Wisconsin Council of Churches
Public Policy Statements
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Statement on Economic Justice

November 28, 2001 (Amended December 12, 2006)

God's intention for all Creation

From the beginning, it has been God's intention for human beings to live in fellowship with God and one another and in harmony with Creation. As is told in the book of Genesis, God created human beings in the image of God. God gave them everything they needed to live including a garden to cultivate and tend (Genesis 2:15). With these human beings, God also created community (Genesis 2:18, 22). They were given loving responsibility for all living creatures and stewardship of the land. God directed humans to care for it all in a way that the earth and all that live on it would thrive. In God's Creation we find abundant resources to feed, house, and clothe ourselves. God continues to bless us with these resources. Our concern as the Council of Churches is that without proper management, those resources are being depleted and are not reaching those who need them most. Millions of people who are hungry, who do not have adequate clothing and shelter, who are sick, who are dying, who are held under bondage, are being deprived of God's gifts. Not everyone has even basic necessities.

The tension between the separateness of the person and the oneness of the community

Our God knows each of us intimately (Psalm 139) and travels with us wherever we go. If we choose to emphasize our God-given individuality, God is with us. When we choose to bring our individuality into community as God created for us, God is there as well. There is a tension that does and should exist between individuality and community. We can find full expression of self in community and we, as individuals, are responsible both to and as community. Yet in a society that places individuality and personal success in such high priority, the Wisconsin Council of Churches believes that it is the responsibility of the church, the body of Christ, to reinforce God's message of community, of stewardship, of mutual support for one another and for the environment.

The purpose of this statement

This statement on economic justice, then, is based on our belief that God's intention for us to live in harmony, in fellowship and with respect for one another and the earth is one that has not changed since the beginning of time. In order for us to live that way, everyone must have enough resources; each person should have according to his or her need. Indeed, God has always provided enough. As the people of God journeyed from the Garden of Eden through 40 years in the wilderness and on to the Land of Milk and Honey, God provided for their needs:

"Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the Lord your God disciplines you. Therefore keep the commandments of the Lord your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him. For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron
and from whose hills you may mine copper. You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you." (Deuteronomy 8:2-10)

With this statement, the Wisconsin Council of Churches recognizes that the church must determine how to properly be in the world, yet resist being of the world. We, as God's people, have not allowed ourselves to be used as God's instruments to care for brothers and sisters in need. With the needs of so many increasing so greatly, the church cannot work in a vacuum and expect to address the ills of society. The church must take responsibility for change and be willing to work through social structures like government in order to achieve social and economic justice for those whom Jesus calls us to serve the most. It is the responsibility of the church to work to transform the priorities of society from the trust of wealth to the trust of God.

Then someone came to Jesus and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The young man said to him, "I have kept all these; and what do I still lack?" Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions." (Matthew 19:16-22)

**God's directive to provide for "the least of these"**

Throughout the Old Testament and in Old Testament history there is great evidence of voluntary acts of charity as a priority in Israel's corporate life. Yet, the very word "charity" has connotations today that it did not have in biblical times. We tend to think of charity as something that we give or do at a given point in time. But biblically, charity is intended as an attitude, a way in which we operate on a daily basis. It is, in fact, synonymous with justice, the act of being fair. In the book of Exodus (chapters 21-23), God lays down a directive to restore social, economic and religious well-being to those who are in need; a directive to be charitable. Those who have sold themselves to others as a result of economic need are to be freed in the seventh, or sabbatical year. The land was to rest, to regain its strength to produce, also in the sabbatical year. The poor, the resident aliens, the widows and orphans were not to be exploited or oppressed. The poor were to be given due process, or proper justice, in legal matters. Anyone who hurt the poor would have to answer to God:

"If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; and my wrath will burn...." (Exodus 22:23-24a).

But perhaps nowhere is Scripture more instructive relative to those who ignore the plight of the poor than those words from the mouths of the eighth century (before Christ) prophets Amos, Isaiah, and Micah. They condemn those who not only ignore the poor but those who make laws that have ill effect on the poor:

"Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right . . . . What will you do on the day of punishment . . . ?" (Isa. 10:1-3a) and "They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance. Therefore thus says the Lord: Now, I am devising against this family an evil From which you cannot remove your necks; And you shall not walk haughtily, For it will be an evil time." (Micah 2:1-3)
Indeed, the New Testament also draws attention to the needs of the poor. Jesus Christ proclaims:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus' authoritative words turned the world around him upside down. Those people who are the least in the sight of human beings, culture and society, are the very ones he declares must and will be helped the most. He contradicts the world's view of success. He turns the world upside down in order to get it right side up and calls upon his followers to do the same. Jesus deliberately identified himself with the poor as an act of loving compassion, therefore challenging the rest of us to respond in kind.

**What are the causes of poverty?**

Many people are born into poverty and some find themselves forced into poverty as a result of other circumstances. Racism, gender discrimination, lack of education, political strife, and government corruption are factors that lead to poverty around the world. Poverty can also be the result of mismanagement of money and power by individuals, churches, businesses, governments and other institutions.

**The special responsibilities of the wealthy**

Neither the Hebrew scriptures nor the New Testament object to wealth nor convict the wealthy for what they have attained (unless by unscrupulous methods).

However, there is great danger lurking in wealth: greed. Knowing that, God also made it clear that inherent in the blessings of wealth is God's directive to use that wealth to meet the needs of the poor:

"Give liberally [to your brother or sister] and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake." Deuteronomy 15:10

Wealth is intended by God to be shared, not hoarded, not accumulated:

"The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work." (2 Corinthians 9:6-8)

**How wealth is to be apportioned**

While we have come to think of property as our accumulated possessions, property in the Hebrew scriptures refers to the land. Such property was a gift from God; it was sacred. Yet while it was a gift to God's people, they held it not as a personal possession but as stewards. God maintained ownership and the stewards of the land who were given dominion over it were to see that it was properly maintained in a way that it would provide not only for the family who tended it, but for the poor who would benefit from the family's tithe. Yet, today, wealth is held in the hands of a very few and land is but one symbol of wealth.

The Apostle Paul adds light to that discussion:
"As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life." (emphasis added) (1 Timothy 6:17-19)

The Wisconsin Council of Churches recognizes that wealth comes in varying degrees and forms. We know that all believers are given gifts of the Spirit to be used for the building of the Church. We know there are conscientious businesspeople and corporations who strive to be responsible by producing quality products that also provide jobs and benefits for their employees. We celebrate those who have used their wealth for charitable causes and who provide the solid fiscal foundation from which philanthropy and job creation can take place. We know there are many people who have taken up public service as a career, from teachers to government workers, to elected officials, and who are striving to find ways to resolve discrepancies in wages and class and property.

But there remains a chasm between those who have and those who have not. Farmers who for generations have considered farming not a business but a "way of life" find it difficult to survive in an economy that calls for cheap food at the expense of the producer and, at the same time, fails to provide food for those who need it the most. There are businesspeople who would, at the expense of their employees and the environment, seek higher personal profits for themselves without thought for the dignity and well-being of those who work for them. There are those in public service who have bowed to high-powered interests and have advocated passed legislation that has been detrimental to or does not address at all the disparity between the rich and the poor.

The plain fact of the matter is that since God provides all that we need and yet there are people who do not have enough to eat or drink or a safe place to sleep, then we can only conclude that there are some who have too much and who have not adequately shared what they have been given.

