

# A GUIDE TO COMMON ISSUES IN INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS



Issued by  
**National Council of Churches of Singapore**  
August 2008

First edition October 2003

## What is the National Council of Churches of Singapore?

### **History**

The National Council of Churches of Singapore (NCCS) is an association of churches and Christian organisations. Constituted on 24 July 1974 to promote Christian unity, it is an offshoot of the Malayan Christian Council inaugurated in 1948. One of its objects is 'to form Christian public opinion and to bring it to bear on the moral, social, national and international issues of the day, particularly those which may affect the life and welfare of the people of Singapore.'

### **Membership**

The founding members of the Council are:

- Anglican Diocese of Singapore
- Lutheran Church in Singapore
- Methodist Church in Singapore
- Mar Thoma Syrian Church
- Presbyterian Church in Singapore
- Salvation Army
- St Thomas Orthodox Syrian Church.

Membership also includes the Assemblies of God (General Council), Evangelical Free Churches of Singapore, the Church of Singapore, Worldwide Church of God, Hope of God Church, City Harvest Church, New Creation Church, Riverlife Church, Pasir Panjang Hill Brethren Church, and others. Christian Organisations that have joined include the Bible Society of Singapore, Trinity Theological College, YMCA, MYMCA, YWCA, and others.

### **Officers**

The officers of the Council are the Most Revd Dr John Chew (President), Bishop Dr Robert Solomon (Vice-President), Rt Rev Tan Cheng Huat (Vice-President), Mark Sng (Hon Treasurer) and Lim K Tham (General Secretary) who, together with Commissioner David Bringans, Rev Dr Kenny Fam, Rev Dr Patrick Lau and Bishop John Tan, form the executive committee.

### **Secretariat**

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## Foreword

The government has initiated a Community Engagement Programme (CEP) to build harmony in our nation. Many of our churches have been invited to participate and are involved in this through the Inter-Racial and Inter-Religious Confidence Circles (IRCC), and have asked for guidelines to assist them in addressing common issues in inter-religious relations and in their participation in CEP.

The National Council of Churches of Singapore (NCCS) is therefore pleased to issue these guidelines to our churches as it is also our desire to contribute to peace and harmony in our nation.

While the guidelines seek to provide a common platform for churches, they are not binding, and churches are encouraged to adopt and use them with discretion according to their respective contexts.

It is helpful to note that these guidelines were first issued in 2003. They have been revised to bring them up-to-date. A few new issues have surfaced and these have been addressed and added in the revision.

These practical guidelines show how we as Christians can relate to our fellow Singaporeans who belong to other religious faiths in a positive and constructive way. We commend them to our churches for their reflection and action, and to the glory of God.

I wish to thank those who had contributed to the original edition, and those who did the revision and helped put the material together. To them we offer our grateful thanks.

**Most Revd Dr John Chew**

President

National Council of Churches of Singapore  
& Bishop of Singapore

### Acknowledgement

We thank the following for contributing to the content of this Guide: Rev Dr William Chang (Lutheran), Rev Christopher Chia (Presbyterian), Dr Roland Chia (Trinity Theological College), Rev Chong Chin Chung (Methodist), Rev Dr Daniel Koh (Methodist), Dr Kwa Kiem Kiok (Methodist), Rev Lau Hua Teck (Presbyterian), Lim K Tham (Bible Society of Singapore), Rev David Ng Teck Seng (Lutheran), Rev Dr Ngoei Foong Nghian (Trinity Theological College), Rev Soh Guan Kheng (Lutheran), Bishop Dr Robert Solomon (Methodist), Rev George Tay (Anglican), Rev Canon Dr Louis Tay (Anglican).

## Q1

**How should Christians respond to invitations to attend and participate in community functions (e.g. memorial service, commissioning, open house, or social gathering) where members of other faiths are also represented or involved?**

Christians should feel free to attend and participate in community functions where members of other religions are represented or involved. These functions serve to foster community cohesion, which Christians as citizens should support and be involved in.

Though many parts of community functions are primarily cultural in nature, there may be some religious elements. Where a community event includes acts of worship or rituals practised by other religions, the Christian in attendance should politely decline participation, or ask to be excused from that portion of the event.

Other aspects of community functions may relate to customs, traditions and values generally held by the larger society which are not incompatible with Christian practice. These, the Christian may feel comfortable to attend and take part in. However, there may be some practices such as gambling, which Christians should avoid.

Christians need to be able to identify the different cultural and religious elements so that they can confidently attend these functions and interact cordially with all those who are also present.

## Q2

**In what circumstances can Christians give or receive funds from other religious organisations?**

Christians can give to, or receive funds from, other religious organisations, where such gifts are clearly designated for services that promote the general welfare of humankind. God the Creator has provided resources, including money, to be used to bless His world. In Christian love and liberty, we may use these resources to benefit others.



