

INTRODUCTION TO INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

SESSION 1: Interfaith Dialogue?

Pre-Reading: *InterActive Faith: The Essential Interreligious Community-Building Handbook*, Bud Heckman (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2008) pp. 4-7.

Session: This session introduces key terms, virtues, and skills for interfaith dialogue. Participants will be engaged in self-reflection and dyad discussion of personal gifts and skills for interfaith dialogue.

OUTLINE OF SCHEDULE:

10 min: Welcome and Gathering Prayer

05 min: Follow-up to Pre-Reading: The Choice of Terms

15 min: Presentation and Reflection- Interfaith Or Cross-Cultural Communication

15 min: Role Play Exercise- I Am Not the Stereotype

20 min: Discussion- Virtues and Competencies

10 min: Large Group Processing

05 min: Assignment and Closing Prayer

COPIES THAT NEED TO BE MADE:

1 copy per participant:

Pre-Reading article (2 pgs or duplex)

Gathering Prayer/ Closing Prayer (1 pg ea or duplex)

Interfaith Or Cross-Cultural Communication (1 pg)

Within My Tradition (1 pg)

I Am Not the Stereotype (½ pg)- *Cut the page in half!*

Spiritual Gifts (½ pg)

Virtues and Competencies (1 pg)

Homework Assignment: *Ecumenical Considerations For Dialogue & Relations With People Of Other Religions* (5 pgs)

INSTRUCTOR'S CONTENT

10 min: Welcome and Gathering Prayer

Welcome participants back to the program. If you have changed meeting places or if things have changed in your setting, offer housekeeping tips before you begin.

The Gathering Prayer is a collection of sayings and prayers about opening one's heart to others—and entering into life-changing activities with a fresh spirit. The sayings come from different Traditions and different times, but they all offer us encouragement for our work. Let us read the first and last words together, but in between, we'll just work around the circle with individual readers. Between each text, rest in about a minute of silence. Let the silence build a circle of peace among us.

05 min: Follow-up to Pre-Reading: The Choice of Terms

This module is entitled "Introduction to Interfaith Dialogue." As you saw in your reading, there are many terms in use when it comes to describing the relationships of people of different faiths, Traditions and spiritualities and the work they do together. The distinctions are significant for people working in the field. I hope you noticed that "Interreligious" is the preferred term for people in leadership deliberately talking to each other about religious matters. It is preferred because it immediately avoids the problem of whether or not any particular tradition considers itself to hold faith. By contrast, Interfaith Dialogue tends to imply a less formal setting and lower-level participants.

I know that you have worked hard to learn skills of theological reflection and to gain a greater understanding of traditions that you don't practice personally. So your conversations are not nearly as accidental as might be suggested by this definition of Interfaith Dialogue. Nevertheless your work as a Spiritual Mentor remains a nonprofessional role and doesn't rise to the level of interreligious dialogue.

In this module we are going to add another layer and begin to think about being Ambassadors of our organizations. But it is important to understand that you will continue working in nonprofessional roles in our structure. So we're going to place our work within the category of Interfaith Dialogue and take Bud Heckman's reminder very seriously. If you are unclear about how someone is using a term or uncertain about what you are doing in a conversation, ask for or offer a clarification.

Another side of this issue is an interesting twist in popular culture. For many people on the street, 'religion' is a bad word because of its association with institutions. This means that sometimes people think interfaith is cool while interreligious is deadly—even though they have no real definition to go with either term!

20 min: Presentation and Reflection- Interfaith Or Cross-Cultural Communication

Distribute the handout: Interfaith Or Cross-Cultural Communication.

(10 min) Basic content-

William Kornblum is a professor of sociology at the City University of New York. He has proposed a simple schema for understanding levels of interaction in society. As you can see on the left-hand triangle on the diagram he describes the system or the culture *as a whole* as a macro system. The responsibility of the macro system is to provide structure—structure with ideas, structure for resources, structure in services. What happens at the macro level would have qualities like an association in which people, services, and ideas are known by their roles or functions rather than as persons. It would include ideas like "economy" that cannot be defined by a simple interaction between a couple of people.

By contrast the micro level of society is all about family and friendship. At this level my role is attached to my identity and relationship with those other people—people that I know by name. Everything is very personal and my self-image is tied up in these relationships.

Somewhere in between is the meso level. At this intermediate level where our communities live, we find forces that offer and reinforce the ideals of the system. At this level we make decisions about how we will participate in society. This is where we experience the power or the problem of categories like race, gender, class, and even religious identity. We forge alliances between families and friendship groups that allow us to function with support in the nameless, faceless society.

Mark Ward, professor of communication at the University of Houston, has adapted Kornblum's schema for use in a religious community. He describes the macro level as a denominational level. Each denomination uses some root metaphor to distinguish itself from other denominations. (Whereas most Americans would think of this in Christian terms, it also works in other traditions where you find different schools establishing themselves by some change in a traditional practice or some tweaks of teaching.)

Of course the other end of this schema is the individual member or adherent. Ward notes a particular distinction in religious societies: Sometimes the individual simply receives the message from on high and sometimes the individual makes choices that help to shape the message. The difference seems to be in what happens at the meso level.

