



Serving a Wounded World in Interreligious Solidarity

*A Christian Call to Reflection and Action
During COVID-19 and Beyond*



**World Council
of Churches**

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**Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue
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A Christian Call to Reflection and Action During COVID-19 and Beyond

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Contents

- 4** Preamble
- 6** The Current Crisis
- 9** Solidarity Sustained by Hope
- 11** Our Basis for Interreligious Solidarity
- 14** Principles
- 18** Recommendations
- 20** Conclusion

Preamble

What does it mean for Christians to love and serve our fellow human beings in a world in which the COVID-19 pandemic has inflicted widespread suffering? At a time such as this, the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue (PCID) call upon the followers of Jesus Christ to love and serve our neighbours. We focus on the importance of doing so in solidarity also with those who profess and practice religions that are different from our own or consider themselves unaffiliated to any particular faith tradition.

This document aims to offer a Christian basis for interreligious solidarity that can inspire and confirm, in Christians of all churches, the impulse to serve a world wounded not only by the COVID-19 pandemic but also by many other wounds. While primarily intended to address Christians, we hope that it will be useful also to those of other religions, who have already responded to this crisis with similar thoughts based on their own traditions. The global challenge of responding to this pandemic calls us to increased ecumenical and interreligious awareness and cooperation.

The parable of the Good Samaritan (cf. Luke 10:25-37) helps us to reflect on the question, “Whom are we called to love and care for?” and offers guidance about the complexities implied in the terms “service” and “solidarity.” Jesus tells this story in the context of the command to love one’s neighbour. When a man is wounded and

left by the side of the road, members of his religious community pass him by and leave him unaided. The person who eventually stops and helps him – a Samaritan – comes from a community that has been in dispute for centuries with his community about religious identity, the correct way to worship, and the right to participate in political matters. The story is an invitation to reflect on the need to transcend boundaries in one's service to, and solidarity with, the suffering. It is also a call to overcome the negative assumptions we may hold and to recognize with humility and gratitude that the 'other' (the Samaritan in this case) may show us the true meaning of service and solidarity.

This parable challenges Christians to think about how to live in a world wounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, and by the scourge of religious intolerance, discrimination, racism, economic and ecological injustice and many other sins. We need to ask ourselves: who is wounded, and whom have we wounded or neglected? And where might we be surprised by seeing Christ-like compassion in action? This story urges us to overcome religious prejudice and cultural biases in relation both to those whom we serve, and to those with whom we serve, as we strive to alleviate suffering and to restore healing and wholeness in a pluralistic world. At the same time, it gives us hope that is central to our faith and the way we live it out, when we realize that it is Christ himself, as the unexpected 'other' – the Samaritan – who is offering His help to the wounded one.

The Current Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on the global community with unavoidable immediacy and with little preparedness on our part. It has dramatically altered everyone's daily life, and powerfully exposed the vulnerability that all humans share. Alongside the millions who have been infected physically, many more have been affected psychologically, economically, politically and religiously; all have been deprived of public worship. People have struggled to cope with death and grief, especially with the inability to be with their loved ones at their deathbeds, and perform their last rites and funerals in a dignified manner. The lockdown has brought the world economy to its knees, and global hunger could double due to this catastrophe. It has also contributed to an increase in domestic violence. The requirements of physical and social distancing have meant isolation for many people. Despair, anxiety and insecurity have come to dominate human lives. The coronavirus has affected all – rich and poor, the elderly and children, persons in cities and villages, farmers and industrialists, workers and students.

While the whole of humanity is gravely wounded, the pandemic has reminded us of the scandalous gap between the rich and the poor, between the privileged and the underprivileged. In many places, the sick, the elderly and the disabled have suffered most grievously, often with little or no medical care. It has exacerbated racial prejudices and led to increased violence against those who

have for long been considered a threat to the dominant body politic that is structured and sustained by systems of inequality, exclusivism, discrimination and domination. People on the margins, especially migrants, refugees and prisoners, have been most affected by this pandemic.

The human misery associated with the COVID-19 pandemic is taking place amid the broader context of the suffering of this planet. Many have called on us to hear not only the voices of suffering humans but also the protracted cries of the earth and the entire community of life on it, which might be aggravated by the economic consequences of a post-COVID-19 world. We can also see this health crisis as a harbinger of future crises relating to climate change and the assault on biodiversity. We urgently need an ecological conversion of attitudes and actions to care more effectively for our world, paying attention to the groaning of the creation.

