

**An Interfaith Response to the Document:
“A Common Word between Us and You”
May 14, 2011**

Abstract

In 2007, 138 Muslim scholars sent to the leaders of Christian Churches around the world an invitation entitled *A Common Word between Us and You*. (See online at www.acommonword.com.) This response to that document is the result of several years of monthly meetings by a group of Christians and Muslims in Newport News, VA. It considers the challenges that stand in the way of achieving understanding and respect between these two religious traditions, challenges rooted in the theological differences found in their teachings, in the sometimes unrealistic claims that followers of each tradition are inclined to make, and in the tensions created by the current geopolitical situation. It finds fruitful possibilities in the twofold commandment, to love God and Neighbor, named by the Muslim invitation and lauded in each tradition. This response expresses the hope that it will create a spirit of inclusiveness which recognizes differences between them without insisting on interpretations that deny a divine presence and purpose in each of these faith communities.

1. First, a word of profound appreciation to the 138 Muslim scholars from around the world for seeing the need and urgency of reaching out to the Christian community, for creating a bold statement and sending it as an open letter to Christian leaders throughout the world. As the document wisely says: “Muslims and Christians together make up well over half of the world’s population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world.” Its timing could not have been more propitious. Engaged as we are in two theatres of war, Iraq and Afghanistan, both predominantly Muslim countries in which the human toll continues to mount, at a time when some are raising the specter of a ‘civilizational’ war between Islam and Christianity, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict continues to test our resolve for interfaith relations, this document comes as a clarion call for sanity and responsible action leading to peace. *It rightly points out that the basis for such peace already exists in two principles dearly held by each community: love of the One God, and love of the neighbor.* We wholeheartedly agree both with the sentiment behind the invitation and the principles of faith to which it calls us.

2. We have also noted and deeply value the responses of Christians from various communions who have replied to the invitation and have posted their responses for all to see. Their statements have been stimulating and enlightening, and from them are emerging responses to the responses. Important friendships are forming. We have learned and benefited from the thoughtful and heartfelt engagements of such friendships. In keeping with this spirit, we want to share our reflections on what the document says and the conversation it now invites. In brief, here is what we did.

3. Shortly after the Open Invitation appeared, people at the ecumenical Peninsula Pastoral Counseling Center, Newport News, VA, gathered a small group of Muslims and Christians from the Hampton Roads community to read and study the document together. Participants represented a variety of Christian and Muslim communities, making it an intra-faith as well as interfaith group. Two members in an interfaith marriage from Prescott Valley, Arizona participated in the discussion by conference call. It was realized that the document called for a Christian response, but we believed that in bringing Muslims and Christians together, the value of the document would be enhanced by creating yet more occasion for dialogue and thus deepening and broadening the response of our Christian participants. The intention was to discover and promote common ground among Muslims and Christians as we engaged in responding to “A Common Word.” Our stated purpose was to:

- provide a forum for public reflection and honest dialogue on issues of faith and practice;
- build among ourselves bridges of understanding based on listening, learning, study, sharing;
- open ourselves in ways that enable us to grow in respect and appreciation of the views of others;
- foster change and peace as people discover their common humanity, while learning to live peacefully amidst our religious differences.

4. By meeting face to face and through committed conversation, sharing, and study, we came to discover in new and deeper ways the humanity of each other and to appreciate how our limitations and vulnerabilities may actually bind us together and create feelings of need for one another. It was not always easy, but those new to interfaith dialogue were helped by others with years of experience. Together we, Muslims and Christians, gradually experienced a sense of unity and common purpose, drawing on those truths from our traditions that bring us close together in our common humanity as worshipers of the one God. The impact of an effort like this is edifying and constructive for each of us, and in its own humble way may bring a

blessing to the world in which we live. Through it we all perceived the mercy and goodness of God guiding us. It was a rich spiritual experience, with an ongoing free-flowing conversation among all participants.

