

**An Ecumenical Response to
“A Common Word Between Us and You”
by the
National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA^[1]**

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.
“Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”
He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”
He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your
soul,
and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”
And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

(Luke 10:25-28, NRSV)

Introduction: An Affirmation of Muslim– Christian Engagement

The churches that comprise the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA welcome with gratitude “A Common Word Between Us and You.” Addressed to leaders of Christian churches around the world, your letter expresses an intent to engage seriously with Christians in dialogue that is grounded in the authentic religious convictions of our respective communities. Based upon the love of God and the love of neighbor – the two great commandments central to Islam, Christianity, and Judaism – your letter invites Christians to join with Muslims to forge ties of peace. This is a bold and timely invitation. Out of Christian faithfulness, and with respect for Islam, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, whose member churches’ common Christian witness leads them to seek unity with one another and peace with justice for all people, offers this ecumenical response to you, our Muslim friends, as an acceptance of your invitation.

As Christians in the United States, we understand our response to be an entry into the hospitality you have offered in “A Common Word.” As in Islam, hospitality has been an important virtue from the beginning of Christianity. St. Paul, deeply rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, instructed early Christians to “*extend hospitality to the stranger*” (*Romans 12:13, NRSV*). In Christian theology, a dramatic image of the centrality of hospitality is drawn from the visit of the Lord to Abraham (Genesis 18:1-15). Three men – iconographically portrayed as angels in Christian interpretation – appeared to Abraham, who offered them food, shelter and protection, after which they pronounced upon Abraham and Sarah a great blessing.^[2] This story, in itself symbolizing the love of God and the love of neighbor – and all the peace and understanding that attend such love – inspired the further scriptural injunction, “*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it*” (*Hebrews*

13:2, NRSV). In the experience of hospitality, therefore, a blessing is given and received.

Your call for mutual outreach between Muslims and Christians resonates with the recent experience of our respective communities. For some thirty years, Muslim–Christian dialogue has been included in the work of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, and for much longer in many of its member communions. In 1999, because of the growing importance of interfaith relations, we formulated a policy, “Interfaith Relations and the Churches,”^[3] to further guide our interactions with Islam and other religious traditions. This policy statement sets out a framework for relationship that is rooted in an understanding of God in community, the call of Christ to engagement and reconciliation, and the power of the Holy Spirit to teach us new things about God, ourselves, and what the world needs of us. The urgency for such outreach was made more acute after the terrible events of September 11, 2001, and responses to those events by and within the United States, and it is to this urgency – for the sake of peace in the world – that “A Common Word” speaks most eloquently.

We agree that striving together as people who would seek to be peacemakers – as Christians and Muslims, and also in cooperation with people of other religious traditions – for fairness, justice and mutual goodwill is indeed necessary for the welfare of the world. We note in “A Common Word” that the Arabic word translated “common,” as used in the Qur’an (“Say: O People of the Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you...” – Aal ‘Imran 3:64), also means “just” and “fair.”^[4] Thus we are called to a “just word,” or a “fair word” between one another. It is our belief that proclaiming this just word together, and acting in accordance with it, will contribute significantly to a just world for all.

Seeking Common Ground

We recognize and welcome the affirmation that love of the One God – the love of God for the world and our love for God – and love of neighbor together form the heart of our faiths. While our religious traditions have differing views of each other’s historical experience and theology, this commonality is indeed something on which to base our efforts.

This common belief is rooted in the Old Testament: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5, NRSV). In context, these words mean that God’s blessing upon the people who call upon God’s name has fundamental implications; the covenant with the people, a people chosen by God, brings blessing, and just as surely brings an obligation to love God and a responsibility to love one’s neighbor.

Christianity and Islam come to these words from different starting points. And yet, precisely because each tradition hearkens back to these same words, we are compelled to find common ground.

In "A Common Word" you write, from the perspective of your own theological understanding: "...we ask Christians to come together with us on the common essentials of our two religions... *that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God...* (Aal 'Imran, 3:64). Let this common ground be the basis of all future interfaith dialogue between us, for our common ground is that on which hangs *all the Law and the Prophets* (Matthew 22:40)." We, of course, view this common ground from the perspective of our own theological understanding. We do so as Christians involved in ecumenical dialogue among ourselves, maintaining theological differences in creative tension even as we assert what we hold in common. We bring our willingness to enter into this kind of dialogue to interfaith relationships as well.

Both Christians and Muslims understand that love of God means that human beings are to believe in God, trust God, listen to God's word and in obedience to God put this faith into practice, remain faithful under duress, practice virtues and avoid sin, pray regularly, and be forgiving and generous to others. These values and virtues are strongly convergent, even if they differ in details related to the ways we order our respective visions of the spiritual life.