**Avenues of economic justice**

Specifically, the Wisconsin Council of Churches declares our intention to seek economic justice through such avenues as:

- Continued efforts to reduce poverty;
- Opportunities in all forms for children, families, singles and elders so as to ensure the full potential and dignity of each person;
- Racial, ethnic, and gender equality in all sectors of the economy;
- Employment standards that are fair, where workers are paid a just and fair wage and where benefits are provided where possible (including the farm sector and with migrant workers), and, when unemployment occurs, access to public or private assistance for those people who cannot work or for whom there are no jobs available.
- The right of private and public employees to choose to organize and bargain collectively, so each and all may participate more effectively in decisions that affect them and protect the dignity and well-being of themselves and their families. Workers and employers are responsible for negotiating in good faith and considering how their decisions will affect the common good.
- Decent and affordable housing;
- Quality public education that is funded adequately and fairly, recognizing the needs of rural schools and those with large numbers of poor, students needing special education, and children for whom English is their second language; and that is protected against measures that are punitive and that undermine a public commitment to the common good;
• Access to basic health care that provides for the whole of the person, physical and mental;
• Sustainable agricultural practices, fair prices and income for farmers and farm workers, and ensuring a safe food supply for all of those who hunger and thirst;
• Environmental laws and regulations that ensure the long-term productivity and protection of the land;
• Taxation that gives relief to those who need it most and addresses the gap between the rich and the poor;
• Access to government through an open process and financing of elections that attracts those who would be our most able leaders, not just those who can afford to run;
• Reforms of the political process that will make our elected leaders more accountable to the people rather than to special interest money, and that will promote civic participation by assuring citizens that their votes count and that government can work fairly and effectively for the benefit of all;
• International trade systems and treaties that protect worker justice, human rights, environmental standards, and democratic process;
• Community development programs that uphold the integrity of our citizens and our environment.
• Immigration policies that prioritize family reunification, protect workers’ rights, and enforce immigration laws with justice and compassion; and increased efforts to address the root causes of international migration in poverty, war, persecution, and environmental degradation.
• Increasing our nation’s capacity to respond to the growing need for refugee protection, resettlement, and integration.

The church, its role, and the realities of the world

The church has remained silent on many of these issues, fearful of reaction from the people in the pews. We have shunned controversy. We share the guilt of those who have not worked for economic justice. In addition, the church is not exempt from the creation and maintenance of economic injustice and must take its own responsibility for it. Therefore, we recognize several realities in our world:

• The globalization of the economy has changed the face of the way business is done in the world, even to the extent of concentrating power and money in private corporations that exceed the size of some entire countries.
• The political arena is made up of political parties and people in them whose beliefs span a continuum and often find themselves polarized in their positions rather than finding common ground.
• There is an unrecognized tension between freedom and equality, between rights and responsibilities. The more some have of one, the less others have of another. Sometimes freedoms must be sacrificed for the common good.
• Our church members are among those who are voting for and serving as elected officials. It is not a matter of us vs. them.
• The role of government is to seek justice for all people and to uphold the common good. But justice cannot be achieved when the democratic process is not just and fair for all. Economic justice is challenged and compromised when money from special interest groups influences the choice of candidates for public office, the redrawing of legislative districts, and the conduct of election campaigns. The influence of money in campaigns for public office undermines democracy and feeds cynicism concerning public integrity and the validity of elected leadership.
• The role of the church is one of a voice crying in the wilderness, a prophet for those with whom we live and work. At the same time we must also seek progress in small steps and compromise and celebrate every time diverse minds come together to empower those who can least provide for themselves. The church must be a model for open and healthy
dialogue, respectful of a vast array of opinions, seeking common ground, and open to
compromise in a legislative process that often demands that small steps be taken on the
road to reform. Compromise must not sacrifice our prophetic voice; it can be a means to
let that voice be heard.

Conclusion

On that day by the Sea of Galilee when a young boy handed over his five barley loaves and
two fish to Jesus, even Jesus’ disciples were skeptical of how far so little could stretch. Yet the
Master was able to feed a crowd of five thousand men and with them the women and children.
They were not only satisfied, there was enough left over to fill 12 baskets. (John 6)
When we doubt how much we can accomplish through personal change and through
political change, we fail to give credit to the One who will use us to further the Kingdom of God.
We need only to remember what the Lord requires of us: “to do justice, and to love kindness, and
to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

"Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers,
encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you
repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray
without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.
Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to
what is good; abstain from every form of evil." (1 Thessalonians 5:12-22).
Statement on Nonviolence

April, 2002

Introduction

Violence is an ever-present reality in our society. Every day the media confronts us with reports of spouse and child abuse, attacks on women, minorities and gay and lesbian people, ethnic cleansing, terrorism and war. These occurrences inflict incalculable suffering on millions of people all over the world and create an environment of fear that terrorizes millions more.

Faithfulness to its mission requires the Church to speak out against violence, minister to its victims and work tirelessly to reduce the level of violence in society. To do this effectively it is necessary to identify and address the causes of violence. One of the most important, most hidden and least understood of these is structural injustice.

What is structural injustice?

Structural injustice is the oppression and exploitation many people experience, because the social structures and policies that affect their lives are controlled by and benefit disproportionately elite groups at the expense of the masses.

Structural injustice is perhaps most obvious in the economic sector of society. In unregulated, free market economies maximization of profit is the main motivation for economic enterprise. Large corporations, the main economic actors in such economies, have enormous power, which they often use to keep wages and corporate taxes low and to lobby against government regulations such as laws protecting workers or the environment. These corporations produce an abundance of the goods and services people with buying power want, but for economic reasons they often ignore or address inadequately the needs of poor people and of society as a whole. Bill Gates, one of the world’s most successful capitalists at the turn of the third millennium, acknowledged these inadequacies of the free market when he gave one billion dollars to fight AIDS in Africa. He said that although there was an urgent need for this work, the market would not respond to it because it wouldn’t be profitable enough.

Structural injustice, which many see as a form of violence, may be most easily recognized in the economy, but it is present in all other sectors of society as well, including religion. The Church, itself, is not free of it. Indeed, the Church has sometimes supported or even employed overt forms of violence. The Crusades, the Inquisition, the Thirty Years War, the burning of “witches” in medieval Europe and colonial Massachusetts, the torture and execution of heretics by both Protestants and Catholics at the time of the Reformation, and the centuries-long persecution of Jews are dramatic examples of this. It grieves us deeply that religiously motivated violence and violence in the name of religion are continuing and even growing problems in our world. For that reason we rejoice that Pope John Paul II began the Third Millennium on an honest and hopeful note by publicly acknowledging and repenting of these acts and calling the Church to a more consistent and faithful practice of nonviolence. We also rejoice that, although extremist groups still engage in acts of overt violence in the name of Christ or the Church, these acts are no longer officially endorsed or legitimated by the institutional Church.

Structural injustice, however, remains more common. When growth and profitability become the Church’s major goals, structural injustice is often the result, because these goals can easily lead the Church away from Jesus’ injunction to make the well being of “the least of my brothers and sisters” a priority. When this happens, the Church, pursuing success as the world understands it,
organizes its life around the preferences of affluent and powerful groups. It adopts more-or-less uncritically the culture of these groups and starts new parishes primarily among them while abandoning many poor, inner-city congregations. This is an example of structural injustice in the life of the Church, because, through these practices, it serves the powerful while neglecting the needs of poor and marginalized people.

