



Embarking on the Journey of Interreligious Dialogue



THE
LUTHERAN
WORLD
FEDERATION

Jennifer Lewis

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Preface

In all our expressions, we remain strongly committed to ecumenical dialogue and relationships and, together with our ecumenical partners, we build bridges and dialogue with other faiths (LWF Strategy 2012–2017, 20).

The Lutheran World Federation is firmly committed to promoting interreligious dialogue. In a world, marked by division and strife also among religious communities, the bringing together of people of different faiths to deepen the mutual

understanding of and joint commitment to issues of shared concern constitutes a strong public witness.

Over the last decades, the LWF has published a number of substantial theological studies in the area of interreligious relations. During the

summer of 2015, Jennifer Lewis, a student of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, studied a number of these publications in order to gather insights that will be inspiring and thought-provoking for a wider audience. This booklet provides a taste of the wealth of

expertise the LWF has gathered in this field.

Jennifer approached the topic with a sharp intellect, an astute mind and an open heart. We are grateful to her for this inspiring contribution and envisage that many within the Lutheran communion, the ecu-

menical fellowship and among our interfaith partners, from the grass roots to the leadership, will find this booklet informative and energizing.

Dr Simone Sinn
Study Secretary for Public Theology
and Interreligious Relations

Embarking on the Journey of Interreligious Dialogue

Religious pluralism: walking the path of hope

In 1988, Dr J. Paul Rajashekar, then Secretary for the Church and People of Other Faiths in the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), astutely observed, “Religious pluralism has always been recognized by Christians as an historical fact. But the significance of that fact—and the questions it poses for Christian thought—has emerged only recently as a prominent issue.”¹ A quarter of a century ago, this insight regarding the significance of religious pluralism launched the LWF into a near-thirty-year journey of interreligious reflection and engagement.

Today, the reality of religious pluralism and its significance for Christianity no longer represents an emerging issue but a pressing concern of our time. Religio-political violence in

our countries, immigration crises, or mosques and temples in our towns regularly remind us that religious pluralism shapes our world. Many of us interact daily with people of other religious beliefs, and more and more of us will do so as religious people cross national, societal, cultural and digital borders, shortening the physical distance that once separated us. As technology, increased migration and economic structures shrink our planet, Rajashekar’s insight about religious pluralism’s significance, especially for Christian identity, is even more relevant.

Nonetheless, moving from acknowledging religious pluralism into dialogue can be challenging. Whether it is political violence executed in the name of religion,² theological gridlocks, fear of another group, or political and social barriers such as inequality or structural discrimina-

tion, obstacles confront us from the very start. Yet, real as the challenges may be, hesitation to engage with our religious neighbors does not have to constitute the norm. In fact, testimonies of religious communities worldwide who have sought out and experienced interreligious friendship and partnership confirm that dialogue often serves as a catalyst for reconciliation and hope.

A trail that talks: inspiration for the journey

In February 2015, the visual unity of Islamic and Jewish communities garnered international attention as thousands of immigrant Muslims, ethnic Norwegians and Jews formed solidarity rings to protect a mosque and a synagogue in Oslo.³ The organizers hoped that the symbolic

circles would testify that, “There’s still hope for humanity, for peace and love, across religious differences and backgrounds,” and wanted to offer a tangible expression of how different religious communities can live together in peace.

In 2001, fires of religious tension literally set ablaze villages in Jos, Nigeria. Thousands lost their lives, and though Christian Briom and Muslim Jasawa communities there had lived peacefully for decades, recent government policies escalated political tensions between the groups until the conflict erupted into a violent struggle.⁴ Yet, even while fire was literally licking up communities, religious neighbors demonstrated enormous courage: Muslims hid Christians from violence, an Imam brought breakfast to a housebound Christian family and smuggled them to safety and a pastor saved a mosque when he removed a burning tire from the building.

In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Northern Germany, interreligious dialogue with Muslims constitutes an integral part of the church’s life.⁵ The interaction, which goes back to the 1960s, has progressed

from educating members on Islam to attending one another’s special celebrations to eventually issuing the declaration, “Living as Good Neighbors,” that acknowledged and called for continued relations between the churches and nearby Muslim communities. To this day, the relationship between the communities continues to be a reciprocal one, with the local Imam sending Easter cards to the Lutheran pastor, and Lutheran clergy sending Ramadan greetings to the Muslim community.

Internationally, interreligious communities increasingly convene to discuss pressing issues, from gender equality and peace-building to climate change, combining forces to combat global injustices. The 2011 Muslim-Christian conference in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia that gathered forty-three Christians and Muslims from around the world to reflect on economic injustices represents one example,⁶ and each dialogue contributes to the development of global interreligious peace and partnership.