I would suggest this difference makes sense because of how he describes that meso level. The intermediate organization or congregation has leadership that is expected to teach "the way" and employ "suasive rhetoric." This makes a religious organization different from other civic or social organizations. If that teaching leadership is an authority *given* to a community and works within a highly structured and cohesive group, the suasion maybe very direct and directive. If that leadership *rises* from a looser organization, authority may only be granted if the suasion is more general and inspirational. The opportunity for an individual member or adherent to both accept and shape the rhetoric in the community is proportionate to the liberty offered in the culture.

The point I want you to pay most attention to is the box between the two triangles. Ward points out that the congruence of language at all levels reflects the strength of the society and how individuals identity with that society. Until now, as you have been learning about different Traditions, I have asked you to be attentive to the word "cues and clues" that reveal a Storyteller's affinity for a Tradition whether or not they actually claim to belong to it. Now we are adding another layer for you to attend to, namely how tightly does your Storyteller bind himself or herself to the Tradition. Although the structure of your conversations may not always change, you must be more measured in your attention to interfaith or interreligious matters.

And this takes us to the next set of comments on your handout. The first requirement in preparing for this is the same skill we started with in the module on Theological Reflection: You have to be able to set aside your cultural script— including your own story.

The second requirement may seem odd after all the work you've already done, "Why would there be any anxiety? Why would there be any uncertainty about the Other's narrative?" This reflects the reality of a slightly new role for you. As a Spiritual Mentor your goal was simply to help the Other uncover the next best step in a situation. As an Ambassador you don't just serve within an organization but reach outside it as a representative.

As a representative even in nonprofessional settings you are obliged to be clear about any differences between your position and your organization's position on an issue or situation... and expect the same of your dialogue partner. For a simple example, if you are representing your Sangha at a meeting to plan a community event, you can't agree to a date that conflicts with the observance of Vesak just because that observance is not important to you! This may seem silly to you but sometimes the hardest work of interfaith dialogue is the nitty-gritty of scheduling time, choosing a place, and arranging refreshments!

For the moment, we are going to begin a completely personal exercise that reflects on our experience of congruence between your Tradition and your spiritual life. In this case think of Tradition in terms of the long line of teachings and teachers and practices that have brought us to today rather than your experience or identification with this particular organization. Our goal is to expose the points of convergence and divergence that might influence your work as an Ambassador.

(10 min) *Distribute the handout: Within My Tradition*

Explain that participants will have 10 minutes of quiet to begin this reflection. It is recommended that they finish this at home by Session 3.

15 min: Role Play Exercise- I Am Not The Stereotype

These directions are printed on the handout:

You have 15 minutes for this exercise.

(3-4 min) In groups of 4, make a list of all the ways that your Tradition is portrayed in media and common stereotypes that you've heard over the years.

(3-4 min) When you have as long a list as you can generate, begin discussing all the ways in which the experiences of group members contradict the stereotype.

(4-6 min) Discuss the following questions:

- When have you run up against a stereotype? How did it effect what you were doing?
- How have you handled experiences like this with the people holding the stereotypes?
- After your experience with being stereotyped, how do you view stereotypes of other religious Traditions? How do you explain this to others?
- What can we do to keep others from having such experiences?

Conclude the exercise with this observation:

When we reflect on our experience with and identity in our Tradition, we know we don't fit all the expectations and impressions people have of an adherent of the Tradition. As an Ambassador, we have to raise our reflection to another level: We have to remember this is true for others and learn to set aside our stereotypes, biases, and prejudices. This is actually a skill or competency. We're going to consider many more competencies throughout this module.

20 min: Discussion- Virtues and Competencies

Distribute the handout: Virtues and Competencies

Basic content-

In the first session on Theological Reflection, we defined virtues in this way: Good qualities or attitudes that have been practiced until they become a habit. They are a way of behaving in the world and they are noticeable as part of our character. As we discussed then, they are essential to your identity and ministry. We asked you to attentive to and responsible for cultivating them in your spiritual life. As we talk about your expanded role as Ambassador, we are going to look at five virtues that facilitate interfaith dialogue. These are outlined in the work of Catherine Cornille, professor of theology at Boston College. They are described for you on the far left on this handout.

(6-7 minutes) Have participants rank the virtues as #1-5, #1 being their strongest. Ask them to talk with one other person about a) What examples they can give that supports their rankings and b) Who and what influenced them in developing their strongest one?

Bring the group back together to continue.

There are many religious people of goodwill who try to set aside interfaith or interreligious dialogue because the bar for success seems too high, or the work seems too complicated, or it feels like an extra added burden given the workload within one's own community. When the researcher, Diana Butler Bass, examined what makes middle-sized churches 'vital,' she discovered "10 signposts of renewal." These are

outlined in her book entitled *Christianity for the Rest of Us*. We are not concerned with all the details of her research or descriptions of the signposts in this study. What I want you to know is that there is significant overlap in the 10 signposts in Bass' study and the five virtues that Cornille describes. The reason I want you to know that is that it demonstrates in a concrete way that what makes us healthy and effective internally is intimately related to what enables us to reach out graciously and effectively. In other words the work of interfaith or interreligious dialogue is not something unmanageable "out there," but part and parcel of a more deliberate, more maximal community life.