Jesus calls the Church to be concerned about the well being of the earth and all its inhabitants and to minister to the victims of violence. It does this through Word and Sacrament, pastoral care, social services, and worldwide humanitarian programs. Through faith-based public policy advocacy it also urges governments to seek alternatives to violence in addressing social problems and resolving social conflicts. The Church's inspiration for this work is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

**Jesus' proclamation of God's reign**

Although there are numerous, troubling passages in the Bible itself that legitimate violence, at its heart the biblical message is about a God who is full of compassion and who ceaselessly works to transform the world through love. In this transformed world, peace and justice will kiss each other (Psalm 85:10), poverty will be no more (Deuteronomy 15:4) and war between nations will be a thing of the past (Isaiah 2:4). The Hebrew scriptures use the word "shalom" to describe this New World which is bringing into being. Shalom is the total well being of the whole world and all its inhabitants. The Bible portrays Shalom as God's will for the world and pictures God as relentless in pursuit of Shalom.

Christians believe and the Church teaches that in Jesus of Nazareth God's work in behalf of shalom reaches a new intensity. Jesus announces and initiates the Reign of God on earth. The Reign of God is the New World, the world of Shalom that God is bringing into being among us.

Jesus' proclamation of God's reign brings him into conflict with the powerful who control the social structures of his society. He boldly exposes the oppressive role these structures are playing in communal life and shows how incompatible many of their present practices are with life in the Kingdom of God. Jesus is particularly critical of his society's religious structures and practices. He breaks the Sabbath and purity laws as they were understood and applied by the religious leaders of his society. These laws regulated relationships between “the Righteous” and women, poor people, lame people, blind people, people with leprosy, prostitutes and others considered unclean by the religious elite.

Jesus also challenged in a unique way the political structures of his time and the beliefs and values on which they were based. When his disciples argue about which one is the greatest, he says to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called Benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest and the leader like one who serves.” (Luke 22:25-26) To understand the political undertones of this saying, it is important to know that Benefactor is one of the titles of Tiberius Caesar, Jesus’ emperor.

Both in his time and in our own, those who hear and understand Jesus' message realize that he threatens the status quo by calling individuals to radical repentance and also by calling for radical change in the way society is organized and functions.

**God as Abba**

Jesus' experience of God is the inspiration for his message about God's Reign as a reign of love. For Jesus, God is not a distant, condemning and wrathful sovereign waiting to punish everyone who makes a false move.
Jesus experiences God as “Abba.” Abba is the affectionate, intimate name that a little child calls a loving father whom she knows loves her, whom she can trust, with whom she knows she is safe and whom she knows wants the best for her. For Jesus, the transcendent Holy One is Abba, the Lover of humanity, who longs to draw all people into the beloved community.

Jesus’ teaching and ministry reflect the universal love and welcome that he experiences from God. Like God, Jesus welcomes all, especially those usually excluded—people with leprosy, handicapped people, poor people, beggars, thieves, and prostitutes—in other words those whom righteous, religious and important people consider of no account. “Tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you,” Jesus told the chief priests and elders of the people. (Matthew 21:31). It should come as no surprise that these leaders, as well as the Roman authorities with whom they collaborated, thought Jesus was dangerous and felt they had a responsibility to eliminate him before he undermined the social systems they administered and in which they found their security.

**Gospel nonviolence**

Jesus is aware of their plot, but he responds in an extraordinary way. On the one hand, he refuses to be intimidated. He continues to preach and live God’s reign of grace and unconditional love in spite of growing opposition and danger. On the other hand, he will not use violence to defend himself or the Reign of God that he came to initiate on earth. He trusts God, his Abba, and commends himself to God’s care. Most remarkably, he continues to love his enemies, even after he is aware of their plot to kill him. When the disciples tried to defend him in the Garden, Jesus told them to put their swords away. “All who take the sword will perish by the sword,” he said. (Matthew 26:52). As he hung on the cross, dying and in pain, Jesus prayed for his executioners, “Abba, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34)

Jesus asks God to include in the Kingdom even those who are killing him. Christians believe that God raised Jesus from the dead, demonstrating that his nonviolent, suffering love is the most powerful reality in the universe, more powerful even than death.

**The call to discipleship**

Jesus calls us to share in his ministry and way of life. His vision of the Reign of God is our inspiration and guide. We are to resist evil and oppose violence, but not by evil or violent means. We are to love our enemies, even those who seek to destroy us, and pray for those who persecute us. This is a counter-intuitive and counter-cultural mandate. Millions of years of evolution and millennia of social conditioning have programmed us not to love enemies who threaten our lives, but to flee from them or to destroy them before they can destroy us. It is impossible for us to change ourselves. But the Spirit of God, dwelling within us, can transform us. The Spirit can open our hearts so that we begin to understand the beauty and joy of nonviolent life in the Reign of God, embrace it, however haltingly, in our personal lives and relationships and work to make it a reality in the world.

**Nonviolence in the history of the Church**

Nonviolence was a very important part of Christian life and witness in the early Church. The most often quoted saying of Jesus in the first centuries was his teaching that we should love our enemies. All Christian writings from the first 300 years that have survived, if they speak about the subject at all, describe Christians as people who refuse to participate in violent activities such as war, gladiatorial games or public executions. These words of Lactantius, a theologian who lived around the year 300, express well the early Church’s consensus about the incompatibility of violence with Christian life.
"When God prohibits killing, he not only forbids us to commit brigandage, which is not allowed even by the public laws, but he warns us not to do even those things which are regarded as legal among men. And so it will not be lawful for a just (person) to serve as a soldier, since justice itself is his military service-nor to accuse anyone of a capital offense, because it makes no difference whether you kill with a sword or with a word, since killing itself is forbidden. And so in this commandment of God, no exception at all ought to be made to the rule that it is always wrong to kill a (human being), whom God has wished to be a sacrosanct creature." (John Ferguson, The Politics of Love, p. 61.)

Although this teaching of the early Church never completely died out, after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire it was pushed to the margins of the Church. The theological tradition that became dominant after 300 and remains so today teaches that God might call saints like Francis of Assisi or Mother Teresa to embrace a nonviolent way of life. But, according to this later tradition, nonviolence is not a part of the ordinary Believer's calling and has very little if any relevance for the institutional life of society. This later tradition also teaches that social systems and institutions cannot function without violence and that effective leaders cannot consistently act nonviolently. Nor, according to this tradition, did Jesus ever intend his nonviolent teaching and example to apply to society.

**Rediscovery of gospel nonviolence**

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries several Christians, including the novelist, Leo Tolstoi, rediscovered Jesus' nonviolence. However, more than anyone else it was the Hindu, Mohandas K. Gandhi, who explored its meaning for society. Gandhi applied the nonviolence he claimed to have learned from Jesus in new and revolutionary ways. Through his "experiments with truth," he disproved the idea that Jesus’ teaching on nonviolence can have no relevance for society or that it is reserved for special saints. He brought Jesus’ ethic of nonviolence into the Town Square and even the battlefield. His commitment to nonviolence was religious. He believed in nonviolence not because it was successful but because it was right. But he also tried to prove that a courageous, fierce but loving nonviolence like that of Jesus, when practiced on a mass scale by committed and courageous people, is a powerful method of social transformation. Gandhi repeatedly acknowledged that Jesus, particularly his Sermon on the Mount, was the chief inspiration and guide for his work.