These and other positive testimonies of interreligious encounter affirm the enormous power of dialogue to

propel our fracturing world toward a future marked by unity rather than division, hope rather than despair. The road will not be an easy one: extremism and violence, the politicization of religion, cultural differences, media-promoted stereotyping and generalizations,⁷ the silencing of certain voices, and socio-economic disparities promise a bumpy path indeed. Nonetheless, the repercussions of resisting dialogue are too great to ignore. Ultimately, refusing or even neglecting to forge intentional interreligious relationships and dialogues constitutes a risk that the church and the world cannot afford to take. The stakes may be high but the benefits are enormous. The call of and opportunity for the church today is to move towards our neighbors in love, knowing that both we and our world will be enriched in the process.

The journey begins: moments and milestones in the LWF’s history⁸

In 1964, the LWF commenced a journey of robust theological reflec-



The hands of 84 year-old María Montezuma, a member of the Gnobe community, portray the daily struggle for survival among Costa Rica's Indigenous population.
Photo: © ILCO communication office

tion and interreligious engagement. The consultation on “The Church and the Jewish People” in Denmark marked its initial venture, and the discussion sparked further meet-

ings. Subsequent reports affirmed the significance of Judaism for the life and mission of the church and critically discussed the Christian legacy of anti-Judaism. The 1984 LWF

Assembly in Budapest testified to the fruits of those consultations, receiving a statement on “Luther, Lutheranism and Jews.” The statement, which acknowledged anti-Semitism



Participants at the 2014 Conference on Religious Identity and Renewal: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Explorations. Photo: LWF/ I. Benesch

in Lutheran churches and called for its elimination, represented a significant milestone and new path forward for the LWF's interreligious relations, clearly stating, "The sins of Luther's anti-Jewish remarks, the violence of his attacks on the Jews, must be acknowledged with deep

distress. And all occasions for similar sin in the present or future must be removed from our churches."⁹

In the 1970s, the LWF took initial steps to understand the reality of religious pluralism more broadly and Dr Arne Sovik, then director of the Department for World Mission, con-

vened meetings on the "Encounter with Other Faiths and Ideologies." By the early 1980s, the LWF member churches expressed a growing desire comprehensively to reflect on Lutheran relations with other religious communities. Following resolutions adopted at the Budapest

Assembly, the Lutheran World Federation officially established a desk for theological reflection on and engagement with people of other religions titled, “The Church and People of Other Faiths.” Rajashekar, from India, the desk’s first study secretary, proposed that “dynamic interaction” characterize the organization’s approach to interreligious relations. The method sought to engage other religious communities and traditions from within Lutheran frameworks with the understanding that Lutheran theologies would be enriched in the process.

The member churches’ varying contexts and multiple anxieties regarding interfaith issues presented the desk with early challenges. In 1985, the office initiated a project that would address the diverse challenges that religious pluralism posed to the member churches from a theological angle. The project “Theological Perspectives on Other Faiths” extended from 1986 to 1991, and an international cohort of theologians collaborated to discuss the challenges and multiple perspectives within the communion.

The resulting book, *Religious Pluralism and Lutheran Theology*, served as a guide for consultations in the years ahead.

The Executive Committee’s urging in Munich to “intensify dialogue with the Islamic faith as well as research and study programs to help equip LWF member churches...”¹⁰ led the desk to devote special energies to Christian-Muslim relations in Africa and Asia. Between 1988 and 1992, the office organized several consultations with leaders from these continents; the consultations, which focused on Islamic-Christian tensions, extremism and the need for dialogue between the two groups, welcomed the involvement of organizations dealing with similar issues. Furthermore, although the project specifically addressed Muslim-Christian relations, the department and participants recognized the global nature of the challenges and opportunities created by religious pluralism and thus also drew on European leaders’ reflections.

The following decade saw another study on Christian Muslim relations that included both internal dis-

cussion and dialogue with Muslims. The LWF organized three consultations of Muslim-Christian scholars in Bethlehem (Middle East, 1999), Dar es Salaam (Tanzania, 2000), and Yogyakarta (Indonesia, 2002) and each group reflected on the tensions between and challenges confronting their respective communities. As leaders shared their theological reflections in constructive ways, each gathering progressed in mutual respect, peace and solidarity. Far from an academic dialogue,¹¹ the practical discussions represented a first step towards creating peaceful and positive relationships between the groups. The final consultation in Indonesia provided the basis for the LWF publication, *Dialogue and Beyond: Christians and Muslims Together on the Way*, which explores the three different consultation participants’ experiences and reflects their visions for continued solidarity between Muslims and Christians in the coming years.

Other programs paralleled the study on Christian-Muslim relations. The first engaged the reality of religious pluralism in Europe and

culminated in a consultation in Jarvenpää, Finland in 1996. In response to the 1990 Curitiba Assembly report that identified religious plurality as a significant issue for all member churches, the sixty-person meeting addressed questions of Christian self-understanding, the

nature of pluralism in Europe and best responses to it, and methods for encouraging interest in other religions' beliefs and practices, as well as one's own. The second program, an extension of the 1984-1991 "Theological Perspectives on Other Faiths" one, featured a

study of the major world religions. Under the direction of Dr Hance A.O. Mwakabana from Tanzania, five teams researched Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism and African Religion over a period of four years, from 1992-1996. The study culminated in a 1996 consultation

Celebrating the end of one year of monthly fasting by religious and environmental groups around the world in the Fast for the Climate. Photo: LWF/Sean Hawkey



in Bangkok where the teams presented their reports.