The heightened awareness of our shared vulnerability is a call to new forms of solidarity reaching across all boundaries. In this hour of crisis, we gratefully acknowledge the heroic service rendered by healthcare workers and all those who offer services, even risking their own health, irrespective of identity. We have also seen flourishing signs of people's solidarity with the needy, manifested through volunteerism and charity. We rejoice that Christians, as well as people of all faiths and goodwill, are collaborating to construct a culture of compassion, reaching out to the needy and the vulnerable with material, psychological and spiritual assistance, at the individual as well as institutional levels. Because we are one human family, we are all related as brothers and sisters and are co-inhabitants of the earth, our common home. Our interdependence reminds us that no one can be saved on their own. This is a time for discovering new forms of solidarity for rethinking the post-COVID-19 world.

Because interreligious relationships can be a powerful means of expressing and building solidarity, and of opening ourselves to resources coming to us from beyond our limitations, we invite reflection on how we as Christians can become partners in solidarity with all people of faith and goodwill. In this journey towards solidarity, different communities are inspired and sustained by the hope we find in our respective traditions.

Solidarity Sustained by Hope

All people have hopes and dreams, and hope offers strength to support the human will to live even in difficult times. As Christians, we hope for God's promised kingdom in which the whole creation is reconciled and bound together in justice and peace. This hope transforms our lives, pointing us beyond the present world, and at the same time leading us to follow Christ in service of this world and its flourishing. As a result, all Christians are called to work together and collaborate with the followers of other religious traditions to fulfil our hope for a united world of justice and peace. More broadly, we are called to become men and women of hope, working together with all persons of goodwill for a better world.

Hope is an essential feature of all religions. Throughout human history, we know that religious hope has often inspired believers to care in love and compassion for those who suffer the tragedies of the human condition. Today, we need universal and shared ethical and spiritual values to inject a new hope into the pandemic-ravaged world. In this respect, religions can offer a precious contribution to reawaken and guide humanity in building a new social order at the local, regional, national, and international levels. This new vision needs to be based on the unity of the human family as well as on a heritage of moral values common to all human beings. Today, there is a global interconnectedness that urges us to assume planetary responsibility based on common religious

and ethical values to serve and heal the post-COVID-19 world. We are called to reengage with the world, particularly in response to the grievous woundedness in ourselves, our families, our cities and nations, and in the whole of creation.

Our Basis for Interreligious Solidarity

As Christians, we see the basis for interreligious solidarity in our belief in the God who is one in three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit:

- 1.** All human beings are creatures of the One God, the Father (cf. Genesis 1: 26-27), who has the same good plan for them. We are sisters and brothers, connected by love, and by our equal dignity that does not have to be earned. Therefore, as a family linked by the one Creator, and created in God's image, we have responsibility for each other. This awareness challenges us to be the face and the instrument of God's healing love in the world, defending and restoring the dignity of all human beings. By caring for one another and removing obstacles in the way of being and becoming persons responsible for one another's wellbeing, we honour the one in whose likeness we are made. As the Good Samaritan shows us, this solidarity is universal, transcends boundaries and is aimed at all of humankind. Our fundamental connectedness and our shared origin matter many times more than perceived divisions constructed by humans.
- 2.** Our trust and our hope are in Jesus Christ who heals by His wounds (cf. 1 Peter 2:24). In Jesus Christ, we come face to face with suffering without losing our well-founded hope. In His sacrifice, Jesus took compassion, in the original sense of co-

suffering or suffering with, to its healing extreme, in love that surpasses our understanding. We as Christians are called to this same healing “suffering with,” becoming channels of His love, at the same time as being dependent on it for our own healing. It is the compassion of the Good Samaritan that allows us to see him as an image of Christ, tending the wounds of the world. We recognize that the virtues of mercy and compassion for all who are suffering resonate in other religious traditions, which also have rich examples of generosity and concern for those most in need.

- 3.** We also see Christ in the wounded man by the wayside. In the suffering of our sisters and brothers, we encounter the face of the suffering Christ (cf. Matthew 25: 31-46). This understanding of Christ’s co-suffering with all of humanity challenges us Christians to recognize that all suffering holds the same dignity and the same claim on healing – even “one of these little ones” (cf. Matthew 18:14) cannot be left behind. For us, Jesus’ solidarity with the sufferer is as radical as it is transformative: it fully embraces the woundedness of the world, allowing no distance from the pain of the other and taking it on. However, in Jesus’ rising from the dead this solidarity also opens up a new way of being for all. The resurrection is proof and assurance that love is stronger than any woundedness, however deep, and that death will not have the final word.
- 4.** When we are in solidarity with others, we are connected by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit “blows where it wills” (John 3:8). When we turn to the other, especially to a person in need, as the Good Samaritan does, we might well be amazed, and humbled, by where we see God at work. As the spiritual force that turns us towards God in prayer and towards our neighbours in service and solidarity, the Spirit connects us in a particular way with all people of faith. It empowers us with gifts that

we should use for purposes of building people up. It has the capacity to produce in us works of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control and guide us away from the path of conceit, competition and envy (cf. Galatians 5: 22-23, 26). It is the Spirit, too, that sends us out into the world to be good news in it, and to be the hands of Christ caring for all who suffer.