5. Eventually around twelve people, roughly divided between Muslims and Christians, stayed in conversation for nearly three years. Among this group were two women, one a Muslim educator, the other a Catholic lay leader, engineers, theologians, clinical counselors, professors of world religions, pastors and scientists. The views expressed represented youth and old age; they were diverse, sometimes startling, always refreshing.
6. The larger group met once a month, while a smaller study group met each month in between the monthly whole group meetings. We met on Saturday mornings from 8:30 to 10:00 am at the Counseling Center which hosted us. We opened each session by a recitation of the Fatiha, first in Arabic then by all in English. We closed with a recitation of the Lord's Prayer, first in Arabic, then by all in English. Doing this generated good conversation about what it means to pray together and whether Muslims could use the 'our Father' in the Lord's prayer. Our process was to explore, examine and ponder the document, "A Common Word between Us and You," line by line and paragraph by paragraph. We wanted to take enough time to give each theme a thorough reading so its intent and gravity could seep through, and to give each participant ample opportunity to express feelings, reactions and insights. Paraphrasing one participant, such dialogue becomes God's means of educating us on the way to a deeper and more responsible humanity, broadening insights into ourselves as well as our neighbor. The study group went through the Anglican response with equal care and attention. We ended by participants writing and sharing a two or three page reflection on what they garnered from the whole experience and how it changed them. These in turn became grist for another year of further intense conversation. What follows is an attempt to summarize the substance of these many and varied conversations. What makes them unique, perhaps, is that both Christians and Muslims from the local community participated in the conversations.
7. We began by pondering the question, "What are the obstacles in coming to a Common Word, and in carrying out the command to love God and neighbor in the present context?" Our deliberations revealed obstacles that can be placed under three categories: 1) obstacles in understanding each other that arise from the uniqueness of each tradition, where words common to both traditions assume different meanings and nuance, as well as the challenge posed by beliefs espoused in each tradition that conflict with those of the other; 2) obstacles posed by our human nature, where we too readily create an "us vs. them" mentality that leads to absolutist claims concerning our version of the truth that would exclude others; and 3) obstacles

posed by the current geopolitical situation, giving rise to fears and suspicions that too easily infiltrate each religious community. The following paragraphs address each of these obstacles.

I. Obstacles to Understanding and Addressing Distinctive Beliefs

8. Most of our discussion addressed obstacles in this first category. It became apparent that while we share such words as *love*, *God*, and *neighbor*, they bring different meanings and nuance depending on who is using them. Nonetheless, by focusing on love of God and love of neighbor, the Muslim signatories have lifted up core imperatives of each religion that, when heeded, can bind us together in our common desire to be faithful to God and hospitable to one another. This document, we agreed, would serve its purpose if it draws us together in a common loyalty to God, whatever the differences that mark the historical uniqueness of each religion.
9. In discussing the concept of love we agreed that while love can include *eros* (erotic love) and *philia* (friendly love), it does not mean sentimental or over-romantic feelings. To love someone involves acting with a sense of duty, commitment and faithfulness to that person. To love God means to act in accordance with God's will and in obedience to Divine commands. When we spoke of God's love for us, Muslims made it clear that such love does not include vulnerability or any appearance of weakness. We pondered whether this excludes the possibility of the love known in the Christian community as *agape* (self-giving).
10. Likewise, we commonly acknowledge that God is one and there is no god but God. We also recognize that both Christianity and Islam have their own ways of interpreting what 'oneness' means. Muslims, for example, affirm this oneness by denying certain "distinctives", such as atonement theology, the Trinity, and the divinity of Jesus. Christians among us tried to explain that while these particular distinctive beliefs are essential to Christian identity, their meaning is trivialized and thus misunderstood if the mystery they convey is removed by a literal or superficial understanding. Muslims may find these Christian distinctives more palatable if they recognize that they require symbolic rather than literal modes of understanding, pointing to the mystery rather than describing an empirical phenomenon. At the same time, Muslims reiterated their concern that Christians not compromise the unity or oneness of God. Many Muslims, they said, harbor a deep suspicion that when Christians worship Jesus the Christ as Lord, as God incarnate, Emmanuel, they are compromising both the unity and "otherness" of God.

11. Another case in point is that Christians among us tended to focus more on God's love for us, a love that biblically entails suffering, pain, and even the ignominy of a cross of execution, and that human love for God comes primarily in response to this incarnational outpouring of divine love and grace. Christians among us believe we are commanded to love God, but the motivation to do so is rooted in the fact that God first loved us. Muslims among us, on the other hand, preferred to speak more of God's mercy and compassion, expressed through a multitude of 'signs' both in nature and within ourselves (Sura 41:53), and through prophets and sacred texts, all given for our edification and guidance. The result is a straightforward requirement: we are to love God because we are commanded to do so.
12. As a group we also pursued, but only in general terms, how each community defines 'neighbor' and what it means to love the neighbor as ourselves. At issue is how Christians and Muslims see and treat people in their midst who are minorities, how they accord such people the dignity they deserve and how they protect their freedom, rights and privileges. As noted in the document, "empathy and sympathy...are not enough. They must be accompanied by generosity and self-sacrifice." Christians reflected on phrases like: "love for your neighbor what you love for yourself" in the Qur'an and in hadith, while Muslims listened to Christians explain "love your neighbor as yourself" in the teachings of Jesus. We wanted to explore the meanings these phrases held for each community and how they are interpreted. Some expressed the need of finding more examples of how Jesus and Muhammad demonstrated in their own lives what it means to love one's neighbor. These examples may complement or challenge one another, but their decisive importance for the way we live out our faith cannot be denied. In her study entitled *Muslim Devotions*, Constance Padwick notes aptly,

No one can estimate the power of Islam as a religion who does not take into account the love at the heart of it for this figure [Muhammad]. It is here that human emotion, repressed at some points by the austerity of the doctrine of God as developed in theology, has its full outlet—a warm human emotion which the peasant can share with the mystic.¹

The same could be said regarding the love Christians have for the figure of Jesus.