In recent years, the emphasis has shifted from articulating general theological perspectives on religious pluralism to pursuing topically-focused dialogues. From 2003–2006, Dr Ingo Wulfhorst, from Brazil, organized consultations in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America to discuss how issues of “Spirits, Ancestors and Healing” challenge the church. The consultations stressed the importance of appreciating indigenous approaches to healing and wholeness, which often relate to understandings of ancestors, spirits and traditional medicine, while cautioning against possible negative ethical consequences of some beliefs and healing practices.

In 2009, Christians and Muslims gathered once again in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, for a discussion on freedom and responsibility. The group examined questions such as, How do we understand freedom when societies seem either to worship or to condemn boundless freedom? What is the meaning of freedom from a faith perspective? What is

our responsibility towards neighbors in need? The desk selected topics significant to the groups, and the resulting dialogue both strengthened the LWF’s existing interreligious relations and encouraged continued engagement.

Then, in light of the 2008 financial crisis, study secretary Dr Martin L. Sinaga, from Indonesia, convened a project on “structural greed” in 2010. In the same year, the Christian-Buddhist dialogue in Chiang Mai, Thailand, addressed the pressing issue of economic injustice and issued the statement *A Common Word: Buddhists and Christians Engage Structural Greed*. The ensuing publication features theological and practical reflections from both communities that equip communities to combat social greed in our world and religious traditions today. In 2011, a Christian–Muslim dialogue consultation on the same topic followed.

In 2014, the LWF initiated a study program on “public space and citizenship” together with interreligious partners in different regions. The current study secretary,

Dr Simone Sinn, from Germany, organized consultations in Germany, Tanzania and Indonesia. The current program involves religious leaders and scholars of religion, as well as interfaith and civil society activists. The lead concern is how religious communities can work together in a shared public space, ensuring equal citizenship rights to people of every religious tradition, in the midst of numerous asymmetries and power struggles.

The year 2015 marks half a century since the LWF initiated reflection on its relationship to Judaism, and thirty years since it expanded its mandate to include the engagement with other religious traditions. The result is an incredible story of theological reflection, illuminating dialogue and partnership with religious communities around a shared vision for the transformation of our world. Nonetheless, while these ground-breaking interreligious engagements have a sturdy foundation, the work of dialogue and relationship building must go on. Since the LWF’s official jump into the world of interreligious dialogue,

economic globalization and technological advancements have rapidly collapsed geographical, social and cultural borders that once prevented diverse groups from interaction, and global crises demand communal strategizing and reflection. Without abandoning our distinctive identities, religious groups and neighbors must continue to engage in loving, honest, mutually enriching and justice-oriented dialogues so that peace and sustainability can be realized in this world.

Tracing a theological trail: footprints from journeys past

Christianity has a long and varied tradition of reflection on and engagement with other religions. The early church, emerging and expanding in the quasi-plural religious environment of the Roman Empire, regularly engaged with people of other religious and philosophical traditions. Paul's sermon on the altar to an unknown God in Athens is one example of how interreligious

engagement, and countless other responses to religious others in the successive centuries reveal that reflection continued, albeit primarily in negative ways. Despite the smattering of early and medieval Christian leaders who viewed other religions positively, antagonism dominated European Christian thinking and interactions with religious neighbors until the mid-nineteenth century. However, Friedrich Schleiermacher's and Georg Hegel's approaches to other religions opened the door to reflection on the reality of religious pluralism, while Ernst Troeltsch's reflections in the early twentieth century and Karl Barth's reaction to totalitarianism and German liberalism opened the engagement wider still. Paul Tillich's philosophical approach towards other religions in the 1950s ventured even further, creating space for new theological perceptions to develop. Then, Vatican II's affirmation of positive relations with other religious people, and the World Council of Churches' creation of a Sub-Unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies in 1971 bulldozed any remaining barriers to interreligious

reflection and engagement. Although these individual footprints may be winding, diverse or half-formed, they form a theological path that many Christians have travelled into new ways of seeing and understanding Christianity's relationship to other religions.

So, where does this trail of theological footprints leave us today? On the one hand, the individuals who left their prints teach the Christian community that viewing other religious traditions positively is possible. The emphasis on religious groups' commonalities and shared concerns, as well as the recognition that religious pluralism is here to stay, encourages the church to try out new approaches and reflect deeply on Christianity's relationship with other religions.

On the other hand, increasing pluralism demands that Christians make the concerted and widespread reflection on religious pluralism a priority. Ultimately, the last century's footprints have led the way, but the road forward depends on us.

Without neglecting the work of theologians and leaders in the past,

each Christian community is responsible for building positive relationships to their religious neighbors. This requires churches to interpret, translate and apply the sacred Scriptures in light of their different contexts, as well as corporately and practically to engage with other religious groups.