As you look at the two right hand columns on the handout, you will see a description of the kind of knowledge that informs each virtue and the skills that give it life. Because the focus of our study is conversation or dialogue, you will see many of the skills describe in terms of an ability to articulate or define, listen or question, or otherwise apply skills of attention. To be honest I'm hoping that some of those strike you as difficult to manage at this point—not because I want you to feel ill prepared for this study, but because I want you to be eager for more development and depth than you have right now.

I want to draw your attention to three specific things in the far right column. First, in the row describing 'Humility,' you see the first skill is being able to name your own particular spiritual gifts. Humility is never about taking a backseat; it is always about being honest about one's self in this context and the bigger picture. It relies on simplicity and frankness in acknowledging your talents and abilities, neither puffing them up nor downplaying them. In just a moment we will spend some time on this topic.

Second, in the row describing 'Commitment,' the third skill is your "ability to articulate your religious identity to non-practitioners (of your Tradition.)" This includes humility, but the emphasis is on your ability to explain clearly to folks standing outside your Tradition how *you* stand within it. The reflection we began on the congruence of your Tradition and spiritual practice lines up with the first two skills in this box. As you complete that reflection you will have some of the content that helps others understand your religious identity. Said another way, articulating your religious identity is not just about declaring the name of a Tradition or practice by which you identify. For example, I want you to be able to say more than I am a solitary Pagan or a Muslim. I would hope you would be able to include a detail like you are particularly delighted by your tradition's teaching about God's direct accessibility to you. As an Ambassador you obviously can't be badmouthing your Tradition or organization. The positive side of that is that you have to be able to let a little more of yourself into the conversation than would normally be appropriate in your role as a Spiritual Mentor.

Finally, in the row 'Hospitality,' you will notice the first skill is an ability to see the Other as a person not a stereotype. It means that you know how to separate the "stuff" floating in our social setting from the person with whom you are engaging. As we began discussing a few moments ago, it's an extension of your concrete awareness of being different from the stereotypes of your own Tradition.

(6-7 minutes) Have participants pair up with a different person (from the last exercise) to discuss spiritual gifts. Use the half-page handout, Spiritual Gifts, to guide the conversation. Let participants know that stories will be shared with the large group so they shouldn't tell more than they are willing to share with the whole group. Instruct participants to be prepared to offer to the large group a summary of the story they have heard.

10 min: Large Group Processing

Spend this time sharing summaries of the stories of spiritual giftedness. This is an opportunity for affirming the many different gifts in your group; invite participants to listen with an open heart but without comment. Conclude the sharing with these or similar words: We are a truly gifted and blessed group! May we continue to develop our gifts and put them in the service of the community!

05 min: Assignment and Closing Prayer

Distribute the assignment: Ecumenical Considerations For Dialogue & Relations With People Of Other Religions By the World Council Of Churches, issued 1 Jan 2004.

Note the directions on page 1: "Pay special attention to paragraphs #17-27. Which one seems most difficult to you?" Ask participant to come prepared to discuss their answers to this question.

GATHERING PRAYER MEDITATIONS ON OPEN SPIRITS

ALL:

From W. Frederick Wooden:

“Heart’s delight, Source of mercy,” beyond my sight yet beside my soul,
holy is the very thought of thee.
Justice is your call and love your enfolding heart.
Abide with us day by day even in our stumbling,
that we may grow in our compassion for our kindred.
Keep us from arrogance by casting a light into the darkness around us and within.
For thou art the longing of our hopes, and the horizon of our dreams,
bidding our “hearts not rest till they find rest in thee.”
Amen.¹

INDIVIDUAL READERS:

From Thích Nhất Hạnh:

Letting go gives us freedom,
and freedom is the only condition for happiness.
If, in our heart, we still cling to anything—anger, anxiety, or possessions—
we cannot be free. (SILENCE- 1 MIN)

From Paul of Tarsus: Ephesians 1:18

I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light
so that you can understand the confident hope he has given to those he called—
his holy people who are his rich and glorious inheritance. (SILENCE- 1 MIN)

From Noam Chomsky:

The first step is to penetrate the clouds of deceit and distortion
and learn the truth about the world,
then to organize and act to change it.
That’s never been impossible and never been easy. (SILENCE- 1 MIN)

From White Eagle:

Flowers do not force their way with great strife.
Flowers open to perfection slowly in the sun.
Don’t be in a hurry about spiritual matters,
go step by step and be very sure. (SILENCE- 1 MIN)

From Halijo Webster

Oh Divine Energy, my soul is open to you... come and sit in my core,
Let rings of bright golden light circle my feet, hands, limbs body, neck and head.
Over and over from the center core and outward, from feet to crown.
Out with the toxic, in with the healing Divine Energy.
Refreshed, renewed, relaxed, breathing slowly. (SILENCE- 1 MIN)

