships of the historic Lund Principle that churches should do all things together except where differences of conscience require their acting separately.

Building Block #3: Mission, Dialogue, and Evangelism. Presbyterians approach others in a spirit of openness and trust as they follow Jesus Christ in respecting and affirming the freedom of others. Thus the church affirms that dialogical (i.e., mutually interactive) relationships are an authentic and appropriate form of witness in which we share ourselves and our commitments and also listen intently to what others express to us.

The reuniting 195th General Assembly (1983) affirmed "Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation" (from the World Council of Churches, 1982) as a "faithful expression of the basic commitment of [the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)] to mission and evangelism" (Minutes, 1983, Part I, p. 436). Declaring that "Christians owe the message of God's salvation in Jesus Christ to every person and every people" (Ibid, p. 551, 7. Witness among People of Living Faiths, 41), it stated that "true witness follows Jesus Christ in respecting and affirming the uniqueness and freedom of others" (Ibid).

A new World Council of Churches document (2013) says this freedom "flows from the dignity of the human person, grounded in the creation of all the human beings in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26)" ("Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes", paragraph 96).

All witness must be led by a discernment born of the Holy Spirit, offering opportunities for both speaking and listening. Allegiance to Christ is not compromised in dialogue when we (1) do not bend or trim our faith in order to reach artificial agreement with doctrines of another; (2) learn from other religions insofar as it enriches our relationship with the God revealed in Christ; and (3) express our faith as a part of authentic dialogue (Minutes, 1987, Part I, p. 452, "The Nature of Revelation in the Christian Tradition from a Reformed Perspective," IX.F, Christians in Interfaith Dialogue).

Building Block #4: Peace, Justice, and Ecology. Presbyterians are called by God to work with those of other religions for peace, justice, and the sustainability of creation. Experience has taught that the most fruitful interfaith relationships often develop when people of different faiths explore concrete ethical concerns and unite to act on them together.

In 1987, Presbyterians were counseled that "the most fruitful interreligious relationships are likely to develop where persons of different faiths share concrete ethical concerns and can unite to put them into action, with mutual acknowledgment of the religious motivation for action" (Minutes, 1987, Part I, p. 452, "The Nature of Revelation in the Christian Tradition from a Reformed Perspective," IX.F, Christians in Interfaith Dialogue).

The practical aspects of human well-being have led to a series of recommendations concerning advocacy and action. "Guidelines for Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Participation in Interfaith Bodies" (204th General Assembly [1992]) recommended establishment of relationships with multifaith bodies whose "goals, grounded in spirituality, ... enable common work toward justice, peace, and the integrity of creation" (Minutes, 1992, Part I, p. 600, Recommendation 6.c.).

Building Block #5: Modesty in Witness. Presbyterians urge a humble modesty in witness that recognizes God's Spirit is at work in ways we often least expect. Whatever the form of witness—mission, dialogue, evangelism, peace, justice, environmental issues—the church affirms that it is not called to respond to others in judgment but in awareness of the limitless grace of God.

Statements about God's ways with humankind have urged upon Presbyterians a humble modesty in witness. "Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation" (paragraph 43) declared that "... [t]he Spirit of God is constantly at work in ways ... that to us are least expected. ... Christians seek to discern the unsearchable riches of God and the way he [sic] deals with humanity" (Minutes, 1983, Part I, p. 551). Yet "The Study Catechism" (answer to question 38), says, "The limits [of] salvation ... are known only to God" (Minutes, 1998, Part I, p. 613).

A modesty of claims is present in the statement on "Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ" (section on "We Believe in One Lord, Jesus Christ," 214th General Assembly [2002], Minutes, 2002, Part I, p. 525) when it affirms that grace, love, and communion belong to God and are not ours to determine. Modesty leads to rejection of judgmental attitudes toward others.

The PC(USA) evangelism document “Turn to the Living God” (section on “People of Many Religions,” 203rd General Assembly [1991]) reads, “As our Christian affirmation meets the faith of others, we are not called to respond in judgment but in awareness of the limitless, saving presence, power, and grace of God” (Minutes, 1991, Part I, p. 676).

Building Block #6: Unfinished Conclusions. Presbyterians acknowledge the unfinished nature of our conclusions about relationships with people of different faiths, in recognition of the limits of our knowledge, our sinful nature, and the mystery of God’s workings in human lives.

Not all questions are humanly answerable. Thus, an element of interreligious relationships has been a commitment to be unfinished in our conclusions.

Spheres of Relationship

Interreligious interactions are not limited to just one aspect of living. The implications of loving our religious neighbors as ourselves must pervade all areas of our life together. Following are nine spheres of life in which interreligious understandings are challenging us and need to be acted on by the people of God. These spheres and the suggestions offered are areas for attention and reflection as we implement the policy implications of the building blocks. Each sphere ends with actions that can be undertaken by church agencies, congregations, and individuals.