Rather than developing systematic approaches or theologies of religion, communities must discern methods for dialogue contextually. Taking the faith experience of the other groups seriously is essential,¹² and theologies of religion that engage other traditions only through the lenses of Christian

doctrine neglect to do so.¹³ In the end, understanding theology as both contextually shaped and historically informed frees Christian communities to respond to the theological challenge of other religions with creative, practical approaches that offer hope for our societies and world.

Children who live in a tent in the Khanke camp on the outskirts of one of northern Iraq's largest cities, Duhok. Photo: LWF/Sandra Cox



Preparing for our own journey: scriptural visions and theological food

How do we begin this journey of creative, practical engagement without falling off a theological cliff? We orient ourselves with a scriptural vision of the God “For in him [Jesus Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things,” (Col. 1:19-20a) and fill our knapsacks with theological food to fuel us for the task of fully caring for our neighbors as ourselves. The two following examples represent possible visions for guiding communities into interreligious engagement in their contexts, though they are just two among a whole gamut of possibilities. The exciting opportunity for each community to explore Scripture and cast a theological vision together is among the greatest gifts of walking the road of interreligious dialogue.

Hospitality: Whether it is the radical hospitality epitomized in the Good Samaritan parable (Lk 10:25-37),

the mutual hospitality embodied in the narrative about the woman washing Jesus’ feet (Lk 7:36-50; Jn 12:1-8; Mt 26:6-13; Mk 14:3-9), or a “neighborology”¹⁴ that identifies love for God and neighbor as the starting point for engagement, the practice of hospitality builds bridges for dialogue. In fact, to show hospitality and to receive it from others is itself a form of dialogue, spoken not with words but with actions of generosity and humility. In offering ourselves and our resources to our religious neighbors, we say that they are valuable to us; in receiving hospitality from others, we remember that Christians are not outside the web of human interdependence. In short, hospitality, whether extended or received, embodies the Christian conviction that faith produces love, and that love moves us toward God and others.

Practically speaking, what is the shape of Christian hospitality? Unlike modern conceptions of entertaining or hosting, Christian hospitality does not simply orient itself only to those one already knows. Rather, it overcomes the boundaries of differ-

ence to relate to those whom one does not know well or even like.¹⁵ When Jesus told the parable of the wedding banquet (Mt 22:1-14), the host extended his invitation further and further outside the acceptable boundaries of Jewish or Greek societies until the most unfathomable guests had received it. Ironically, on the wedding day, it was the socially despicable guests who turned up to celebrate at the feast. Moreover, these guests, who received the host’s radical hospitality with gratitude, ultimately enhanced that host’s celebration by choosing to rejoice with him.

This parable reminds us that we cannot limit the extension or reception of hospitality to certain groups. God’s invitation goes out to all, and it is this universal hospitality that invites Christians to relate to all their neighbors with open arms, especially those to whom hospitality is often denied. Furthermore, showing hospitality does not require the credentials of pastors or theologians, nor can it be relegated to particular locations, environments or schedules with specific agendas.



Children attending a church service in a Kigali congregation of the Lutheran Church of Rwanda. Photo: © LWF/DWS Rwanda/T. Lohnes

On the contrary, hospitality belongs to all humans. It constitutes a way of being that wiggles into every nook and cranny of life and allows all to share Christ's body and blood as priests of God. In short, when it comes to interreligious engagement, hospitality opens the door for

everyday persons and churches to demonstrate Christ's unexpected love in unexpected places.

Finally, hospitality, as a joyful response to God's grace, embraces a lifestyle marked by expectation and commitment: an expectation that each person and tradition

has something to receive from its religious neighbors and a commitment to sharing the treasures of one's own faith in return. Moreover, Christian hospitality remembers that the practice of giving always arises out of the context of having received. Christians have much to

gain—theologically, globally and personally—from engaging with their religious neighbors. Ultimately, hospitality requires Christians to go beyond seeing or observing others and obliges us to move towards them in love, committed to offering the riches of our tradition and expecting that our own theologies and faiths will be enhanced in return.

Vocation: To what is the church called and with whom does it partner in living out that call? Micah 6:8 sheds light on these questions, offering the church a vocational theology where justice, mercy and dependence on God in faith comprise the fundamentals of the church's mission in the world. Through the prophet's words, we witness the interconnectivity of Christian faith and work: walking faithfully with God translates into a life of doing justice and extending mercy. The Christian community's vocation and formation are indelibly one.