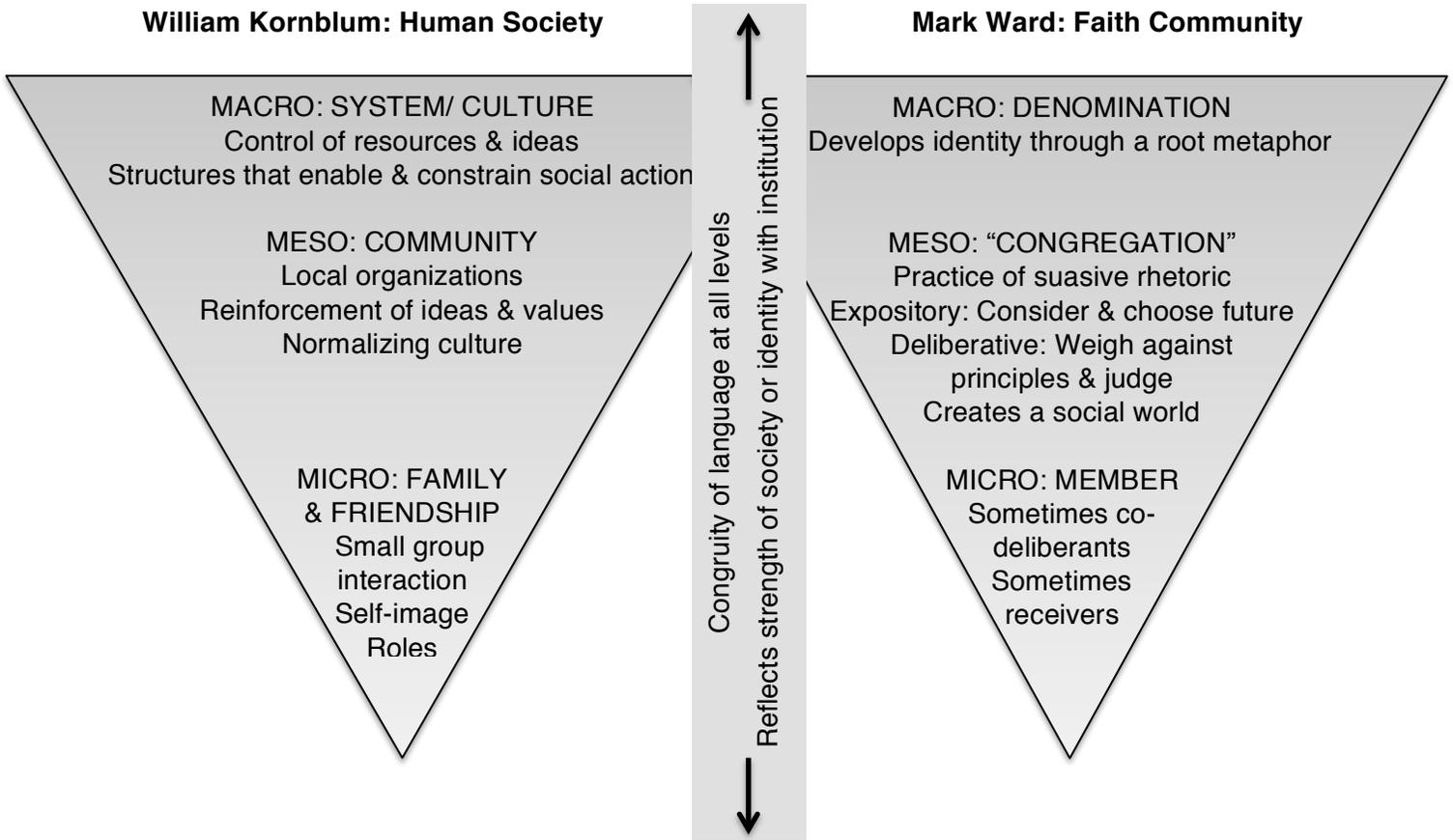
ALL:

From Mahatma Gandhi:

We may have our private opinions
but why should they be a bar to the meeting of hearts?

¹ Quoting: "Heart's delight, Source of mercy": *yedid nefesh*, *Gates of Prayer: The New Union Prayerbook*, Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1975. "Our hearts not rest": Augustine, *Confessions*, Book I.

INTERFAITH OR CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION



MARK WARD

Effective intercultural communication requires us to:

- 1) Mindfully set aside our cultural script
- 2) Manage anxiety (affective) and uncertainty (cognitive) during an encounter with a cultural Other

Anxiety and uncertainty need to be "mid-range"

- Too minimal and we become inattentive or mindless
- Too maximal and we can't focus, we lapse back into our scripts

Some cultures have traits that magnify the challenge of finding "mid-range"

WILLIAM GUDYKUNST CONTRIBUTES THIS:

Optimal anxiety =

- We think a stranger's behavior is predictable
- + We recognize we may not be able to describe it accurately

WITHIN MY TRADITION...

THE TEACHING THAT MOST	THE SPIRITUAL PRACTICE	HISTORY & FIGURES
Delights me is... Because...	That inspires and/or sustains me is: Because... I learned it: From? When? How?	The best period of our history: Because:
Inspires me is... Because...		The worst period of our history: Because:
Challenges me is... Because...		
Confuses me is... Because...	That disconcerts and/or annoys me is: Because: I learned it: From? When? How?	The teacher I most admire: Because:
Frustrates me is... Because...		The figure I most detest: Because:
Embarrasses me... Because...		Our greatest need is: Because:

VIRTUES & COMPETENCIES

Based on the work of Catherine Cornille in *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*