Most pertinent to this discourse, there are differences as to how Muslims and Christians each understand the realities that make up the common ground upon which we stand. *Oneness* of God compels a discussion about how the revelation of God has been differently understood by the communities that call upon God's name. *Love* of God demands an exploration of how each community perceives a genuine response to God's love for the world. Even the word *neighbor* requires frank analysis: as historically played out, despite theological mandates to care for the other (as in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37), in both Muslim and Christian societies, the word "neighbor" has sometimes been limited to the designation of a member of one's own community. In various places and times, Christian minorities and Muslim minorities have both fared well and fared badly in the context of religious majorities of the other faith. In the present day, sectarian tensions are undeniable around the world, as are instances of positive interaction. In both communities, there is a growing understanding of the "other" as "neighbor," and increasing clarity that equal status in society, based on human dignity and freedom of conscience, is the ideal that should be sought and legally established.

There are many questions for Christians and Muslims to ask together as we explore the common ground on which we stand. We acknowledge God's oneness, but how do we understand this as communities that call upon God's name? Can we understand each other's affirmations of the oneness of God? What does it mean to love God and to respond to God's love in the world of suffering, strife, and division we see today? Who is our neighbor in a world in which Christians, Muslims, people of other faiths, and

secular people live together in the same societies? In a world of deep and fracturing differences, of majorities and minorities, and of urgent human needs, how do we respond to our obligation to love our neighbors? How do we genuinely understand that “love of God and love of neighbors cannot be separated”[\[5\]](#)?

As we attempt to answer these questions, we recognize that our differences are important; they contribute to who we are and to what we believe. We regretfully acknowledge, and painfully remember, that in history, due to our differences Christians and Muslims both have had a mixture of successes and failures in living out the conviction to love people of other religious traditions, including one another’s communities. Nevertheless, in repentance and humility, and in obedience to God, we can walk forward together with mutual appreciation in acceptance of the commandment to love God with our whole being, and in the belief that love for God leads to and is demonstrated in love for one another. Indeed, we can know that, with God’s blessing, each step we take together will lead to new and yet undiscovered common ground.

In Community with One Another

Ultimately, human beings are not capable of fully comprehending the Holy Mystery that is God. Yet we respond to you out of our understanding of the One God, wrought through our community’s experience of God over generations. The Christian understanding of God – the God of Abraham and his descendants – leads us to confess the One God as Trinity: God, the Father, who is fully revealed in Jesus Christ, and whose revelation in Christ and whose presence in the world and in our lives are continually confirmed through the Holy Spirit. This is the language we use to express our experience of the One God. Christian theology affirms that the Son and the Spirit find their eternal origin in the Father; it is through self-transcending freedom and love that the Father through his very being brings forth the Son and the Spirit, who thus fully possess the Father’s one and undivided divine nature. This unity is expressed in the dynamic, self-giving interrelatedness and communion of the Father, Son and Spirit; it is a relationship of mutual, self-transcending love for, and union with, one another.

Our understanding of God opens our eyes to the very meaning of relationship and communion. Indeed, the divine fellowship serves as the model for genuine human relationship to which we are called. This calling is reflected in the theological affirmation of the creation account in Genesis (1:26-27): together, male and female, “it is the first humans in community who...constitute the image and likeness of God.”[\[6\]](#) Human beings, “created to live a life of relationship, and called to claim the unity in our human diversity,”[\[7\]](#) were therefore created for communion. In our understanding, we are fully human only when, like Jesus, we are in communion – with God and with one another. Incarnating the fullness of God and being fully human, “Jesus Christ initiates a new creation, a world unified in relationship as God intended.”[\[8\]](#) This enables humans in freedom and love to transcend the self for communion with God and others. In other words, “we believe that Jesus Christ makes real God’s will for a life of loving community with God, with the whole human family, and with all creation.”[\[9\]](#) Because communion

with God and God's people and God's creation is ultimately the content of salvation, as human beings sojourn in this life we are driven by an inner impulse to reach out in community to one another.

In Christian understanding, it is the Holy Spirit that quickens this impulse toward relationship within us and "enables us to discern how to nurture the loving community of persons which is God's intention for creation, and gives us the strength to keep working toward it."^[10] Affirming that the Spirit, which, like the wind, "*blows where it chooses*" (*John 3:8, NRSV*), constantly shapes and expands our understanding of the ways of God, many Christian churches have long disavowed an exclusive appropriation of God's saving grace. Today, we can join in the affirmation that we "reject nothing of what is true and holy in [other] religions" (*Nostra Aetate*). For us, the doctrine of the Trinity reveals communion in unity and in difference. Such communion, when reflected in the human community, can therefore include relationship with neighbors of religious traditions different from our own in mutual respect, accountability, and cooperation. In the conviction that Jesus Christ is the Word of God, and that through him God has spoken to all of humanity, we are thus called upon to engage with one another respectfully, honestly, and appreciatively in the hope that through the Spirit our engagement will make a difference in the world we share.

Believing that God through Jesus was with humanity in our suffering and through the Holy Spirit continues to be present in creation, and is as close to us as our very breath, Christians are called to be agents of grace, healing, reconciliation, renewal and transformation. Central to this call is to affirm the dignity of all human beings, and to celebrate the gifts of God and blessings of life that come with being children of our Creator. As a joyful exhortation to these ministries, the Christian scriptures offer these words: "*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near...[W]hatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things*" (*Philippians 4:4-5, 8, NRSV*). We therefore reach out enthusiastically to meet your embrace, not only in respect for you as brothers and sisters within the human family, but also in solidarity in the calling to love God and love our neighbor. For as Jesus said, "*In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets*" (*Matthew 7:12, NRSV*).