Yet, does the church live out its call alone? The responsibility to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God does not mean that the church operates as a lone ranger,

working without the world on behalf of the world. Jesus' incarnation and association with sinful human beings of all religions offers a rich glimpse into how God envisions the arrival of the kingdom of heaven: not on a golden chariot but through the messy involvement of broken human beings empowered by the Spirit. Jesus' frequent praising of outsiders' expressions of faith derails theologies of vocation that identify the church as the only community capable of envisioning and implementing justice and mercy. While occasions arise where the church is left alone to do its work, Christians frequently represent just one of many religious and non-religious groups aspiring to a peaceful and healthy world. Hence, when it comes faithfully to live out our call, the church must do justice, show mercy and walk humbly in dependence on God in partnership with others pursuing the same goal

If it is true that the Christian community's calling involves the insights, labors and cooperative love of others, then any dream of justice for all will require us to engage with

all. Moving forward without dialogue is not an option in situations of interdependence, and the more we invest in our relationships with religious neighbors, the more fruitful our dialogues will be. While this may be challenging, Christians can enter into such interreligious relationships securely with the knowledge that justice seeking inevitably propels diverse communities and people together towards reconciliation and love. This joint pursuit of justice for all, based on our shared human worth, requires mutual conversation and dependence from the initial stages to the final ones. In this way, the hope for the manifestation of God's kingdom finds renewal not simply in accomplishing a specific goal or initiative, but in the process of joining together to seek it. Such situations, where different religious communities join together in efforts to celebrate and protect our shared humanity, function as theatres in which the reconciling movement of the Spirit appears in tangible form.



The LWF Peace Oasis offers workshops in arts, sports and music and non-violent conflict resolution. The soccer team just won a competition in the camp. Photo: LWF/ M. Renaux

Two steps forward, one step back: moving in a hermeneutical circle

While we cannot embark on the journey of interreligious dialogue without a theological vision, the work of vision casting is never finished. Our

encounters will inevitably invite us to double back, revisit our Scriptures and envision anew. Ultimately, the initial vision leads us onto a road that will both challenge and enrich our theologies, providing us with ever-new insights into the mysterious God we worship. In the end, dialoguing

with our religious neighbors is an invitation to continue to reflect on our own tradition: just who are we as Christians and what do we believe? Regularly asking these kinds of questions strengthens rather than weakens Christian identity, helping to create a communion that is theo-

logically rooted as well as oriented toward the other in love.

The journey itself: beauty in diversity

So what is dialogue? Is it a tool for achieving a specific end? A way of being that a community practices? Is it both, or something else altogether?¹⁶ This question, “what is dialogue?” is complex, especially because dialogue means different things to different people. Some view dialogue as a way to achieve identified goals; others understand dialogue to be symbolic—neither a tool nor a way of being, dialogue signifies something larger than the conversation itself. Others view dialogue as educational, underscoring the long-term societal and personal benefits of interreligious engagement.

Ultimately, dialogue, simply meaning “a through word” in Greek, invites an infinite number of definitions, and how one answers questions of location, topics, participants, or goals influences any conclusion drawn. Is dialogue formal, informal,

large, small, open, closed, in a place of worship or someone’s home, short-term, long-term, theologically focused or socially oriented? And what about the participants? Dialogue could involve young people envisioning a new kind of world, women linking arms for justice and peace, the poor displaying genuine hospitality, elderly people guiding us to paths of wisdom, men laboring to produce hope, with every culture and society offering different perspectives and insights. In the end, every participant, as well the settings, topics and atmosphere contribute to making each dialogue a unique process with its own personality. And like a picture, that dialogue changes over time. With every new phase of the journey, questions such as who will participate, what the agenda will be, or where to hold the gathering, may challenge us to reflect on what are we doing, why we are doing it, and how what we have learned in the process will change our next steps. Similarly to an artist fine-tuning a painting along the way, communities are free to adjust their thinking, approaches, styles and

settings based on their situation’s changing needs and opportunities. Approaching dialogue with flexibility, rather than standardizing a “right approach,” allows participants to discern the common picture they can paint together.

Sharing “through words” on the way: suggestions for the road

It is clear from the description above that dialogue, like human beings, cannot be captured in a single snapshot. On the contrary, dialogue represents a moving, dynamic process where religious communities gather to paint common visions: visions that retain the distinctiveness of all the traditions, yet emphasize the colorful ties that bind us as one. Ultimately, dialogue, like all religious communities, emerges as a living entity birthed through relationship: it moves, grows and transforms over time to include a spectrum of shades and colors. As the seasons change, social demands shift, and new theological questions and

challenges arise, dialogue—the “through word”—offers a continuous road forward. Far from a singular event, dialogue represents an ongoing activity, the best possible way for religious communities to live together in a plural world.

Still, after all this discussion about dialogue’s dynamic nature, the question of methods lingers. Are there practical ways to engage in dialogue such that all communities involved benefit from the interaction? The short answer is yes; fruitful dialogue possesses distinct characteristics that, when absent, render the road ahead hazardous and temporarily unsafe for travel. Thus, the following guidelines are offered not to limit or set the boundaries of dialogue, but to orient it, shape it and guide it, like a parent with a child. Keep in mind, however, that “sharing words through time” may not be easy at the beginning, even with these guidelines in place. Yet, as with the artist, the hope is that the picture grows more beautiful with time.