Principles

Our belief in the importance of walking this path together is reflected in the fact that the WCC and the PCID wrote this document together. We believe that both the process of its conception and its content mirror our openness and responsibility as Christians to engage in dialogue with followers of other religious traditions. We recognize the following principles to guide us in the work of serving each other in a wounded world, together with all people of faith and goodwill. They stem from our shared belief in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and God's plan for all humankind.

1. Humility and vulnerability: As Christians, we are called to walk humbly with our Lord (cf. Micah 6:8, Matthew 11:29) and to be willing to share in Christ's sufferings and the sufferings of the world. In the openness of this "daring and caring," we learn to live our witness as with-ness. In such humility and vulnerability, we follow the model of Christ and His sacrificial love, and in Him reach our full potential (cf. Philippians 2: 5-11). It is pride, and the inability to open up to the other sufficiently to grow, that traps us in entrenched positions that create and perpetuate division. Like Jacob in his struggle with God, we must risk being hurt to receive blessing (cf. Gen 32: 22-32). We are made vulnerable by speaking truth to power, and by speaking up for those who suffer injustice. We also believe in justice as a basis for forgiveness, without which conflict cannot be solved, and we stand in a long tradition of Christians who have given their lives in the struggle for it, mirroring the selfless sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

- 2. Respect:** As Christians, we need to have respect for the unique and complex situation of each individual and their right to tell their own story. We are called to see and treat people as subjects of their own stories, and not objects of our stories, and to resist reducing their rights and freedom to factors such as the state of their physical or mental health, their nationality, their income, their sex, the colour of their skin, etc. In this, we bear witness to a God whose self-revelation at a specific time and a particular place, in the human face of Jesus Christ (cf. John 1:14), affirms the whole of humanity, and that all humans are created in the image of God. This compels us to work towards closing gaps and healing inequalities wherever they occur, including between the rich and the poor, and men and women, in close conversation and collaboration with those whose lives and stories are often suppressed by these inequalities (cf. Matthew 7:12).
- 3. Community, compassion, and the common good:** These values form the basis for our engagement with the world (cf. Matthew 5:7). We are called to embrace the complex and painful reality of human life, just as God did in becoming human in Jesus Christ. It is only in relationship that we fully experience our humanity, and by loving the other, and sharing in their suffering, we become fully human in the way God intends us to be and has revealed to us in the example of Jesus Christ. The impetus for our solidarity lies in building just and inclusive communities, cultivating compassion and furthering the common good by paying greater attention to the wounds of the world that Jesus embraced through his suffering with the outcasts of the world - “outside the city gates” (Hebrews 13:12).
- 4. Dialogue and mutual learning:** We are called to learn from each other in this time of crisis. We should also be open to what God can teach us through those from whom we least expect to learn anything (cf. Acts 11:1-18). The poor and the wounded

frequently have important lessons to teach and gifts to give. We all need to acknowledge the poverty and woundedness within us. We need to be ready to have our lives changed to the same extent that we are seeking to change the lives of others: for example, when migrants and refugees are welcomed, both they and their host communities can be transformed. In the suffering and the vulnerable, there is an opportunity to encounter the works of God (cf. John 9:2-3). Created in the image and likeness of God, every human being can reflect the divine image to us, and help us question how well we are doing in our calling to show God's love to others.

- 5. Repentance and Renewal:** To be part of the process of healing and wholeness, we Christians are called to own up to our complicity and guilt in many systems of oppression, which exacerbate the sufferings of many (2 Samuel 12). With the reassurance that our God forgives, we need to ask how we, who are ourselves wounded by sin, have wounded others, and more widely all of God's creation. We need to listen to the cry of both our mother earth and our sisters and brothers who suffer. With an aching heart, we recognize that, as communities, we also have a history of abuse that has wounded the most vulnerable among us. Confession of our complicity in suffering is the starting point for true renewal that will enable us to live more just lives. Such self-critical reflection will also help us to resist the temptation to blame the poor for their poverty, or those who are hurt for their wounds. It also helps us to reject the idea that God chooses some people to prosper, and some to suffer, based on their worth or actions, and to overcome those systems of injustice we have tacitly perpetuated through silence and neutrality.
- 6. Gratitude and generosity:** Christians are called to be grateful and generous. We must remember that, through no merit of our own, we are rich in gifts given by God, the source of every

perfect gift (cf. James 1:17). For this, we should be grateful to God. We must resist the temptation to cling to our possessions. One of the defining marks of the early Church was its radical economy of sharing, which was accompanied by glad and sincere hearts (cf. Acts 2:45, 46). We also see examples of early Christian communities overflowing in joy and generosity, even amid severe affliction and extreme poverty, through the empowering grace of God, who in Jesus Christ became poor for our sake (2 Corinthians 8:1-9). Our joy and gratitude for God's self-revelation to us in Jesus Christ offer us the security and confidence that we need to put our whole selves on the line in service to a wounded world, inspired by unexpected examples of generosity.