VIRTUE	COMPETENCIES	
	KNOWLEDGE	SKILLS
<p>HUMILITY... is the difference between “I hold truth” and “TRUTH holds me.”</p> <p>I recognize <i>my</i> fallibility and imperfection in handling my own Tradition and <i>our</i> inability to hold the fullness of Revelation.</p>	<p>Of my own Tradition</p> <p>Of the tensions in my Tradition</p> <p>Understanding how language, symbols, and interpretation change through history</p>	<p>Development of my natural spiritual gifts</p> <p>Ongoing study of my Tradition</p> <p>Ability to articulate and apply principles for interpretation of texts, utterances, etc. (hermeneutics)</p>
<p>COMMITMENT... is the difference between an inter-personal conversation of people of faith and genuine interreligious dialogue.</p> <p>I care for my Tradition and will bring the fruits of dialog back to it.</p>	<p>Of my Tradition’s expectations of adherents</p> <p>Of systems of religious authority</p>	<p>Critical reflection on history and teachings of my Tradition</p> <p>Spiritual practice in my Tradition</p> <p>Ability to articulate my religious Identity to non-practitioners</p>
<p>INTERCONNECTION... is the difference between, “There’s an Ultimate Reality out there joining us together,” and “We believe in different Ultimate Realities and so we are related because we are people of faith”</p> <p>Your Tradition’s teaching, practices, and commitments are relevant to mine.</p>	<p>Of the relationship of one Tradition to another</p> <p>Of the common experiences of Traditions in today’s world</p> <p>Of the difference between basic concepts across Traditions</p>	<p>Listening skills with special attention to learning to identify common ground in external challenges and internal causes that all of our Traditions face (e.g. war and violence, gender, environment...)</p>
<p>EMPATHY... is the difference between “My faith moves me” and “I am open to the movement of Spirit wherever it blows.”</p> <p>I can feel a resonance between us and it has an impact on my life as I return to my Tradition.</p>	<p>Of others’ Traditions and worldviews</p> <p>Of the attitudes and emotional states preferred in other Traditions</p>	<p>Ability to appreciate <i>your</i> devotion and mindset through listening to <i>your</i> story and asking clarifying questions</p> <p>Ability to imagine the impact of events and/or experiences on you because of <i>your</i> worldview—and use analogy to describe/clarify it</p>
<p>HOSPITALITY... is the difference between “Truth makes a difference” and “There is TRUTH in difference”</p> <p>I am open to discovering distinctive Truth in your Tradition and growing in my Tradition because of it.</p>	<p>Of Otherness as a category of substance (but not a barrier to dialogue)</p> <p>Of principles for dialogue</p>	<p>Ability to separate <i>your</i> identity in a Tradition from a stereotype of the Tradition</p> <p>Ability to name fundamental differences in consideration of Truth of others <i>and</i> principles for engagement</p> <p>Commitment to personal growth and to relationship with Other</p>

ROLE PLAY EXERCISE: I AM NOT THE STEREOTYPE

You have 15 minutes for this exercise.

(3-4 min) In groups of 4, make a list of all the ways that your Tradition is portrayed in media and common stereotypes that you've heard over the years.

(4-5 min) When you have as long a list as you can generate, begin discussing all the ways in which the experiences of group members contradict the stereotype.

(6-8 min) Discuss the following questions:

- When have you run up against a stereotype? How did it effect what you were doing?
- How have you handled experiences like this with the people holding the stereotypes?
- After your experience with being stereotyped, how do you view stereotypes of other religious Traditions? How do you explain this to others?
- What can we do to keep others from having such experiences?

SPIRITUAL GIFTS

For this exercise use this description:

“Spirit” comes from a root meaning *to breathe*. Spirituality includes the practices and insights that allow you to catch your breath in the world and help you to breathe life into the work you consider to be your calling. They connect you to what you know to be Ultimate.

Spiritual gifts are innate qualities or “inklings” of the natural way *you* breathe in the world. They are not full blown abilities or skills, but they tell you what you'd probably be good at with attention and development.

For example: Dee has a gift for knowledge. Since childhood, Dee has loved asking, “How?” and researching what makes things work. Dee breathes in the world by pursuing, examining, and sharing knowledge. Not surprisingly, Dee is a teacher!

Each speaker will have approximately 3 minutes to answer these questions:

- What spiritual gifts have you discovered within yourself?
- What is the source of your gifts?
- Who helped you notice these?
- What have you done to develop them?
- What is your greatest hope or dream for putting your gift to work in service?

CLOSING PRAYER

To be read responsively.

ALL will read the indented, italicized lines.

We have sought out meaning together.

We have broadened our awareness of each other's gifts.

We have deepened our thought about our identities.

We have done this that we may be ready to be reverent before the truth of each one's Tradition.

One last time today, let us be silent together.

(Observe a couple of minutes of silence.)

Baha'i Prayer for Harmony-

Inspired by the Parliament of World Religions

Composed by Dr. V. V. Raman: at The Cape of Good Hope, SA: 1999

In striving to recognize the primacy of Fire and Light.

I feel kinship with my Zoroastrian brothers and sisters.

In striving to obey the Ten Commandments,

I feel kinship with my Jewish brothers and sisters.

In striving to be kind to neighbor and the needy,

I feel kinship with my Christian brothers and sisters.

In striving to be compassionate to creatures great and small,

I feel kinship with my Buddhist and Jaina brothers and sisters.

In striving to surrender myself completely to God Almighty,

I feel kinship with my Muslim brothers and sisters.

In the recognition that wisdom flows from enlightened masters,

I feel kinship with my Sikh brothers and sisters.

In remembering that serving people should be the goal of religion,

I feel kinship with my Baha'i brothers and sisters.