Seeking education: Dialogue requires engagement, and as we

engage with our religious neighbors, we are invited to listen, learn and reflect on the traditions, beliefs and practices of a particular community. Who are these people before us? What do they believe about God, about humans, about the challenges facing society? How do their beliefs impact our own? Education prior to and throughout the process of dialogue increases the likelihood that our encounters with other religious communities will be fruitful. Such education, while certainly covering the basic beliefs and normative practices of another religious community, must also engage the historical, cultural, political and economic contexts in which a particular religion has and continues to take shape.¹⁷ Education also entails engaging with how one’s own culture and community—religious and national—have represented the other group: are there myths to be debunked, prejudices to be exposed, caricatures to be dismissed, frameworks for evaluating others’ salvation to be derailed, or offenses to be confessed? While it is impossible to leave behind all of our

pre- or misconceptions, education offers a way to shed some of them. Finally, each group must honestly and thoroughly take stock of how its specific religious tradition has hindered dialogue in the past, so that future dialogues are effective. Ultimately, while not a prerequisite to dialogue, the interreligious and intercultural competence we gain through education will help to enrich our encounters and deal effectively with challenges we may face.¹⁸

Practicing self-reflexivity: Interreligious engagement is a venture into unfamiliar territory: the deeper one goes into the traditions and living faith of another community, the more aware of one’s own identity one becomes. Sometimes this self-awareness is comfortable; other times it is not. In these situations, fruitful dialogue requires religious groups to be vulnerable with one another, trusting that the other group will practice the same self-reflexivity. Ultimately, Christians cannot claim the authority of their tradition through self-reference; we must be willing fully to engage in dialogue, and that



Workshop about HIV/AIDS in Sumatra, Indonesia. Photo: LWF/ C. Kästner

requires bringing one's traditions, doctrines and practices to the table and reflecting on them critically alongside those of our neighbors.¹⁹

Keeping the dialogue relational:

Dialoguing with real people can be hard work. Yet dialogue, by its very

nature, requires the participation of particular people at a particular time in a particular space. Religious traditions, beliefs and theologies can never be divorced from the communities that practice them, and engaging a religious tradition from a distance keeps us removed

from the physical people who call a particular faith their own. Moreover, engaging only at the level of doctrine can mislead us into believing that official teachings represent an entire religious tradition. Like Christianity, other religions are not monolithic, and believers practice their faith in

diverse ways.²⁰ Dialogue thus invites us to leave the clouds of speculation and keep our feet on the ground, our language in the vernacular and our eyes ready to see the face of our religious neighbors. If interfaith dialogue is to bear fruits—of love, justice, mutual edification, or otherwise—it will be in the context of relationship, for it alone can transform fear into friendship.

Reaching consensus, maintaining difference: Does dialogue require consensus between different religious groups? Yes and no. Consensus is necessary when it comes to matters of respect for the other persons involved and an individual's human rights: agree together to observe a common standard of rights based on recognized international understandings.²¹ Expectations for the relationships and dialogue, appropriate ways of conversing and the topics addressed or activities engaged also require on-going discussion and consensus. While this process of consensus may be informal, the participation of both groups in decision making ultimately forms a continuous

circle of consensus that is itself a kind of positive and life-giving dialogue. Much like the parable of the wheat that grows while the farmer sleeps, kernels of fruit emerge as religious neighbors learn to listen to and work with one another at either end of theological or content-laden conversations. On the other hand, dialogue does not demand the creation of a relativized, global theology. In fact, the most fruitful dialogue occurs in contexts where groups hold deep and often vastly different convictions, yet share a commitment to developing a peaceful and mutually enhancing relationship. In the end, maintaining our differences while simultaneously offering them to our religious neighbors often allows us to see our own beliefs afresh, and to reflect upon the richness of our tradition through new lenses.

Is there a destination? Holding the compass as the path unfolds

When it comes to interreligious dialogue, the destinations, known

and unknown, resemble the path to get there: unfolding with each step, with just enough light for the next one. Ultimately, the possible goals of interreligious dialogue come in as many colors as the communities participating, and every community's unique context and theological vision will guide it to a different understanding of the dialogue's purpose. However, each community should consider these important questions before and throughout the dialogue process: why do we want to engage with our religious neighbors? Are there specific tensions between our communities that need resolving, questions we want to ask, theological conversations we desire to have, offenses we need to confess, injustices we hope to combat together, or things we simply want to learn from one another? Are the reasons we identified global in scope or local? Socially oriented or doctrinally focused? These questions and others like them can help to orient each religious community throughout their dialogical journey, keeping in mind that freedom exists for making changes along the way.



IFAPA Inter-Faith Action for Peace in Africa. Photo: LWF/Paul Weinberg

Finally, we must recognize that our religious neighbors may not share the same goals, and remember that learning to adjust one's goals and expectations is as much part of the dialogue process as anything

else. As with the artist's painting, the final results of dialogue may look, and often do look, different than originally imagined.

Even with a theological compass in hand, food for the road and a des-

tinuation in mind, the journey of inter-religious dialogue requires churches and individuals to work out their own ways forward: no right path, method, or answer exists for facing the challenge of religious pluralism. In the

end, Christian communities must rely on the Spirit in discerning how, in their individual contexts, best to move into mutually edifying engagement with their religious neighbors. That said: does a way of evaluating the fruitfulness of our dialogues exist? Absolutely. Tracing the extent to which the Scriptural imperatives to practice faith, hope and love, as well as justice and mercy, manifest in our dialogues offers a way to measure the effectiveness of our approaches and the value of the outcomes.²² Where has love increased or been experienced? How has the horizon of hope expanded?