Christians, however, should not give to funds that directly promote the cause of other religions (e.g. building of temples or places of worship). This is because such giving is contrary to the Great Commission which calls Christians to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19-20).

Thus, for example, Christians may contribute towards a fund that assists poor families to send their children to school, but not towards a fund to send those children to a religious school.

### Q3

#### In what ways can Christians co-operate with followers of other faiths for the good of the community?

Christians are citizens of the nation. As citizens, Christians can and should work with others in efforts which promote the common good, and which build up the community as a whole. Thus, since Christians believe that every human person is created in the image of God, they will seek to care for all others, regardless of race or religion.



In Singapore's multi religious context, where up to 85% of the population are followers of one religion or another, harmony among followers of religions is important and necessary for society as a whole to flourish. Christians should work with others to achieve racial and religious harmony. One thing they can do is take part in the Inter Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCC) which have been initiated and set up by the government.

Christians are also concerned for justice and peace, and in particular, that the vulnerable, weak and marginalised in society are adequately cared for and protected. Thus, Christians can work with others in services which benefit these sectors of society.

Christians may also initiate projects and work with followers of other religions in such common concerns as caring for the environment.

### Q4

#### In what ways can Christians dialogue and interact with followers of other faiths in everyday life?

The aim of dialogue between followers of different faiths is to promote understanding of each other's faith and practices. There are various forms of dialogue which can be carried out by Christians. First, there are the daily interactions in school, around the neighbourhood, in the market and at work. These interactions are opportunities for Christians to speak with neighbours, friends and colleagues about their common concerns about life and family, as well as about their religious practices. These daily interactions could also give rise to opportunities for Christians to find out more about the life and religious practices of followers of other faiths and to speak about their practices. In these social interactions, Christians can find opportunities to give a reason for the hope that they have (1 Peter 3:15-16).

Secondly, dialogue can also be conducted at an official or organised level. Here, leaders of two faiths can meet together to seek better understanding of each other's doctrine and practices. The aim of such dialogue is not conversion, nor an attempt to synthesise religions, but mutual understanding. At all times, both parties should maintain utmost respect for each other.

### Q5

#### How should Christians participate in inter-religious dialogue?

Christians should be involved in inter-religious dialogue when its basic purpose is to enable members of different faith-communities to understand one another better.

Inter-religious dialogue, as is with all social interaction, should lead the conversation partners to better understand one another as well as respect the differences between them. For the Christian, such dialogue can be understood simply as the conversation between people who hold different religious beliefs. Thus, inter-religious dialogue is part of the larger context of social intercourse in a pluralistic society. Inter-religious dialogue can be conducted at different levels and with different objectives and goals (see Q 4 above). Even when such dialogue is conducted at official levels with more concrete goals in view, e.g. inter-faith collaboration for nation building, they cannot detract from this basic criterion of fostering understanding between the different faith communities.

## Q6

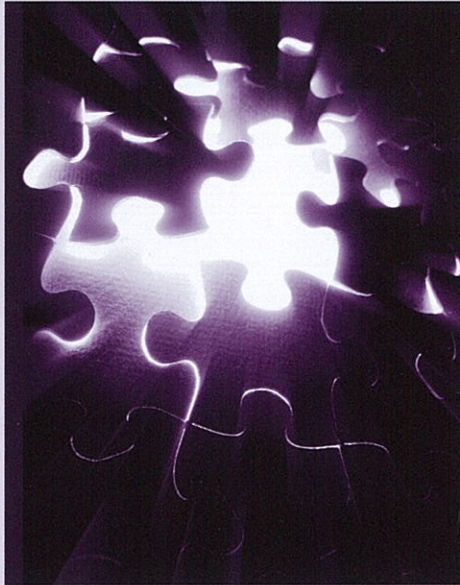
### How should Christians be involved in Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCC)?

Christians should be involved in such platforms, as well as other inter-faith dialogue activities, both as individuals and as a church or a denomination.

IRCCs and other inter-religious channels have been set up to promote racial and religious harmony. They achieve this end by bringing people of different faiths and races for dialogue and cooperation. The role played by these organisations has taken on heightened importance in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States.

In Singapore, people of different faiths and beliefs live side by side. IRCCs are an opportunity for us to work together with fellow citizens to build a harmonious and cohesive society. The different traditions we come from offer us many resources to do this. Inter-faith meetings also provide opportunities or settings to correct misunderstandings and misrepresentations not only of our own but also of those of other faiths as well.