Walking Forward Together

As you did in "A Common Word Between Us and You," we also affirm the need to take actions that demonstrate our commitment to our "common" and "just" word. It is our conviction that the exploration of our shared ground requires that we move beyond polite conversation to interaction with one another and cooperative endeavors. Indeed, we believe that deep relationship as neighbors calls us to common engagement in a world plagued by violence, poverty, environmental degradation, and other such ills, and in need of moral leadership in addressing them.

Consistent with this affirmation, Christian leaders within the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA have joined with American Muslim leaders in a National Muslim–Christian Initiative, with the following mission statement: “We, from various streams of Muslim and Christian communities, seek to enhance mutual understanding, respect, appreciation and support of what is sacred for each other through dialogue, education and sustained visible encounters that foster and nurture relationships.” There are various components to this work:

- to encourage the local churches, mosques and Islamic centers to engage with each other in new and positive ways;
- to educate each other about ourselves, so that we are able to present each other with authenticity and credibility, and with respect and appreciation;
- to foster the healing of painful memories that our two communities have of one another;
- to establish a mechanism for response in the event of negative events or emergencies involving our communities, and especially to denounce violence committed against them; and,
- to publicize our work and disseminate materials, including engagement on “A Common Word,” so that our constituent members and the media will have access to positive interaction between our communities.

Through this national dialogue, and through similar initiatives throughout our country and globally, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA and our member churches firmly commit to ongoing and tangible engagement with Muslim partners.

At the heart of “A Common Word,” we hear a call for Christians to consider that Muslims are *with us*, and that this togetherness bears upon the state of the world. The importance of this call should not be underestimated. Certainly, very different groups with very different agendas (mis)use the name of Islam, the Qur’an, and the Prophet Muhammad to further their own cause, and many devout Muslims deplore their actions. The same can be said for the way some (mis)use the name of Christianity, Jesus Christ, and the Bible, and for the deep distress of devout Christians who discern this abuse as contrary to the Gospel. For this reason, we similarly affirm that Christianity is not against Islam. Accordingly, we pray, not only for the absence of enmity, but for the nurturing of friendship between our two communities.

We lament on every occasion when violence is committed in the name of religion. Yet we must confess that our traditions do contain attitudes, historical memories, and even passages of scripture that have been, and can all too easily be, used in support of violence. At the same time we are convinced that, when our faiths are most authentically practiced, they lead to a rejection of violence. Such conviction also brings a responsibility. And so, we affirm with you, as written in “A Common Word”: “And to those who nevertheless relish conflict and destruction for their own sake or reckon that ultimately they stand to gain through them, we say that our very eternal souls are all also at stake if we fail to sincerely make every effort to make peace and come together in harmony.”

Therefore, our churches, in ecumenical solidarity through the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, commit themselves to actively seek, together with you, ways to take up the challenge you have presented to us in “A Common Word”: “Let us vie with each other only in righteousness and good works. Let us respect each other, be fair, just and kind to one another and live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual goodwill.” May we discern together, in the various places of our common life and work, how to give concrete expression to this commitment, *“not [only] in word or speech, but in truth and action”* (1 John 3:18, NRSV). In this way, in all contexts and in all places, equality, fairness, justice, and peace may prevail.

[1] “A Common Word Between Us and You,” a letter initially signed by 138 Muslim scholars and leaders and subsequently endorsed by some 100 others representing a broad spectrum of the Muslim community worldwide, was sent to Christian leaders throughout the world in October 2007. This response by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA is the result of a 1-year study process, led by the Interfaith Relations Commission in consultation with the Faith and Order Commission and others within the Council. The letter and other Christian responses to it may be viewed at <http://www.acommonword.com/>.

[2] This story is also of significance in the Qur’an, where it appears three times (Hud, 11:69-76; al-Hijr, 15:51-60; and al-Dariyat, 51:24-37), although there the guests are emissaries of the Lord and do not include the Lord.

[3] This document may be accessed at <http://www.nccusa.org/interfaith/ifr.html>.

[4] See footnote 22 of “A Common Word Between Us and You.”

[5] See “Interfaith Relations and the Churches,” par. 35.

[6] See “Interfaith Relations and the Churches,” par. 21.

[7] See “Interfaith Relations and the Churches,” par. 21.

[8] See “Interfaith Relations and the Churches,” par. 31.

[9] See “Interfaith Relations and the Churches,” par. 31.

[10] See “Interfaith Relations and the Churches,” par. 39.

Contact [Dr. Antonios Kireopoulos](#), NCC Senior Program Director for Interfaith Relations, 212-870-3422

NCC News contact: Philip E. Jenks, 212-870-2228, NCCnews@nccusa.org