1. Human Needs

Human need is everywhere. Often the religions of the world are called on to meet the needs of hunger, natural disasters, poverty, and disease. In meeting human needs around the globe, the religions need one another. We can do more together than we can do apart. How do Presbyterians engage in an interreligious response to human need from our position of historical religious and cultural privilege? How can we collaborate with faith partners to meet these pressing challenges?

Actions:

- Engage in self-reflection through education on seminary and college campuses and in congregations to examine breakdowns in existing paradigms of poverty relief.
- Listen to and incorporate the voices of the marginalized and underrepresented, many of whom have led and are leading the way in meeting human needs.
- See ourselves as friends, not competitors, with people and institutions of other religious traditions as we meet human needs around the globe.
- Be willing to be the gracious recipients of humanitarian and spiritual aid from our neighbors of other religious traditions, especially recognizing God’s concern for the poor.

2. Social Justice

The search for social justice in the world today is one of the most compelling reasons for interreligious activity. Global challenges—such as forced migration, human rights violations, unjust imprisonment, militarism, and totalitarianism—cannot be solved by any single segment of the world’s people or any single religion. Social justice cannot be achieved without the cooperation of the world’s religions.

Actions:

- Explore interreligious opportunities for truth and reconciliation work, including formal acts of repentance for unjust actions of the church, past and present.
- Participate at all levels in established multireligious groups working toward the common good.
- Encourage all the PC(USA)’s entities to do social justice work on an interreligious basis, as appropriate.
- Remember that those in need of social justice, including those of other religious traditions, often have much to teach us about how the gospel manifests itself in cultures different from our own.

3. Mission and Evangelism

Mission and evangelism are central to the Reformed tradition. In our relationships with people of other faiths, dialogical interreligious conversations promote the virtues of mutual respect and mutual understanding. This is an appropriate form of witness in the sense that we are as “living letters” that others can read, which Paul wrote about (2 Cor. 3:1–3). We witness because God, the creator of life in all its diversity, acted first.

As we consider witness through mission, evangelism, and dialogue, we commend for study the 2013 World Council of Churches document, “Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes.” This document states, “Authentic evangelism takes place in the context of the dialogue of life and action, and in ‘the spirit of dialogue’: ‘an attitude of respect and friendship.’ Evangelism entails not only proclamations of deepest conviction, but also listening to others and being challenged and enriched by others” (“Together Towards Life,” paragraph 95).

In the context of interreligious interactions, we witness to our faith with humility, knowing that what we know about God is limited by our human condition. We accept the challenge of expressing our faith in dialogue, often in spite of the fact that we may not feel as articulate as we would hope, but knowing that peaceful and fruitful relationships with others is surely what God intends as we witness to a truth that is beyond ourselves.

Actions:

- Recognize that the relationship between dialogue and evangelism is not an either/or choice for the church but a both/and requirement.
- Commit to having no hidden agendas in our interactions with people of other religious traditions.
- Have a humble modesty of witness in all our mission and evangelism efforts.

4. Conflict

Too many of the world’s conflicts have a religious component. Religion is used by governments and nongovernmental groups alike either to justify war or to motivate people to fight wars, practice religious discrimination, or engage in acts of persecution. Too often religious people stand by and watch their religions being used to justify conflicts that run counter to the values of love and justice that our traditions espouse.

Actions:

- Advocate justice and peace in all levels of human activity, especially involvement in interreligious peacemaking efforts.
- Work for reconciliation, identifying and resisting destructive interreligious conflict wherever possible.
- Recognize that sometimes Christians may be the cause of conflict; such complicity urges us to repent and change.
- Be open to learn from our religious neighbors.
- Stand with and support, where appropriate, those suffering religious persecution.

5. Families

Interreligious families are common in many of our communities. Challenges can arise for interreligious families as they seek meaningful religious expression across multiple narratives and traditions, work through disagreement and division over religious beliefs, and make choices about how to raise children. Congregations can help families engage issues that likely will arise in their life together.

Actions:

- Engage the whole congregation in important conversations about topics such as: “Families of Origin,” “Life-Cycle Rituals,” “Planning Your Wedding,” “Death and Grief,” “Holiday Observances,” and “Talking with Your Children about God and Values.”
- Draw on spiritual resources to help family members articulate religious values, beliefs, and practices they cherish most and to seek ways to be faithful to them in their family life.

6. Education

Challenges for education in contexts of religious plurality are many. Christians must become self-aware about the assumptions they hold and the habits of mind that guide their thinking about religious neighbors. Christians should know more about the history, beliefs, and practices of our neighbors' religious traditions.