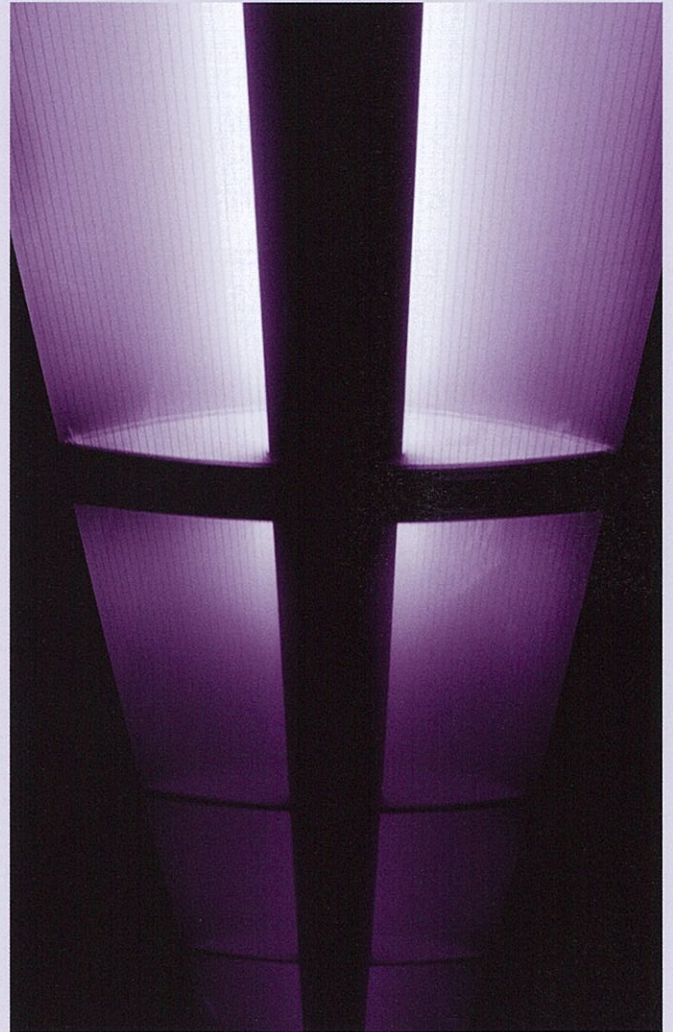
Involvement in such platforms is an expression of Christian commitment towards community building. Together with those of other faiths, listening and responding to one another with openness and respect, we can move forward to work in ways that acknowledge genuine differences, but build on shared hopes and values.



## Q7

### In what circumstances can Christians allow their premises to be used for meetings with followers of other faiths?

Christians may wish to invite followers of other faiths to use their facilities for common activities such as group games or dialogue. These events may be held in fields, meeting rooms, or halls owned by the church. Opening their doors in this way is an act of hospitality. While Christians may wish to invite followers of other faiths to their worship services (see Q 12 below), they should restrict the use of their sanctuary or worship halls to Christian worship only.



## Q 8

**How should evangelism be carried out in a multi-religious society?**



Christians are called to proclaim Jesus Christ as the Resurrection and the Life. In doing so, we are not to denounce other religions, nor denigrate their sacred

objects or practices. We are to witness by our lives, good deeds, and the sharing of personal testimony (1 Pet 2:12).

Those who belong to other faiths are also human beings and like us are created in the image of God. Many are sincere and are struggling to do good. Like us, they are sometimes lonely, disappointed, troubled or sick.

Christians need to live godly lives, displaying the fruit of the Spirit. There are many non-Christians who have high standards in their conduct and values. We must do better, to demonstrate that we worship and serve a holy God who has commanded us to live holy lives. Indeed, a godly life demands that we show respect and give honour where it is due, be scrupulously honest in all transactions, and be polite and gracious to one and all.

People are generally responsive to gestures of love and friendship. We need to develop genuine friendships and establish caring and loving relationships with neighbours, friends and colleagues. Within this context, we can find opportunities to speak about Jesus Christ who is our Lord and Saviour.

It should be noted that under the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, the Government of Singapore is empowered to restrain leaders or members of religious groups and institutions from creating "ill-will" between religious groups or carrying out subversive activities. Thus, when sharing the gospel, Christians should always be respectful of the beliefs of others, careful not to create or sow ill-will.