Gandhi’s experiments with nonviolence inspired many others to take up this work. Among the best-known are Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar Chavez, Desmond Tutu, and Dorothy Day, Corazon Aquino, Lech Walesa, Vaclav Havel, Oscar Romero, Nelson Mandela and many other leaders of the nonviolent revolutions that swept through the Philippines, South Africa, Eastern and Central Europe, the Soviet Union, and Central America in the waning years of the twentieth century are also among the disciples of Gandhi. Some of these leaders do not reject violence absolutely but are proponents of the Just War theory, which has played such an important role in Church history. This theory is often misused as a justification for war, but when responsibly applied, it is only a short step from Gospel nonviolence. Those who espouse and responsibly apply it remind us that, while Jesus calls us to a life of nonviolence, we still confront situations in the world which are ambiguous and confusing. In light of this ambiguity, some Christian leaders, although agreeing that violence is always both tragic and sinful, have concluded that there are extreme situations that justify the use of limited violence against evil when all other possibilities seem to be exhausted. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is an example of such a Christian.

**Our commitment**

Nonviolence both as a personal way of life and as a way of transforming society is rooted and inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus. It was affirmed and nurtured by the early Church. Therefore the institutional Church today has a particular responsibility to support and promote it. As Church leaders, we confess that we have often failed in this responsibility. We repent of our
failure and ask God to forgive us and give us the courage we need both to embrace nonviolence in our personal lives and relationships and also in our work for social justice and peace in the world. In the spirit of repentance and hope, the Wisconsin Council of Churches, a community of churches that proclaim the Triune God as revealed in Jesus Christ, commits itself, as opportunity and resources allow, to:

* Urge member Churches to examine their policies and practices for instances of institutional violence and work to eliminate any they discover;
* Encourage Christian leaders to lift up Jesus’ vision of nonviolence in their preaching, teaching and liturgical ministries;
* Support the United Nations Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World (2001-2010) by sponsoring educational events, making resources on nonviolence available and promoting training in nonviolence;
* Work to reduce and eventually eliminate weapons of mass destruction and land mines;
* Advocate for the dignity and civil rights of all persons and groups and speak out against expressions of hatred or acts of violence directed against persons or groups because of their race, nationality, culture, ethnic group, religion, political position, gender or sexual orientation;
* Seek common ground among all those concerned about the problem of unwanted pregnancies so people who take different points of view will be able to work together both to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies and abortions and to promote the welfare of all children;
* Support efforts to reduce violence in the media;
* Advocate restraint in defense spending;
* Advocates legislation that keeps guns out of the hands of unstable or dangerous persons;
* Support efforts to reduce violence in the media;
* Advocate legislation that keeps guns out of the hands of unstable or dangerous persons;
* Cooperate with groups working nonviolently for economic justice and peace when their work is compatible with the faith and values of the Wisconsin Council of Churches and its member churches;
* Work nonviolently in behalf of the goals outlined in the Wisconsin Council of Churches’ statement on economic justice;
* Support efforts to end domestic violence and provide safe haven for abused spouses and children;
* Advocate in behalf of adequate legal services for all, alternatives to incarceration for nonviolent crimes and a criminal justice system that strives for restorative justice, restitution, rehabilitation and reconciliation rather than retribution. This includes continued opposition to the death penalty and other cruel and unusual punishments such as prolonged solitary confinement and sensory deprivation.

April 2002
Reconciled in Christ with Creator and Creation:

The Worshipful Work of Caring for the Earth and People


A note about this statement: Policy statements of the Wisconsin Council of Churches express the biblical, theological, and ethical grounds for the Council’s work and witness regarding matters of concern to God’s people in the world. They are not binding on member churches, but provide direction and guidance for the Council’s education, and worship, advocacy and programming. We hope that they may also be helpful and inspiring to anyone who seeks to think and live as a Christian disciple in the public realm.

I. God, Humanity, Nature

From Genesis through Revelation, scripture repeatedly affirms that the whole earth is God’s good creation, filled with the divine glory and mirroring God’s wisdom, mystery, and majesty (Is. 6:3; Rom 1:20). All creation is a gift. By God’s grace this planet is a life-sustaining home for us and for all earth’s creatures (Gen 1, Ps 104). The whole creation depends on God, to whom all things belong (Ps. 24:1). God loves the world, the kosmos, (John 3:16-17) and we cannot love God without loving what God loves.

Daily we receive God’s gifts through the complex, interdependent ecological web into which our lives are woven: gifts of physical and mental health, beauty, material resources, the shared basis for community, and a diverse environment. Study of the natural world gives us knowledge that is useful and that deepens our awe and appreciation for the Creator and the creation.

We are human creatures, dependent on the rest of creation. While we have great abilities to transform matter and energy, we can create neither. We are fellow creatures with all that God has made, sharing with them a common origin and destiny (Gen 1, Rom 8, Rev. 22). As divine images reflecting God’s gracious love and care, we have been given the special vocation of caring for creation, and special gifts for appreciating, understanding, cultivating, and protecting it (Gen 1:28, 2:15).

II. A Threatened Creation

Arrogance, greed, and ignorance, however, have distorted this calling into a domination that exploits and degrades both human beings and the natural world. Social injustice and ecological destruction are manifestations of sin (Isa.5:8-10, 24:4-7).

The consequences of this distortion of our calling are many: global climate change; biodiversity loss; air and water pollution; environmental health hazards; urban sprawl; loss of forests, rivers and farmland; the loss of natural beauty; loss of contact with the natural world, and much more.

Locked in a vicious cycle with these environmental problems are hunger, war and preparations for war, poverty, and injustice. “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.” The poor and vulnerable suffer the most from environmental
degradation. Poverty and insecurity, in turn, lead people to over-exploit their local environments, which contributes to political and armed conflicts that cause further destruction and displace people from their land. The more affluent among us consume more than a fair share of the earth's resources, often in ways that undermine creation's integrity and harm our human neighbors. But benefiting economically from the abuse of earth and people diminishes us morally and spiritually.

Our political and economic policies take too little account of the consequences of our actions. Industrial civilization is on a collision course with environmental limits – if we have not already exceeded them. Future generations will reap a bitter harvest from the seeds we sow (Hos. 8:7).

We must change our ways. Our means of producing energy, food and other necessities must become more just and sustainable. Responsible economic development can meet human needs over the long term while maintaining ecological integrity.

III. Repentance and Commitment

As citizens of Wisconsin, we have enjoyed the beauty and the bounty of our state and wish to preserve it for all who live here and for those who come after us.

Past and present generations have not always treated the land, the waters, their inhabitants, and our neighbors with care or respect. Yet we are grateful for the legacies of the native peoples of Wisconsin, and for Aldo Leopold, John Muir, Sigurd Olson, Gaylord Nelson, Philip Lewis, and many others who have sought to show a better way to inhabit the earth. We know that change is urgently needed if we and our descendants are to continue to enjoy the blessings of this gifted land.

Because of the extended reach of technology, trade and communications, our actions have global consequences, and events far away affect our own communities. Our responsibilities are national and global as well as local.

As members of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, we call ourselves and our fellow citizens to repentance and to a renewed commitment to responsible living in our part of Creation. As Christian communities, we have a responsibility to lift up the ethical and spiritual values that must guide our behavior as members of earth's household.