What new territory has faith explored? For whom has justice been

realized? When has mercy allowed us to start afresh? While evaluating dialogue with the measuring rods of faith, hope, love, justice and mercy may seem vague, assessing how each one emerges and grows during the journey keeps us moving in directions that enhance the well-being of the religious communities involved, the peace of the global village in which we live, and ultimately the glory of the God we worship.

An invitation

Are we ready to join the work of fanning that flame of hope by practicing love, justice and mercy in dialogue

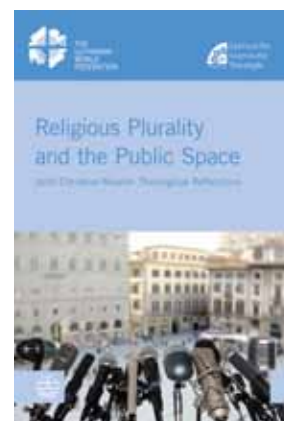
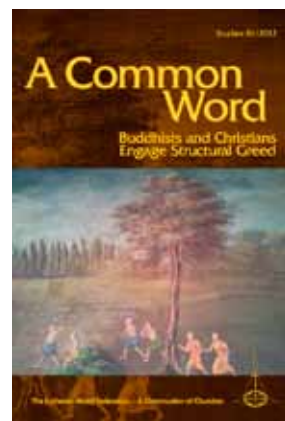
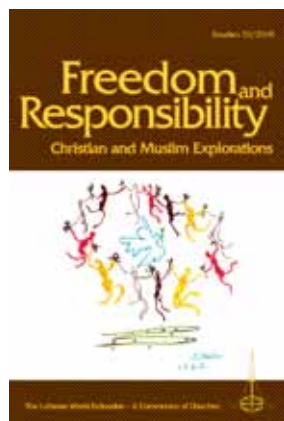
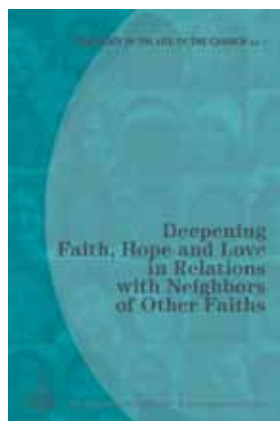
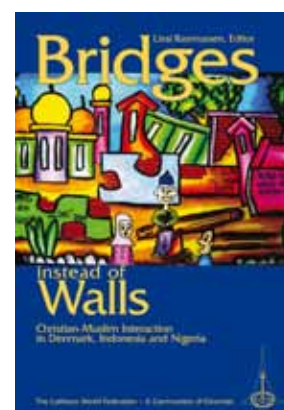
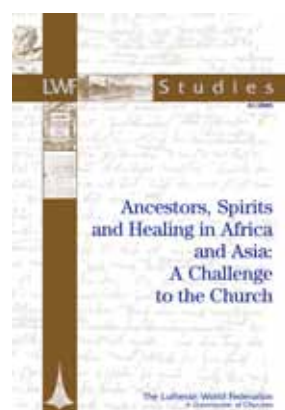
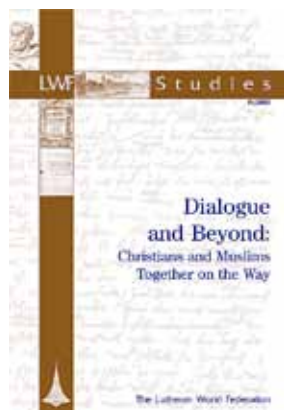
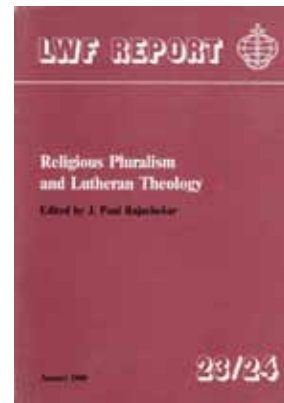
with our religious neighbors? As the Norwegian religious communities who formed solidarity rings in their own streets demonstrated, hope for humanity flourishes when we join hands with our religious neighbors. Though the journey of interreligious dialogue may send us into unfamiliar and sometimes challenging terrain, let us embark on it with certainty that the God, whose love, justice and mercy inspire our faith and enliven our hope, will guide the way.