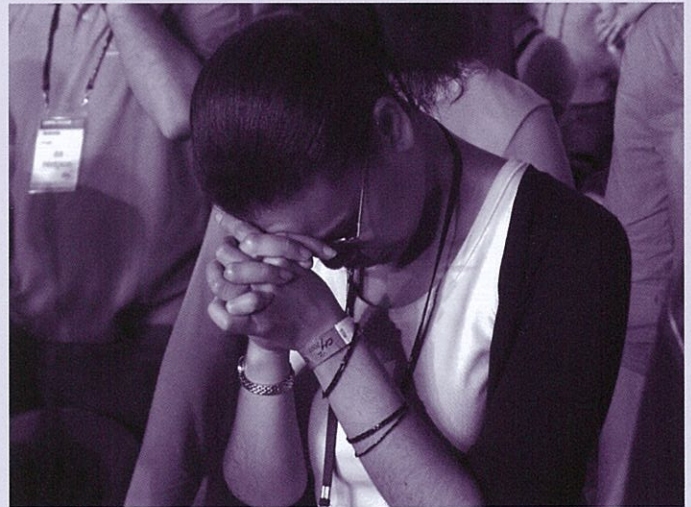
## Q 9

**How should Christians respond when invited to take part in inter-faith religious services?**

Proponents of inter-faith religious services believe that the deities of the different religions all point to the same ultimate reality. However, the orthodox doctrines of many religions, including Christianity, reject this.

For Christians, worship is an act of praise and adoration directed to the God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. Christian worship is directed to this God and no other. Christians maintain that God has revealed Himself specifically, first through His dealings with Israel, and then finally and supremely in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word (Heb 1:1 - 2). Given these basic premises of orthodox Christian faith, inter-faith or multi-faith worship for the Christian poses serious theological problems because the object of that worship is, at best, ambiguous. Christians should, therefore, not participate in inter-faith worship.

What Christians can do, however, is encourage the organisers of such events to conduct them as civic events with opportunities given for those present to pray silently according to each person's faith and tradition. At such moments, Christians may also pray silently in their heart knowing that God hears their unuttered prayers (cf. Matthew 6:6).



## Q 10

### How should Christians participate in a public civic memorial or ceremony where there is public 'prayer' provided by leaders of the other religions?

A civic or memorial ceremony organised by a religiously neutral body in the wake of a tragedy (e.g. the Silkair jetliner crash in 1997) is an act that fosters social solidarity as the tragedy affects many people. Such ceremonies draw family members, relatives, friends and citizens together to mourn the deaths of the innocent victims.

The basis of such a gathering is human solidarity in a time of crisis or in the wake of a tragic event. It is the recognition that this crisis or tragedy has affected every member of society, regardless of race and religious convictions. The purpose of the gathering is to reflect on what has happened, to mourn with those who have lost their lives, and to express sorrow, faith and hope (through the use of religious language and symbolic gestures). Christians may attend such events because they are part of the larger society.

Such civic rituals, while they may not be inter-faith religious services as described in Q 9 above, usually involve prayer. For Christians, corporate prayer is seen as part of worship liturgy to God and as such they cannot offer prayers on the same platform as with members of other faith communities. However, Christians join their fellow citizens in such a time of tragedy and at the appropriate time may pray silently to God who hears these prayers (cf. Matthew 6:6).

## Q 11

### What can Christians do when invited to attend and take part in religious services at temples or mosques?

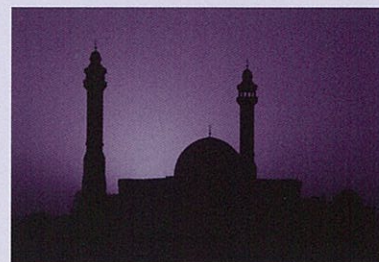
Sometimes, Christians may be invited to visit places of worship of those of other faiths. Some Christians may politely decline such invitations for their own valid reasons and this should be respected. Others may wish to visit those places when there are no worship or religious activities going on in order to better understand the other religion and so build relationships with the other communities and persons in it.

When acts of worship are being carried out in that temple or mosque, Christians should bear in mind the following:

- Christians should find out more about the other faith community prior to attending its worship activity.

Christians attend such activities as visitors and not as participants. This means that they

- should not take part in any rituals or religious activities performed during these worship events.
- When Christians attend the worship activities of other faith communities, they must learn about and observe any restrictions that may be practised in that place of worship. This includes appropriate behaviour relating to attire, food and drink, gestures, gender roles as well as postures.



## Q 12

### In what ways can followers of other faiths be invited to attend and participate in Sunday worship services in church?

Although the Sunday worship service is primarily an activity for Christians, people of other faiths should be allowed to attend if they wish to. Through the work of the IRCC, some churches have hosted people from other faiths in their worship services. While Christians should welcome followers of other faiths to the Sunday worship, it is important to note the following:

- Visitors should not be compelled to participate in the worship service if they do not wish to do so, e.g. they should not be compelled to give during the offertory. If they are comfortable with participating in the acts of worship (e.g., sing, stand, kneel, etc), they should be informed before the service that they are welcome to do so.
- Throughout the worship service, visitors should be accompanied by a mature Christian who can explain clearly the meaning of the actions, rituals and liturgical materials.
- When the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is celebrated, it is important that the ritual is clearly explained to visitors. It would not be appropriate for them to participate in this sacrament.