IV. Having The Mind of Christ

As Christians, our pursuit of a just, sustainable, and life-sustaining world is energized and guided by our faith in Jesus Christ. We see Christ's face in all people, especially the "least" among us (Mt. 25:31-46). We desire to have the mind of Christ, who in the Incarnation took the form of a servant (Phil. 2:5-8), and who in his life and ministry challenged the structures of imperial and religious domination of his day (Mt.20:25-28). Today, the voiceless and vulnerable victims of domination we are called to serve and defend include future generations and the natural world as well as the poor.

V. Principles for Witness and Discipleship in Public Life

Christian witness and discipleship is lived out in public as well as personal life. The Wisconsin Council of Churches is committed to the following principles in our advocacy for environmentally responsible policies in national and state government, businesses, churches, and other organizations:

- **Respect for the whole earth community.** As we provide for ourselves and our human neighbors, we must also provide for the survival and well-being of our fellow creatures in their habitats.
- Following the principle of the Sabbath, we must recognize creation's limits and its need for rhythms of rest and recuperation: we cannot press creatures to produce for us in ways that violate
their integrity (Ex. 23:10-12). Remembering the story of Noah we realize that all creatures – “clean and unclean” – are valued by God regardless of their usefulness for human beings.

A comprehensive view of the common good. Peace, justice, and sustainability are interdependent. Each is essential to the common good of life in all its forms. Environmentally unsustainably practices undercut our efforts to achieve justice and peace for all persons; violence and injustice undermine sustainability. Nor is a violent, unjust, and ecologically impoverished society the sort of society we wish to sustain.

Sustainable sufficiency for all. Over-consumption of natural resources by a relative few is a major cause of environmental degradation. At the same time, many have barely enough to survive. A more equitable and sustainable sharing of the earth’s bounty will require more efficient technologies for meeting human needs, as well as a reduced consumption and increased conservation ethic by those who already have more than enough.

Environmental rights for all persons. All human beings have the right to a safe and healthy environment as well as access to essential natural resources such as food, water, and energy. They also have the right to the material and social conditions for contended and dignified lives; and for rich and rewarding relationships with one another and with the natural world. The needs of the most vulnerable and marginalized people must be given special attention.

Responsibility for the future. The beauty, integrity, and diversity of the earth, as well as its material resources, are an inheritance from the past that we hold in trust for future generations. The decisions we make now will affect their well-being. We must not foreclose their opportunities by exhausting nonrenewable resources, causing major long-term or irreversible global environmental changes, or diminishing the continued fruitfulness of the earth by overexploiting renewable resources.

Democratic participation. Effective environmental policymaking requires well-informed participation by members of the community in the decisions that affect them. Democracy must serve the good of all, rather than the desires of a powerful few who stand to benefit in material terms from the destructive exploitation of people and the earth. As we are all sustained by the resources and life-support systems of this planet, so we also share a common responsibility for conserving, protecting, and restoring them.

Prudence. There are limits to our ability to predict, control, or defend ourselves against the consequences of our actions. We do not have the luxury of certainty, but when the best available evidence and interpretation indicate that a particular course of action – or inaction – could jeopardize future well-being, prudence requires us to respond appropriately, even if that means making challenging and far-reaching changes in our way of life.

Support for stewards of the land. As fewer of us are directly engaged in making our living from the land, we depend on farmers, farm workers, and others who help us to meet our needs from creation’s bounty. We must seek justice for them while encouraging environmentally healthy and sustainable forms of agriculture, forestry, and fishing. We especially owe smaller family farmers a just livelihood so they can support themselves, their families, and their communities while acting on our behalf as good stewards of the land.

VI. The Charge to the Church

The Holy Spirit calls the church, as Christ’s body in the world, to reflect in word and action God’s intention to reconcile the whole creation (Col. 1). This calling is not an optional activity to be relegated to a congregation’s social ministry committee, but belongs to the whole worshipful work of every congregation. Therefore, the Wisconsin Council of Churches is committed to the care of creation as integral to its mission:
In doxology – Offering praise, honor, and gratitude to the Creator by celebrating and appreciating the Creation;
In confession – Facing the truth of our situation without complacency or despair, and accepting our own complicity in Earth’s distress;
In teaching – Forming disciples who accept their responsibility to care for creation in their community and the world;
In service – Protecting and restoring creation and helping others to have livelihoods of sustainable sufficiency;
In advocacy – Reminding the government, private enterprise, and the public of their responsibility for the common good, and speaking out on behalf of the voiceless;
In daily life – Actively redefining the “good life” in contrast to the culture of materialistic consumerism, and as based on abundant life in Christ Jesus, who offers to all the inexhaustible and infinitely renewable gifts of love, grace, justice, and peace.

December 2006

ENDNOTES


2 Martin Luther King, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."

3 Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) was Professor of Wildlife Management at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the author of A Sand County Almanac. He wrote that our ethics must include concern for the health of the land as an interdependent community of living things, to which human beings belong. (www.aldoeopold.org)

4 Oikos, the Greek word for “household,” is the common root of “ecology,” “economy,” and “ecumenism.”
Statement on Institutional Racism and Racial Justice

November 14, 2011

Preamble: Definition of Institutional Racism

Institutional racism (also known as systemic racism) is measured not by personal attitudes, but by effects. By definition, institutional racism in the U.S. is the sum of policies, practices, and attitudes within an institution, government, corporation, or group that perpetuates the position of power and privilege for members of the white race. Originally these policies, practices, and attitudes were likely to be intentional. Now, however, they may not be consciously chosen. They have been a part of the status quo long enough that they have become invisible to those who benefit from them. Whites, for example, have long regarded themselves as the human norm and without a consciousness of race, whereas people of color are identified by race. That invisibility of whiteness has been a major expression and driver of white privilege and of institutional racism.¹

Institutional discrimination toward people of color was practiced, for example, by U.S. government agencies (Veterans’ Administration, U.S. Employment Service, Federal Housing Administration) in the implementation of the G.I. Bill after World War II, as “African American GIs (were denied) access to their benefits and to the new educational, occupational, and residential opportunities.”² Earlier, "during the New Deal Era of the 1930s and 1940s, both the Wagner Act and the Social Security Act excluded farm workers and domestics from coverage, effectively denying those disproportionately minority sectors of the work force protections and benefits routinely afforded whites. The Federal Housing Act of 1934 brought home ownership within reach of millions of citizens by placing the credit of the federal government behind private lending to home buyers, but overtly racist categories in the Federal Housing Agency’s (FHA) ‘confidential’ city surveys and appraisers’ manuals channeled almost all of the loan money toward whites and away from communities of color.”³

Government urban renewal programs disproportionately devastated minority communities, while federal highway programs subsidized the growth of segregated suburbs.⁴ In our own time, “Subsidies to the private sector by government agencies also tend to enhance the rewards of past discrimination. . . . Tax-increment financing for redevelopment programs offers tax-free and low-interest loans to developers . . . .”⁵

Today the effects of this past institutional discrimination can be seen in the enormous disparity in wealth between whites and people of color: “The median wealth of white households is 20 times that of black households and 18 times that of Hispanic households.”⁶ A primary reason for this is that “most white families have acquired their net worth from the appreciation of property that they secured under conditions of special privilege in a discriminatory housing market.”⁷

Despite examples of progress, institutional racism is manifested in people’s lives as people of color experience higher rates of incarceration, poorer overall health, lower educational achievement, less wealth, greater limitations in housing, and fewer economic opportunities.