- 7. Love:** We are called to live Christ's love, showing the world His face. We love because He first loved us (cf. 1 John 4:19). Lived love shows the true face of Christianity (cf. John 13:35), even when sometimes the face we as Christians present, or the ones others construct, can be hard to love. Our faith becomes alive in action that lives out Christ's love. Therefore, working together for a better world builds God's kingdom of justice, peace and joy in many ways. It keeps our faith and our mission alive and active, it shapes our life as Christians into a loving sign of Christ's presence, and it builds love and understanding between us and those with whom we join together to express our love in action. When we work towards the alleviation of suffering, we are also working towards the kingdom promised to us in and through Christ, where the last shall be first (cf. Matthew 20:16) – in marked contrast to the empires of our times.

Recommendations

We call upon all Christians to serve our neighbours, and to serve alongside them, taking into consideration the recommendations below.

- 1. Find ways of bearing witness** to suffering, drawing attention to it, and challenging any forces that aim to silence or exclude the voice of the wounded and vulnerable among us, holding accountable the people and structures behind this suffering.
- 2. Promote a culture of inclusivism which celebrates difference as God's gift**, to counter all signs of exclusivism we see today in our societies at various levels. This needs to begin within family life and continue through other social institutions. To this end, we recommend the responsible use of social media to enhance healthy and constructive communication, to amplify the message of peace and solidarity.
- 3. Nurture solidarity through spirituality**, considering how traditional spiritual practices such as prayer, fasting, self-denial and almsgiving can be more deeply infused with an awareness of the needs of the wider world and of our call to be in solidarity with the suffering.
- 4. Widen the formation** of clergy, members of religious communities and orders (both men and women), laity, pastoral workers, and students to foster empathy and to equip them with the

best knowledge and the tools to work for a wounded humanity in cooperation with others.

- 5. Engage and support young people**, whose idealism and energy can be an antidote to the temptation of cynicism, in the endeavour to heal the wounded world of which we are part.
- 6. Create space for dialogues** (as this document aims to do) that are embracing and inclusive. Learn from members of other religions about their motivation, principles and recommendations for working in interreligious solidarity, so that we may grow closer both in understanding and cooperation. Hold space for the marginalized to be heard and respected, offering places of belonging. Create platforms for different groups to be in each other's company so that they can grow in love and understanding.
- 7. Restructure projects and processes for interreligious solidarity** through an examination of ongoing projects, and existing strengths, to establish where these would gain from work in cooperation with other communities, organizations or agencies. Restructure projects in a way that affirms the diversity in which we are created. Our work can only reflect the fullness of humanity if we resist the temptation to stay "amongst ourselves." Serving a wounded world together makes neighbours of us all.

Conclusion

Ecumenical and interreligious solidarity enable our religious commitment to become a factor that unites, rather than divides, people. When we work hand in hand with believers of other faiths and people of goodwill, we model the peace, justice and interconnectedness which are at the heart of our faith convictions, while at the same time recreating and reinforcing these values.

For Christians, interreligious solidarity is a way both of living out Jesus Christ's commandment to love the other, and also of working with the other to seek peace, which is God's will for the world. Growing in love for those whom we help, for those with whom we help, and for those who help us, creates many ways for us to live fully into what God created us to be – bearers of the divine image, and sharers of this image with others.

As we open ourselves to serving a world wounded by COVID-19 through ecumenical and interreligious solidarity, may we derive strength from the example of the one we follow, Jesus the Christ. He came not to be served but to serve (Matthew 20:28). Imitating the love and generosity of the Good Samaritan, let us seek to support the weak and vulnerable, console the afflicted, relieve pain and suffering and ensure the dignity of all. May we, by opening our hearts in dialogue and by opening our hands in solidarity, build together a world marked by healing and hope.

The front cover, conceptualized by Sister Judith Zoebelein, FSE (PCID) depicts hands of solidarity centred by the heart. This communicates the bearing and sharing of the wounds of suffering inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic and other problems that scourge human beings and the earth. The mask symbolizes human effort, sacrifice, solidarity and responsibility in protecting life during this time.



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