Endnotes

- ¹ J. Paul Rajashekar, “The Challenge of Religious Pluralism to Christian Theological Reflection,” in J. Paul Rajashekar (ed.), *Religious Pluralism and Lutheran Theology* (Geneva: LWF, 1988), 9.
- ² Boko Haram’s recent activity in Nigeria is one such example.
- ³ Balazs Koranyi, “Norway’s Muslims form protective human ring around synagogue,” Reuters [UK], 21 Feb. 2015, at www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/21/us-norway-muslims-jews-idUSKBNLPOAG20150221, and “A New Peace Ring in Norway around an Oslo Mosque,” THE NORDIC PAGE [Norway], 23 Feb. 23, 2015, at www.tnp.no/norway/panorama/4836-a-new-peace-ring-in-norway-around-a-oslo-mosque.
- ⁴ David. L. Windibiziri, “Neighborhood, Mutuality and Friendship,” in Sigvard von Sicard and Ingo Wulfhorst (eds), *Dialogue and Beyond: Christians and Muslims Together on the Way* (Geneva: LWF, 2003), 90–92.
- ⁵ The following paragraph relies on: A Consultation Message to Churches of the Lutheran Communion (LWF), “Beyond Toleration. Towards Deeper Relationships with Muslims,” in Simone Sinn (ed.), *Deeping Faith, Hope and Love in Relations with Neighbors of Other Faiths* (Geneva: LWF, 2008), 37-44.
- ⁶ The conference findings are recorded in “Muslims and Christians Engaging Structural Greed Today,” in Martin Sinaga (ed.), *A Common Word. Buddhists and Christians Engage Structural Greed* (Geneva: LWF, 2012).
- ⁷ In analyzing the recent spikes in animosity between Muslims and Christians, the Communion observed that, “People are highly susceptible to generalizations and polarizing stereotypes fuelled by the mass media...longstanding images of the ‘other,’ which largely are creations of people’s imagination, play powerful roles,” op. cit. (note 5), 39.
- ⁸ The rest of the document draws from the following sources: Rajashekar, op. cit. (note 1); J. Paul Rajashekar (ed.), *Christian-Muslim Relations in Eastern Africa* (Geneva: LWF, 1988); J. Paul Rajashekar and H. S. Wilson (eds), *Islam in Asia* (Geneva: LWF, 1992); Hance A. O. Mwakabana (ed.), *Christianity and Other Faiths in Europe* (Geneva: LWF, 1995); Hance A. O. Mwakabana (ed.), *Religious Pluralism in Africa: Challenge and Response* (Geneva: LWF, 1996); Hance A. O. Mwakabana (ed.), *Theological Perspectives on Other Faiths: Toward a Christian Theology of Religions* (Geneva: LWF, 1997); Jens Holger Schjorring, Prasanna Kumari, Norman A. Hjelm (eds), *From Federation to Communion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997); Roland E. Miller and Hance A. O. Mwakabana, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Theological and Practical Issues* (Geneva: LWF, 1998); Nicholas Lossky et al. (eds), *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001); Sigvard von Sicard and Ingo Wulfhorst (eds), *Dialogue and Beyond: Christians and Muslims Together on the Way* (Geneva: LWF, 2003); Sinn, op. cit. (note 5), Simone Sinn and Martin L. Sinaga (eds), *Freedom and Responsibility: Christian and Muslim Explorations* (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran University Press & LWF, 2010); Sinaga, op. cit. (note 6); Simone Sinn, Mouhanad Khorchide, & Dina El Omari (eds), *Religious Plurality and the Public Space* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2015).

- ⁹ “Statements from the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Consultation, Stockholm, 1983,” in Wolfgang Greive and Peter N. Prove (eds), *Shift in Jewish-Lutheran Relations?* (Geneva: LWF, 2003), 196.
- ¹⁰ Miller and Mwakabana, op. cit. (note 8), 1.
- ¹¹ Von Sicard and Wulforth, op. cit. (note 8), 7.
- ¹² Rajashekar, op. cit. (note 1), 13-14.
- ¹³ Charles Amjad-Ali, “Theological and Historical Rationality Behind Christian-Muslim Relations,” in Rajashekar, 1992, 5-6.
- ¹⁴ Martin Lukito Sinaga, “A Long Road to the Neighbor. Notes from an Indonesian Christian,” in Sinn, op. cit. (note 5), 52.
- ¹⁵ Hazel O. Aganga discusses the concept of “reaching beyond barriers” in relation to the parable of the Good Samaritan. See Hazel O. Aganga, “Hospitality in the Context of Interfaith Relations,” in Sinn, op. cit. (note 5), 52.
- ¹⁶ See Amjad-Ali for a more extensive treatment on epistemological links to understandings of dialogues.
- ¹⁷ See Sinaga, op. cit. (note 8), 47.
- ¹⁸ Simone Sinn, “Introduction,” in Sinn, op. cit. (note 5), 11.
- ¹⁹ On claiming authority through self-definition, see Rajashekar, op. cit. (note 1), 19.
- ²⁰ Göran Gunner, “Interfaith Encounter in a Multi-Religious Society,” in Sinn, op. cit. (note 5), 66-7.
- ²¹ See Gunner’s discussion of rights in Gunner, *ibid.*, 67-8.
- ²² The book *Faith, Hope and Love in Relations with Neighbors of Other Faiths* (Sinn, 2008) is an outstanding resource for exploring how faith, hope and love can inspire and guide interreligious dialogue.

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