Purpose of statement

The Wisconsin Council of Churches recognizes and acknowledges its role in the perpetuation of institutional racism. In this statement we call ourselves to greater awareness of the history and continuation of racism in all institutions in our society, including our member churches. We recognize the long-standing role of Christian churches in the U.S. in standing alongside the state in supporting policies and practices that have provided benefits and privileges for white people at the expense and to the detriment of people of color. As we seek greater racial justice, we call
ourselves to deeper consciousness of the ways in which we participate in institutional racism. We hold ourselves responsible for informed action in which maintain a critical stance in relationship to the state and advocate for policies and laws that intentionally work on behalf of all people.

**Background for statement**

Institutional racism stands within a long history of structural and systemic inequality within the U.S. that began even well before the founding of this country. From the early days of “discovery” of this land, to the exploitation of the indigenous people [Native Americans], to the trade and enslavement of Africans, majority white Christian churches gave support to the social system and provided biblical rationale for their positions and behavior which included practices of separation and discrimination. Most, but not all, Protestant majority white mainline denominations participated in the missionary schools that sought to take language and culture from America’s indigenous peoples, and perpetuated a consciousness of “manifest destiny” that provided justification for people of European heritage to see it as their right and privilege to take the lands of people of indigenous heritage and former Mexican citizens.

Institutional racism resulted in the separation of people by race within most Protestant church bodies. Leaders within Protestant churches played visible roles within the state. “Up until the latter part of the 20th century, Christians (Protestants in particular) were the ‘spoon’ stirring the melting pot: controlling immigration, education, and government; defining the moral vision and ethos of America.”

White superiority and privilege at the level of institutions has also played out at the community and interpersonal levels as people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds have been separated into different worshipping communities. The dominant cultural values and practices of white people have been the invisible and often unconscious standard for thought and action, leaving unexamined the policies and practices of white institutions, including churches.

Because of our role as a part of the institutional church, we take responsibility for our own education in understanding structural and systemic inequities of race, culture, and class. As we grow in understanding, we seek to build partnerships that are based in mutuality and respect. We are encouraged by the formal ecumenical agreements that have been made between denominations that are predominantly white and those with greater racial diversity or that were chartered by people of color. These agreements present new opportunities for confronting institutional racism in our congregations. As a faith community committed to social action, we ground our advocacy in a theology that stands against injustice and that seeks equality for all of God’s people. We stand within the history of the civil rights movement with its foundation in the Black church experience and theology.

**Theological foundation of statement**

Jesus’ ministry and his call for liberation that is found in the launching of his ministry in Luke 4:18 call us to the work of liberation.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lords’ favor.”

The New Testament calls us to look beyond differences in background to see our connections and oneness in Christ.

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)
Because of our deep connection as one body in Christ, we are called to stand alongside one another and to share in the lived experience of one another.

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. . . . If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. . . . But God has so arranged the body . . . that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” (1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 19-20, 24b-26)

Repeatedly throughout the Old Testament, we are called to live in ways of justice and peace. Micah and Amos present God’s requirements:

“And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

“I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. . . . Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.” (Amos 5:24).

The life and words of Jesus in the New Testament challenge us to see our places of privilege and to walk in new ways. Jesus challenged the attitudes of ethnic separation of his time as he healed the daughter of the Canaanite woman, shared time with the Samaritan woman at the well, told a story of a Samaritan being neighbor, and ate with those who were considered outcasts by society. He chided church leaders of his day who put institutional laws and practices above the needs of people, even as he stepped outside institutional policy and practice to heal on the Sabbath.

This statement on institutional racism and racial justice is grounded in God’s admonition to see all people as equal, created in God’s image, with a diversity of gifts to share. It is founded on the biblical call to do justice. It is based in the model of Jesus who challenged attitudes of prejudice and the institutional practices of discrimination of his day.

Call to Action

As a council of Christian churches, we hold ourselves accountable for our own critical self-reflection on the ways in which we knowingly or unknowingly perpetuate institutional racism. We call ourselves to greater awareness of issues of power and privilege. We will strengthen our advocacy efforts as we challenge policies and laws of the state that perpetuate structural injustice.

We, the Wisconsin Council of Churches, commit to combat institutional racism as we:

- **Foster dialogue** and educational events to deepen understanding of racism at the individual, cultural, and institutional levels, including the church;
- **Grow in partnership** with historical Black churches, immigrant churches, and those of other faith backgrounds to strengthen common efforts with an engaged shared leadership;
- **Develop understanding** and resources that make clear the link between racism and poverty;
- **Call to awareness** the hidden racism in laws and policies of the state;
Call for public policy and legislation that work to reduce racial disparities in all aspects of institutional life, including housing, insurance coverage, employment, transportation, education, health care, sentencing and incarceration, banking and loans, representation and voting;

Promote efforts to implement fair and just policies on immigration;

Address policies that affect Native American sovereignty and that provide access to services and opportunities for Native Americans on reservations;

Expose and work against policies that profile people of color or of a particular faith;

Hold ourselves accountable as a body to do our part in fulfilling the aims of this statement, reporting each year to the annual meeting.

Notes


4. Ibid., 65.

5. Ibid., 74.


Breaking the Cycle of Violence: Living As Images of God

Wisconsin Council of Churches Statement Adopted February 6, 1995

Although the violence so prevalent all around us today frightens, angers, and outrages us, we oppose the reintroduction of the death penalty in Wisconsin. We believe there are more humane and effective options for addressing the problem of violence, and that these options enjoy significant public support. *

Our opposition to the death penalty is based, first of all, on our faith.

We believe and teach that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God, and that even the most perverse behavior cannot obliterate that image or destroy the worth of the person who bears it.

We believe that God is love and that, through the prophets, Jesus and other messengers, even to our own time, God teaches us to love and respect every human person as an image of God.

We understand ourselves as people called to follow Jesus, who rejected the law of retribution ("an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth") and, by teaching us to love our enemies, broke the cycle of violence and death once and for all. Our opposition to the death penalty is an expression of our desire, as Jesus' disciples, to do what we can to bring this cycle to an end.

We believe that vengeance belongs to God alone, and that the God we adore is not vengeful but gracious and merciful.

We also oppose the death penalty because of serious and unavoidable problems in its implementation.

The record shows that innocent people have sometimes been executed. Because of human imperfection, such mistakes are unavoidable. Unlike other forms of punishment, a mistaken execution can never be corrected. **

Numerous studies have failed to prove that capital punishment deters homicide more effectively than imprisonment. ***

Demographic studies have shown that the death penalty is imposed disproportionately on poor people and people of color. ****

We know that there are many thoughtful differences of opinion about the death penalty among the members of our churches. In the coming months, we urge the people in our congregations to share these opinions with one another and to study and reflect together on this issue from the perspective of their Christian faith, opening their hearts and minds to one another and to the guidance and illumination of God's Spirit. We also urge those who come to a decision on this issue to communicate their position to the governor and legislators of our state.

Footnotes

* A national poll conducted in 1993 by the polling firms of Greenberg/Lake and the Tarrance Group revealed that more American favor life without parole, coupled with restitution, than favor the death penalty. (Sentencing for Life, Americans Embrace Alternative to the Death Penalty, 1993).
A 1987 Stanford Law Review article found 349 people wrongfully convicted of crimes punishable by death from 1900 to 1985. Of these, 139 received the death penalty and 23 were executed.

For example, a study by Amnesty International revealed that between 1976 and 1986 the average murder rate in states without the death penalty was 5.3 per million and in states that had executed someone, it was 10.6 per million. (The Milwaukee Journal, October 29, 1994).