Actions:

- Articulate a broader definition of education that includes and values lived experiences as a way to engage with people of different religions.
- Develop opportunities for multilevel, interreligious engagement. This might include local, area, or regional conferences involving networks of interreligious people.
- Work to make interreligious dialogue less specialized and more normative, integrated into church members' lives.
- Identify and share examples of churches engaged in doing interreligious interactions well.
- Train congregational leaders in interreligious work as a way to introduce it to congregations.
- Encourage PC(USA)-affiliated seminaries to expand curriculum that prepares students for ministry in a religiously plural world.
- Reflect more deeply on the interrelationships between mission and evangelism and interreligious work.

7. Communities

Many neighborhoods and communities across the United States are welcoming of greater religious and cultural pluralism. Many are not. People from non-Christian, non-white, non-Western backgrounds often experience discrimination due to religio-cultural bias. Note especially the rise in Islamophobia. Religiously based violence has risen throughout the United States. This violence divides communities and discourages the neighborliness advocated in Scripture and modeled in the life of Jesus Christ.

Actions:

- Reach across religious borders to create community alliances to address social problems in ways congruent with the church's identity and mission.
- Promote public education regarding religions and the diversity of religious communities.
- Advocate for the rights, protection, and safety of all.

8. Congregations

Even as many congregations are becoming more racially, culturally, and socioeconomically plural, the diversity of the culture at large continues to create challenges: our children develop friendships with their non-Christian acquaintances; our sons and daughters proclaim love for someone from another religious background; our interreligious neighbors invite us and our families to visit their religious services.

In the midst of such opportunities and challenges, the church must make efforts to interact with other religious communities. In the past, we have tended to relate to people of other religions in one-way modes of witness; we now are challenged to forge new relationships of friendship and collegiality that respect our neighbors' religious search.

Actions:

- Build interreligious relationships not just as a response to crises and conflict, but also as a sign of hospitality and neighborliness.
- Visit our neighbors' houses of worship when invited, even as we invite our neighbors to visit ours.
- Equip members to appropriately engage religious and social situations involving people of different religious traditions and to receive people from these traditions in Christian contexts.
- Explore what it means to be a Christian community in the midst of multiple faith communities.

- Look for ways to be in dialogue and relationships of mutuality.
- Develop a mutual agreement with another religious community that involves concrete ways in which the two congregations will be in relation.
- Recognize that enduring interreligious alliances can be built around social issues and that people of different religious traditions can work together to address them.

8. Workplace

The interreligious reality of today's workplace cannot be ignored. Often, the workplace is a space where people for the first time are asked to work across lines of religious difference. Presbyterians have the opportunity to model and express an environment of respect and love for people of other religions in their workplace settings, including respect for holiday observances, time and space for prayer, religious dress, and articles of faith.

Actions:

- Recognize the importance and validity of individuals' freedom to choose their religious identity and commitments, and advocate that employers work to accommodate the religious practices and observances of employees, knowing that it may not be possible in every case.
- Allow for deeper cooperation and respect among coworkers; education about religious diversity is needed to address much of the prejudice and hatred that exists.

* * *

Trust between religious communities is hard-won. In our efforts to build such trust in all these spheres, we will not always see eye-to-eye, especially on issues born from histories of conflict. At times, we may unintentionally misunderstand, disappoint, and hurt one another. Only within a framework of commitment to people of other religious traditions can we remain faithful to these relationships despite such differences and misunderstandings. Following is an affirmation of our commitment to positive interreligious interactions.

Biblical Backgrounds and Teachings

We believe the Bible proclaims God's love for all people, that Christ's Great Commandment sets the standard for all of our relationships: "... 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,'" and, empowered by the Holy Spirit, "... 'love your neighbor as yourself'" (Mt. 22:37, 39).

We confess

that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has sought to live up to its commitment to love people of other religious traditions, but many times we have not;
with God's help we resolve to do better;
that self-serving theologies and goals and triumphalistic attitudes pull us apart;
with God's help we resolve to do better;
that some of our confessions and the dated perspectives of our religious heritage have resulted in patterns of unhealthy relationships with people of other religions;
with God's help we resolve to do better.

We resolve to do better and not perpetuate divisive relationships among our neighbors and ourselves.

God calls us to have loving relationships with people of other religions.

God calls us to approach others in a spirit of openness and trust as we follow Jesus Christ in respecting and affirming the freedom of others.

God calls us, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to work with people of other religions for peace, justice, and the sustainability of creation.

Guided on our way by the Holy Spirit, we will
meet human needs,
work for social justice,
participate in mission and evangelism,
pursue peace,
strengthen families,
educate for greater understanding,
nurture diverse communities,
value hospitality in our congregations, and
respect one another in our workplaces.