In my respect and reverence for Nature that sustains us,

I feel kinship with my Native American brothers and sisters.

In feeling that these and more are all paths to the same Divinity,

I feel kinship with my Hindu brothers and sisters.

In my love and laughter, joy and pain,

I feel kinship with all my fellow humans.

In my need for nourishment and instinct to live on,

I feel kinship with all beings on the planet.

In my spiritual ecstasy with this wondrous world,

I feel kinship with the Cosmic Whole.

HOMEWORK SESSION 1

Pay special attention to paragraphs #17-27. Which one seems most difficult to you?

How do these principles match up with the material we discussed on Competencies?

Ecumenical Considerations For Dialogue & Relations With People Of Other Religions

Study Document by the World Council Of Churches, issued 1 Jan 2004

Taking stock of 30 years of dialogue and revisiting the 1979 Guidelines

From its beginning, the Church has confessed that God is reconciling the world to Godself through Christ Jesus. Throughout history, the Church has been seeking to understand and apply the fundamentals of its faith to concrete situations in which it found itself. The early Church continuously had to rethink its self-understanding when it moved from being part of the Jewish tradition to becoming a church of Jews and Gentiles, and beyond its Greco-Roman setting into other cultures and regions of the world. Today the church is continually called upon to enable its members to relate to persons of other faith traditions and to live as witnesses with others.

2. True to this vision, the World Council of Churches developed the "Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies" in Chiang Mai in 1979. We affirm the values of these guidelines, which were widely shared and received by the churches. However, we now have thirty years of experience in interreligious relations and dialogue, making it possible to move forward by drawing on what we have achieved or attempted. Since the 1979 guidelines, the ecumenical movement has taken significant steps toward facilitating interreligious relations and dialogue, but expectations for the fruits of our efforts have also risen.

3. In recent years, member churches have requested guidelines on interreligious relations and dialogue that address today's context. More than ever, we sense a growing need not just for dialogue with people of other faiths but for genuine relationships with them. Increased awareness of religious plurality, the potential role of religion in conflict, and the growing place of religion in public life present urgent challenges that require greater understanding and cooperation among people of diverse faiths.

4. From a global perspective, we speak as Christians of diverse traditions to the member churches. We hope local churches will study, discuss, and adapt these ecumenical considerations to address their own contexts. In this effort, Christians should seek to go further to produce, in collaboration with neighbours of other religious traditions, commonly agreed guidelines for relations and dialogue that would inform, instruct, and enable all to embrace the way of trust and community building.

INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS AND DIALOGUE TODAY

5. Greater awareness of religious plurality has heightened the need for improved relations and dialogue among people of different faiths. Increased mobility, large-scale movement of refugees, and economic migrations have resulted in more people of diverse faiths living side-by-side. Where mechanisms for dialogue and encounter exist, there are opportunities to foster greater knowledge and awareness among people of different religions. Unfortunately, increased relations between communities have sometimes been marred by tension and fear. For many communities, this tension confirms the need to protect their individual identities and distinctiveness. Sometimes the difference between the legitimate search for identity and hostility towards neighbours of other religions and cultures is blurred. Throughout the world and among the followers of major religious traditions, there has been a rise in influence of movements and leaders mobilising their believers in the name of preserving a perceived threatened distinctive identity. Often such an understanding of identity is made into the exclusive basis for the creation of a new societal order, shaped by a selective retrieval of doctrines, beliefs and practises from a sacralized past.

6. Whenever religious plurality gives rise to communal tensions there is a possibility of religious sentiments being misused. Religion speaks for some of the deepest feelings and sensitivities of individuals and communities; it carries profound historical memories and often appeals to uncritical

confessional solidarities. Religion is sometimes seen as the cause of conflict, while it is in fact more likely to be an intensifier of conflict. Interreligious relations and dialogue are meant to help free religion from such misuse, and to present opportunities for religious people to serve together as agents of healing and reconciliation.

7. Too often religious identities are drawn into conflict and violence. In some parts of the world, religion is increasingly identified with ethnicity, giving religious overtones to ethnic conflict. In other situations, religious identity becomes so closely related to power that the communities without power, or who are discriminated against, look to their religion as the force of mobilization of their dissent and protest. These conflicts tend to appear as, or are represented to be, conflict between religious communities, polarizing them along communal lines. Religious communities often inherit deep divisions, hatreds and enmities that are, in most cases, passed down through generations of conflict. When communities identify themselves or are identified exclusively by their religion, the situation becomes explosive, even able to tear apart communities that have lived in peace for centuries. It is the task of interreligious relations and dialogue to help prevent religion from becoming the fault line between communities.

8. Efforts to prevent polarization between religious communities at the world level are more important than ever. Through media, people tend to perceive conflict in one place as part of a conflict in another causing enmities in one part of the world to spill over into other regions. An act of violence in one place is used to confirm the stereotype of the "enemy" in another place, or even to provoke revenge attacks elsewhere in the world. There is a need therefore to de-globalise situations of conflict and to analyse each one within its own context. The emphasis on the specificity of every context should not prevent people of faith in other parts of the world from being both concerned and involved. An interreligious engagement in one place may in fact be an essential contribution to peace building and reconciliation in another place.