For example, nearly 90% of these executed for the crime of rape since 1930 have been African Americans. (U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Capital Punishment, 1981).
Gambling Statement

The Wisconsin Council of Churches is unalterably opposed to any governmental sponsoring of organized gambling in any form, whether by Federal, State, Tribal or County governments. Organized gambling is a burden to society.

At the same time, the Wisconsin Council of Churches totally supports the principle of Tribal Sovereignty. The government of the State of Wisconsin has no right to interfere in the internal decisions of tribal governments, any more than it does in the decisions of other States.

The State does have an obligation to cooperate with tribal governments in order to address the issues which compel those governments to look to gambling to provide an economic base for their citizens.

Wisconsin Council of Churches Board of Directors Statement-December 2, 1997
Loving our Neighbors

A Statement of the Wisconsin Council of Churches on Interfaith Relations

Introduction

“‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”’ (cf. Mt 22:34-40, NRSV)

Wisconsin has been a place of religious diversity from the time of the indigenous peoples to the present. For much of their history, the residents of Wisconsin have represented the diverse traditions within the Christian faith, yet only a small portion of the non-Christian religions of the world. We now face a different social situation represented in terms such as post-modern and post-Christendom. The size and diversity of our religious minorities are increasing and people of faiths previously unknown to Wisconsin have become our neighbors. Interfaith dialogue and understanding have become more important to our common civil discourse than ever before. Attitudes toward other religions that are uninformed and disengaged are simply inadequate to our setting. As followers of Jesus Christ, how do we engage with people of other faiths? How do we proclaim the Gospel in a multi-religious setting while being sensitive to the spiritual traditions of others? What truth can we say in love to them, and what truth can they say in love to us? A first step is to examine the setting in which we live.

Wisconsin’s Interfaith Context

While Wisconsin remains predominantly Christian—two-thirds of religious adherents in the state self-identify as either Roman Catholic or Lutheran—there is a growing presence of other religious traditions. Jews and Muslims are the largest religious groups outside of the Christian community. The major branches of Judaism have congregations and social service agencies in both metropolitan Milwaukee and Madison along with smaller synagogues in other medium sized cities around the state. Muslims also have a large congregational presence in Madison and Milwaukee, with smaller Islamic Centers in Marshfield, the Fox Valley and Sheboygan. Both Madison and Milwaukee metropolitan areas include Unitarian, Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, Pagan, and Sikh communities as well. Native peoples with their distinctive spiritualities—including the Potawatomi, Ho Chunk, Ojibwa and Menominee tribes—are located throughout the state.

There are a number of interfaith initiatives in Wisconsin. The largest is the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee, which includes a variety of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Mormon and Unitarian communities. Local interfaith organizations that focus on cooperative social service ventures and/or advocacy include Madison area Urban Ministry, Waukesha Interfaith Council, Racine Interfaith Center, WISDOM and several others. The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Milwaukee has led the way in our state to create bilateral interfaith conversations, including Catholic-Jewish dialogue and Catholic-Muslim dialogue. Finally, the Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions at U.W. Madison brings world renowned scholars to Wisconsin in support of greater interfaith awareness and understanding.

Biblical and Theological Foundations: Love of God and Love of Neighbor
From the outset it must be understood that, for Christians, the goal of interfaith relationships is different from ecumenical relationships. Ecumenical relationships are established in the hope of fostering Christian unity; interfaith relationships are entered into primarily for the purpose of living in community. Christians enter into dialogue with one another so that we can cherish our common bond in Christ; Christians enter into interfaith dialogue so that we might be good neighbors with everyone. Ecumenical relationships, therefore, are rooted in the second article of the Nicene Creed, a common confession of Christ as God and Savior and the Trinitarian faith that binds Christians together:

[We believe] ...in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made...

For Christians, Interfaith relationships are rooted in the first article of the Nicene Creed, a common experience of our humanity and the struggles of daily life that binds humanity together:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

Although both interfaith and ecumenical relationships have dialogue as their basic activity, respect as their basic approach and mutual understanding as their basic hope, nevertheless, as noted above, the expectations of these relationships are quite different.

The biblical and theological foundation for this distinction in relationships is expressed in the two love commandments that Jesus presented as a summary of "all the law and the prophets."

Loosely quoted, the commandments are: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind…and love your neighbor as yourself" (cf. Mt 22:34-40, NRSV). It is helpful to focus on this text because of the favorable image it already has in interfaith dialogue. For example, in Christian-Muslim relationships, it is the primary text Islamic scholars used in their historic invitation to Christians to dialogue ("A Common Word between Us and You" - See Resources below). For our purposes, the text is important for the way it holds in tension two distinct but foundational principles central to interfaith relationships: freedom of conscience before God and unreserved respect of other persons.

What is striking about the first commandment concerning the love of God is its unconditional nature. But, here, care in interpretation must be taken. As the word of Christ, the commandment is not a demand that is being imposed on us, but an invitation that is being offered to us. The commandment teaches us about who God is. God is the One who can be loved absolutely, relied upon without reserve, and trusted with our whole being, sinful though we are. This God is the God revealed in Jesus Christ, who comes to a sinful, broken world not with new demands and accusations but with grace and mercy, carrying human sin and brokenness in his own body on the cross and conquering human sin and brokenness in his resurrection extending new life to all the world. The commandment is an invitation to love this God, teaching us, paradoxically, that the same God, who, through the law, condemns the world of sin, is the same God who, through the promises expressed by the prophets, redeems the world through Christ.
But the commandment also teaches that the act of loving this magnanimous God is a free act of conscience, a fruit of faith, a gift of the Holy Spirit. Any use of coercion – whether of a physical, social or psychological nature – to promote the love of God contradicts the commandment, the Christian understanding of God, and the nature of faith. Therefore, respect for religious freedom and the conscience or faith of others in religious matters is a foundational principle of Jesus’ teaching on the love of God. While it is certainly appropriate for Christians to dialogue with others about the love of God in Christ and to invite them into that love as circumstances would have it, it is an offense to the love of God to present it as a demand or to inject a coercive element into it.


What is striking about the second commandment concerning the love of neighbor is the unreserved respect, indeed, the complete identification it calls forth between Christians and their neighbors. Again, care must be taken in the interpretation of the text. Who is the neighbor? A neighbor is someone who is related to us by virtue of our placement in the world, not by virtue of our relationship to Christ. The relationship called “neighbor” is defined by the first article of the Nicene Creed, the doctrine of Creation, not the second article, the doctrine of Christ. How are we as Christians to regard our neighbors? Answer: as ourselves, as fellow human beings created in the image of God and as co-stewards of God’s creation, called to work together for the common good. Therefore, when the commandment urges us to love our neighbor as ourselves, it is urging us, above all, to work together with all people for the common good: my good, my neighbor’s good, and the good of the whole creation.

To be sure, neighbors can certainly disagree on how they understand the common good. The commandment does not forbid such disagreement. Rather, what the commandment does is urge love, even in disagreement: love understood as unreserved respect for the other, even in disagreement, love understood as an exercise in civility in all things, even in disagreement. In addition, neither does the commandment forbid compromise in how we uphold the common good. It is certainly a basic part of civility and respect of others to make compromises with our neighbors. But compromise by its very nature must be a free choice, and made with a good conscience. Therefore, only those of equal standing in open dialogue are in a position to make compromise with integrity. For this reason, the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves presupposes a community of equals engaged in open dialogue. The commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves informs all aspects of human life together. In today’s religiously diverse society, where religious disagreement is a given, unreserved respect for those of different religious traditions also needs to be a given. Treating neighbors who have differing religious outlooks as equal partners in a common human calling to promote the common good is a basic principle for governing interfaith relationships that is not only consistent with, but also commensurate with Christian belief.