We follow Christ's call to work for God's kingdom; we believe that God will complete what we leave incomplete. To God be the glory!

Appendix A: Background to the Interreligious Stance

In our era, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) continues to reflect on questions about faithful and effective interreligious interactions. In a number of documents, studies, and statements, we have addressed a broad array of specific interreligious topics, from our relationship with particular traditions such as Judaism and Islam, to interactions with newer religious movements such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), to more general questions about mission, evangelism, dialogue, and universalism.

In many ways, the issues raised as a result of interreligious interactions parallel those raised by intrareligious interactions—that is, ecumenism. At the 218th General Assembly (2008), the PC(USA) approved “The Ecumenical Stance of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).” The PC(USA) had discerned a need for a major document to substantively articulate its relationship to others within the broad Christian household and charged the General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical Relations (GACER) to produce such a statement. One of the findings of the ecumenical stance was that “there was particular energy in the conversation related to interfaith relations and a strong sense that this topic will need to be addressed more fully in another forum” (Minutes, 2008, Part I, p. 517).

Partly in response to this recommendation, the 219th General Assembly (2010) broadened the work of GACER to include interreligious relations, and the committee became GACEIR: the General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations. This broadened committee was charged to act on the recommendation to more fully address interreligious relations. In the spring of 2013, a planning team created the format for a consultation that was held September 19–21, 2013. At that meeting, more than sixty-five church leaders, scholars, and interreligious experts met and identified crucial issues. A writing team began drafting a statement based on the input of the consultation, which included a diverse group of Presbyterians with a range of perspectives on interreligious issues. They were drawn from different theological perspectives, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and church vocations (denominational staff, pastors, lay leaders, and academics). Also participating were representatives from our global and ecumenical partners and from non-Christian religious traditions.

Recent research done by the Office of Interfaith Relations of the PC(USA) shows that interreligious engagement is an early universal experience among Presbyterians in the United States and for many of our partners around the world. Multiplicity of cultures and religious understandings is increasing in large cities and small towns alike, and our relationships—our involvement and collaboration—with adherents of other traditions increasingly are taking place close to home: in our families, neighborhoods, and workplaces.

Participants in the Consultation on the Interfaith Stance of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Farsijana Adeney Risakotta;	Damayanthi Niles
Sr. Aisha Al-Adawiya, <i>Women in Islam</i>	Tyler Orem
Scott Anderson	Rodney Petersen, <i>co-chair, Interreligious Consultation Planning Committee</i>
Gary Angleberger	Shanta Premawardhana, <i>Alliance of Baptists</i>
Judy Angleberger	Paul Rader
Wesley Ariarajah, <i>United Methodist Church</i>	Kathy Randall
John Azumah, <i>Presbyterian Church of Ghana</i>	Annie Rawlings, <i>In Memoriam: we give thanks for the light and life of Annie Rawlings, for her passion for interreligious relationships, and for her service as co-chair of the Interreligious Consultation Planning Committee</i>
David Baak, <i>Reformed Church in America</i>	Juan Sarmiento
Randall Bailey, <i>Progressive National Baptist Convention</i>	Nanette Sawyer
Randy Benn	Joyce Shin
Satanun Boonyakiat, <i>McGilvary College of Theology, Payap University, Thailand</i>	Simran Jeet Singh, <i>The Sikh Coalition</i>
Holly Haile Davis	Aaron Stauffer
Shelly Dawson	Margaret Orr Thomas
Shelley Donaldson	Reginald Tuggle
Arlene Gordon	Rick Ufford-Chase
Krystin Granberg, <i>chair, GACEIR</i>	Marlene Van Brocklin
Marco Grimaldo	Dianna Wright
Heidi Hadsell	Raafat Zaki
Sherrri Hausser	
Lisa Hess	
David Jensen, <i>Evangelical Lutheran Church in America</i>	
Kathy Jones	
Jin Kim	
Yehezkel Landau, <i>Hartford Seminary</i>	
Gun Ho Lee	
HakJoon Lee	
Christopher Leighton	
David Leslie	
Eugene March	
Robert Mark	
Mary Mikhael, <i>National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon</i>	
Terry Muck, <i>chair, Writing Team</i>	
Cruz Negron-Torres	

PC(USA) Staff

Laura Cheifetz
Roger Dermody
Raafat Girgis
Charles Hardwick
Christine Hong
Sara Lisherness
Shannon Beck
Gradye Parsons, *Stated Clerk of the General Assembly*
Toya Richards, *OGA Communications Office*
Charles Wiley
Annette Wimsett
Robina Winbush

Endnote

1. Throughout this document, religion and religious practices include organized religions, folk religions, and indigenous religions and spiritualities practiced throughout our world.