9. There is in many countries a growing role of religion in public life that requires greater understanding and cooperation among religions. Religious leaders are being called by governmental and non-governmental agencies to address public issues of moral concern. However to speak collectively and with moral authority, religious communities must discern their common values, decide to what extent they can express themselves with one voice, and discuss how they can avoid being manipulated by political forces.

APPROACHING RELIGIOUS PLURALITY

10. In their encounters with neighbours of other religious traditions, many Christians have come to experience the meaning of a "common humanity" before God. This experience is rooted in the biblical affirmation that God is the creator and sustainer of all creation. "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it" (Ps.24.1). God called the people of Israel to be witnesses among the nations while, at the same time, affirming that God is the God of all nations (Ex.19: 5-6). The eschatological visions in the Bible anticipate all nations coming together and the creation being restored to the fullness that God intends for all. This conviction is reflected in the affirmation that God is not without witness among any people or at any time (Acts 14.17).

11. When relating to people of other faiths, Christians must be aware of the ambiguities of religious expressions. While religious traditions reflect wisdom, love, compassion, and saintly lives, they are not immune to folly, wickedness and sin. Religious traditions and institutions sometimes support, or function as, systems of oppression and exclusion. Any adequate assessment of religious traditions must deal with their failure to live in accordance with their highest ideals. Christians are particularly aware that history testifies that our own religious tradition has sometimes been used to distort the very meaning of the gospel we are called to proclaim.

12. As witnesses, we approach interreligious relations and dialogue in commitment to our faith. At the heart of Christian belief is faith in the triune God. We affirm that God, the Father, is creator and sustainer of all creation. We hold the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the centre of God's redeeming work for us and for the world. The Holy Spirit confirms us in this faith, renewing our lives and leading us into all truth.

13. We are convinced that we have been called to witness in the world to God's healing and reconciling work in Christ. We do this humbly acknowledging that we are not fully aware of the ways in which God's redeeming work will be brought to its completion. We now see only dimly, as in a mirror, for we now know only in part and do not have the full knowledge of what God has in store (cf. 1 Cor. 13.12-13).

14. Many Christians have found it difficult to make sense of, or relate creatively to, the reality of other religious traditions. However, as Christians we believe that the Spirit of God is at work in ways beyond our understanding (cf. John 3. 8). The activity of the Spirit is beyond our definitions, descriptions and limitations. We should seek to discern the Spirit's presence where there is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal. 5. 22-23). The Spirit of God is groaning with our spirit. The Spirit is at work to bring about the redemption of the whole created order (Rom. 8. 18 - 27).

15. We are witnesses in a world where God has not been absent and to people who do have something to say about God. We meet people who already live by faiths that rule their lives and with which they are at home. We witness among them in a spirit and spirituality informed by our Christian faith. Christians need to open themselves to the witness of others, which is made not just in words but also in faithful deeds, in devotion to God, in selfless service and in commitment to love and non-violence.

16. Our witness is marked by repentance, humility, integrity and hope. We know how easily we misconstrue God's revelation in Jesus Christ, betraying it in our actions and posturing as owners of God's truth rather than as undeserving recipients of grace. The spirituality, dedication, compassion and wisdom we see in others leave us little room for claiming moral superiority. Awaiting the freedom God wills for all creation (Rom. 8. 19-21), we cannot but make known to others our own experience and witness and at the same time listen to them expressing their deepest convictions and insights.

17. In dialogue and relationships with people of other faiths, we have come to recognize that the mystery of God's salvation is not exhausted by our theological affirmations.

Salvation belongs to God. We therefore dare not stand in judgment of others. While witnessing to our own faith, we seek to understand the ways in which God intends to bring God's purposes to their fulfillment.

Salvation belongs to God. We therefore feel able to assure our partners in dialogue that we are sincere and open in our wish to walk together towards the fullness of truth

Salvation belongs to God. We therefore claim this hope with confidence, always prepared to give reason for it, as we struggle and work together with others in a world torn apart by rivalries and wars, social disparities and economic injustices.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

18. Dialogue must be a process of mutual empowerment, not a negotiation between parties who have conflicting interests and claims. Rather than being bound by the constraints of power relations, partners in dialogue should be empowered to join in a common pursuit of justice, peace and constructive action for the good of all people.

19. In dialogue we grow in faith. For Christians, involvement in dialogue produces constant reappraisal of our understanding of the Biblical and theological tradition. Dialogue drives all communities to self-

criticism and to re-thinking the ways in which they have interpreted their faith traditions. Dialogue brings about change in the experience of faith, helping people to deepen and grow in their faith in unexpected ways.

20. In dialogue we affirm hope. In the midst of the many divisions, conflicts and violence there is hope that it is possible to create a human community that lives in justice and peace. Dialogue is not an end in itself. It is a means of building bridges of respect and understanding. It is a joyful affirmation of life for all.

21. In dialogue we nurture relations. Building bonds of relationship with those considered "the other" is the goal of all dialogues. Such bonds however are not built easily or quickly. Therefore patience and perseverance are crucial in the practice of dialogue. The tenacity to go on, even when the fruits are not obvious, is one of the basic disciplines of dialogue.

22. In dialogue we must be informed by the context. Dialogue takes place in concrete settings. Awareness of such realities as historical experience, economic background and political ideologies is essential. Further, differences in culture, gender, generation, race, and ethnicity also have an important impact on the nature and style of interaction. The purpose of dialogue, once the context is taken seriously, is not to remove or run away from differences but to build confidence and trust across them.