From this reading of the love commandments, two basic principles emerge for understanding the relationship of the Christian Churches in the WCC to other religious traditions: freedom of religion and unreserved respect for the other as neighbor and equal. Working out the practical details of these principles can happen only in the context of respectful dialogue. Such dialogue takes place on many levels, from formal theological and scholarly dialogues at the institutional level to informal dialogues between neighbors at the local level. What follows are some guidelines for dialogue at the local level.
The reality of creating a space for respectful dialogue does not always come easily. We must first begin with relationship. To come to a greater understanding of the faith of our neighbors, we must know our neighbors. Therefore, the opening to dialogue is fellowship. The building of relationship can take different forms; most common are those of serving together and eating together. When Jesus encountered a stranger he often responded by sitting down to a meal to build relationship in the sharing of food. We too can follow this example in shared table and fellowship. In serving together, we can build relationships around the work required to meet an identified need in our shared community. When we establish relationships of friendship with our neighbors we open a door to further conversation. This open door is often ignored as we seek to serve our communities and build upon our friendships. In order for true respectful dialogue to be achieved we must be willing to enter into a deeper relationship. This requires three primary virtues from all participants: humble listening, prophetic witness, and compassionate collaboration. The first of these virtues is humble listening: true dialogue requires that we listen. And to listen well requires humility. Humility calls us to focus on others as they share their own faith experiences and to listen attentively, seeking to set aside previous misconceptions or prejudices about their traditions. Humility reminds us also that we do not know all of God’s revelations. While we may understand the truth of our own Christian beliefs, we cannot assume that we fully understand the actions of God, or the ways in which other people of faith may experience the divine. In humble listening we are ready to be surprised.

The second of these virtues is prophetic witness: true dialogue requires that we hear the truth of the other and that we share our understanding of the truth. As Christians, we are called by Christ to go out and share the Gospel. It does nothing for dialogue to sit and listen and not take the opportunity also to share our own experiences of God and the hope we know through Christ. Yet, there are two cautions to this virtue. Sharing our experience of God’s love is not the same as seeking to convert our neighbor to a shared belief. Dialogue is not a space for conversion, but a space for witness. The second caution is that in informal dialogue we are not necessarily called to speak for our full tradition, denomination, or even congregation, but only for ourselves. While fairness to our partners and our own traditions require that we be well-grounded in our faith, too often Christians feel that we are not qualified to speak if we do not know proper theological terms or Biblical references. Informal dialogue provides the opportunity to share our own witness and personal experience and builds toward deeper understanding.

The third of these virtues is compassionate collaboration: true dialogue requires that we act on a foundation of mutual understanding, respecting the beliefs of all participants. Coming together to listen and to share often leads to a strengthened call for collaboration as people of faith seek to respond to the suffering in our world. This differs from the initial attempts of service projects that may build fellowship. By drawing on our common understanding of one another we are able to act in a manner that encourages full collaboration and builds solidarity.

**Invitation to Action**

The Wisconsin Council of Churches invites its member churches to take the following steps:
(1) To give high priority to better understanding and appreciating both our own and other
religious traditions in our state, with the goal of fostering deeper interfaith relationships by
creating safe spaces for dialogue, that we might learn from one another and deepen our
own faith commitments;

(2) To examine and uproot all that might contribute to prejudice in our teaching, life and
ministries; including both disrespect toward Christians and Christian disrespect of others;

(3) To be compassionate neighbors, bearing witness to the love and justice of Jesus Christ
when those of other faith traditions experience prejudice;

(4) To encourage dialogue with Americans of other religions to promote peace and justice
in the U.S. and around the world; and in particular with American Jews and Muslims as
integral to the church’s efforts for peace in the Middle East; encourage interreligious
dialogue in other situations in which religion is identified as a factor in conflict situations;

(5) To condemn all forms of intolerance which turn religious differences into excuses for
defaminations, stereotyping, and violence; to defend their victims; to challenge and rebut
statements about other faith groups or individuals that embody religious stereotyping,
prejudice and bigotry;

(6) To uphold religious freedom for all persons, defending the rights and liberties of cultural,
racial and religious minorities in the same manner that we defend our own;

(7) To support ongoing work with related organizations and people of other religions in public
policy advocacy and to initiate work in other program areas of common concern.

Resources for Further Study

Foundational Documents

Nostra Aetate: Declaration of the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions is a
foundational theological document from the Roman Catholic Church that has informed Christian
reflection on interfaith relationships since the 1960’s.
http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-
ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html

A Common Word Between Us and You
Written as a letter from a group of Muslim scholars to the Christian community in 2009, “A
Common Word” seeks to find common theological ground between Christians and Muslims. The
website also includes Christian responses to it: http://www.acommonword.com/

A Time for Recommitment
The International Council of Christians and Jews published this text. The document has three
sections: A Call to Christians and Christian Communities, A Call to Jews and Jewish
Communities, and A Call to Both Christian and Jewish Communities and Others. You can find it
online at http://www.iccj.org/A-Time-for-Recommitment-The-Twelve-Points-of-Berlin.184.0.html
Dabru Emet – a Jewish response to changing attitudes of Christians toward Jews and Judaism

A group of Jewish scholars sent out a letter in 2000 to Christians affirming dialogue and mutual understanding in: [http://www.jcrelations.net/Dabru_Emet_-_A_Jewish_Statement_on_Christians_and_Christianity.2395.0.html](http://www.jcrelations.net/Dabru_Emet_-_A_Jewish_Statement_on_Christians_and_Christianity.2395.0.html)


Ecumenical Resource Links

National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA

World Council of Churches

Denominational Resource Links

American Baptist Churches in the USA

Church of the Brethren

Episcopal Church

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Moravian Church

Orthodox Traditions
- A concise discussion of Orthodox views on interreligious relationships is contained in:
Steps Towards A Reunited Church: A Sketch Of An Orthodox-Catholic Vision For The Future (October 2, 2010)

Website with all Orthodox papers on faith and order issues:
Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation

Presbyterian Church (USA)
Interreligious Stance of the Presbyterian Church (USA):
http://www.presbyterianmission.org/site_media/media/uploads/theologyandworship/interfaith/the_interreligious_stance_pc%28usa%291.pdf

Reformed Church in America
Resources on Christian-Muslim dialogue and cooperation:

Roman Catholic
From the US Catholic Conference:
Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue:
Declaration on Human Dignity (Dignitatis Humanae, 1965)

United Church of Christ
A study resource for interreligious relations in the United Church of Christ

United Methodist Church
Called to Be Neighbors and Witnesses: Guidelines for Interreligious Relationships

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The Nicene Creed (ICEL Text)

We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;  
through him all things were made.  
For us men and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven,  
and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary,  
and became man.  
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate,  
he suffered death and was buried,  
and rose again on the third day  
in accordance with the Scriptures.  
He ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory  
to judge the living and the dead  
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father [and the Son],  
who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified,  
who has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.  
We confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins  
and we look forward to the resurrection of the dead  
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

vi see endnote i for full text of the Nicene Creed  
vii For a full description of these virtues, see Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, Crossroads, 2008.