23. In dialogue we strive towards mutual respect. Dialogue partners are responsible for hearing and listening to the self-understanding of each other's faith. Trust and confidence comes from allowing partners to define themselves, refraining from proselytism, and providing an opportunity for mutual questioning, and if appropriate justified criticism. Such practices promote an informed understanding of each other, which becomes the basis for all other relationships.

24. In dialogue it is important to respect the integrity of religious traditions in the variety of their structures and organisations. Equally important is to recognise the way that participants in dialogue define their relation with their community. Some affirm their right and obligation to speak for their community. Others would choose to speak from their own experience.

25. Dialogue is a co-operative and collaborative activity. All partners involved need to be included in the planning process from the very beginning. The strength of setting the agenda together lies in the fact that all partners own the agenda and become committed to making it work. For the conduct of dialogue clear objectives and commonly agreed criteria for participation and regular assessment are essential.

26. In dialogue we strive to be inclusive, since dialogue can easily become an elitist activity and be confined to certain strata of society. Care should be taken to ensure that dialogue takes place at different levels, between different groups and on subjects that affect the lives of all sections of the community.

SOME PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

27. Individuals and communities may, even with the best of intentions, encounter problems and difficulties in interreligious relations and dialogue. Sometimes the call for dialogue is met with hesitation, suspicion, indifference or opposition both from within one's own community and from other religious communities. Sometimes interreligious relations communicate attitudes that contrast with the values upheld by the culture and ethics of dialogue. Sometimes the possible outcome of dialogue does not seem enough to really justify participation. In addition, other problems invite careful consideration, some of them emerging in recent discussions.

28. There are often expectations that dialogue can significantly contribute towards resolving political or communal conflicts and restoring peace, in situations where religion seems to be implicated. In a number of countries there are dialogue partners who are able to cooperate, across the religious divide, in concrete efforts of peace making. There are also cases where religious leaders are invited to play a

visible role in state-sponsored peace initiatives. The impact of dialogue in the context of conflicts may disappoint high expectations. When it is unable to quell conflict, its relevance is questioned. However, by its very nature, interreligious dialogue is not an instrument to instantly resolve problems in emergency situations. Contacts and relations of precious trust and friendship between people of different religions, built quietly by patient dialogue during peacetime, may in times of conflict prevent religion from being used as a weapon. In many cases, such relations may pave the way for mediation and reconciliation initiatives. At times of communal tension or at the peak of a crisis, contacts across the communal divide may prove to be invaluable in the construction of peace.

29. Although dialogue by its very nature is direct encounter, there are invisible participants on each side in every dialogue. Our dialogue partners will every so often hold us responsible for what fellow Christians have done or neglected to do, said or not said. While this in some ways is inevitable and even sometimes understandable, we are well aware of deep disagreements within religions and we know that the dividing lines do not always go between religious communities but often within religious communities. The differences may be not only theological, but relate to social, political, and moral issues. We may for various reasons find ourselves in opposition to some of those with whom we share a common faith. We learn that religious communities are not monolithic blocks confronting each other. Plurality of positions on each side should not be ignored or suppressed while defending what is perceived to be the interest of one's community. Commitment to a faith does not entail identification with what is done or not done in its name. Therefore, we should not be defensive, but remain confident of the potential of dialogue to changing deeply held opinions or prejudices.

30. Among many religious communities, we come across people who seem to be primarily interested in the growth of their own community through various forms of mission including proselytism. They seem to have little interest in dialogue or may make use of it to further their missionary design. Such situations can be discouraging for people willing to engage in dialogue. Their disappointment often overshadows the possibility of identifying partners critical of those attitudes in their community. It is essential that we intentionally seek such partners and explore ways of rebuilding the credibility of dialogue enabling people of divergent positions to enter a relationship of mutual respect and openness in discussing divisive issues.

31. There are several expressions of dialogue, reflecting the various aspects of life itself. There is not one expression better than the other and our engagement therein should not conform to any pre-set model or hierarchy of dialogue but respond to the need, doing what is possible. In some contexts, we may discuss "cultural" differences more readily than "religious" ones, even as issues of religious concern and practice are considered in such a discussion. Similarly, co-operation about "social" concerns may be possible and even strongly supported, where there is hesitancy to consider dialogue on theological issues.

32. Motivations for dialogue can sometimes be conditioned by power relations between religious communities and by the importance, objective and subjective, of numerical disparities. In many countries, these communities share the same language and often the same culture. Often their members are said to be granted by law equal civil and political rights. But discriminatory practices exacerbate distrust and division. The intermingling of state policies and confessional identities rooted in communal traditions may lead communities to look at each other as a threat. This is particularly true in times of uncertainty or political and constitutional changes involving a redefinition of state-religion relationships. Interreligious dialogue cannot shy away from recognising the effects of uneven power relations and the impact of mutual perceptions, no matter how distorted they are. The relevance of dialogue initiatives depends largely on their intentional and concentrated effort to dispel fears and suspicions between those who are seen to represent religious communities. Equally, it is essential that interreligious dialogue creates an opportunity for strengthening cross-confessional loyalties, always upholding, in discussion and joint action, the centrality of the common good and inclusive political participation.