13. Throughout our conversations we struggled with a deep and shared desire that we recognize and respect the distinctive and defining beliefs of both Christians and Muslims, different and even mutually exclusive as

¹ Padwick, C. E. (1961). *Muslim Devotions: A Study of Prayer-Manuals in Common Use*. London, SPCK, P. 145

they may be. We were of a mind that the purpose of dialogue is not to reach agreement by reducing every distinctive belief to some kind of common denominator that might promise to erase our differences. We believe that in and through our distinctive beliefs God is fulfilling a divine purpose among us. We agreed that as Muslims and Christians we are not meant necessarily to act, think and believe alike, but, rather, that we need to be able to: (1) see more clearly the commonalities we may have been blind to due to lack of understanding and knowledge, and (2) when we've plumbed in depth these commonalities, accept, even welcome our differences, and live in peace, knowing that in God all these differences will find their answer. Unity in mutual respect and appreciation, not uniformity, should be the goal. In this connection members of our group expressed deep appreciation for the way the "Common Word" document encouraged all of us to share our beliefs and thoughts regarding these tenets of our faith without fear of reprisal or a need to be defensive. One member noted,

The freedom to share our faith journeys, and in some cases, even voicing struggles, doubts and disagreements confirms the level of trust that developed among members of the dialogue group. More importantly, it has highlighted the multitude of ways God works in the lives of people who genuinely seek to know, love and serve God in a more perfect manner.

14. In regard to differences in the nature of our traditions and the way we understand the fundamental reality of our relation to God, we noted that Christians tend to delight in talking about divinity, anthropology, and philosophy, pondering the nature of God and what it means to be human, while Muslims tend to focus more on faith that issues in obedience, practice, and right conduct. While Christians warm to themes in theology and Christology, Muslims warm to themes relating to justice and proper observance. While this difference in mindset can be an obstacle to dialogue, it is also potentially promising because in our hearts we recognized that these are not "either-or" but of necessity "both-and" issues. Together we learned that Christians have a deep desire to "know God", to meditate on the nearness and person of God, and that this runs deep. The Apostle Paul's question on the Damascus road, "Tell me, Lord, who you are?" is a fundamental biblical query and can only be answered, Christians believe, by God's self-revelation. It takes God to reveal God. This culminates, according to Christians, when God comes to reveal Godself in Jesus. But how can one so Divine be disclosed in one so human? It evokes mystery and, for Muslims, the potential sin of association, even blasphemy.

15. For Muslims a central query of the Qur'an is found on the lips of Abraham when he addresses his people, and so is framed somewhat differently. He asks, "What idea have you got of the Lord of all being?" (Sura

37:87). It is a question addressed not to God but to people and their need to have a right understanding, a correct perception that there is no god but God. The desire to know “who God is” is replaced by the need to know with absolute certainty that God is One, and to believe without question in the oneness of God. It is a human query for knowledge that need not, and indeed does not lead to incarnational theology, but rather to a divine revelation that explicitly points us beyond all likenesses and signs to the transcendent otherness, uniqueness, and unqualified oneness of God. At this point we all agreed with the observation of the Apostle Paul that, “We see through a glass darkly.” Even the task of grasping and understanding accurately God's revelations, in Jesus, in the Bible and in the Qur’an, is made difficult by the limits of our comprehension. We asked whether this very human limitation might underscore our need for one another.

16. Another way of describing our conversation is to say that we were challenged to let words like “common,” “God,” “love,” and “neighbor” serve as windows rather than blinds, expanding our view and enlarging our embrace rather than limiting our sight and confining us to interpretations once meaningful but now stifling and no longer relevant. We also acknowledged and confessed that our actions, which should exemplify the words we use, often contradict and betray them. All this, we agreed, makes it difficult to come to “a common word,” but with God’s help, not impossible.

II. Obstacles Posed by Our Human Nature

17. Listening to each other as we shared the rituals and practices of our traditions helped us better to understand each other, and also caused us to examine our own selves in regard to the way we live our faith and the attitudes we bring to those of a different faith. Doing this, we agreed, can make us all better believers. One of our group reflected on broader dimensions of this experience, noting that “dialogue is essential to our self-understanding and self-identity, for we know who we are only as we stand in relationship to others”. He went on to say that “dialogue thus becomes God’s way of educating us on the way to a deeper and more responsible humanity, broadening our insights into ourselves as well as our neighbor”. This kind of knowing our neighbors, learning how to respect and honor them is undoubtedly the best way to narrow what some are calling ‘the widening gap’ between Christians and Muslims, a gap created and sustained by intense focus on our differences. The level of trust we achieved in our small group, while far from common, is testimony to the fact that when Christians and Muslims do meet, greet, share and listen attentively to each other, fear and suspicion can give way to understanding and respect. If the invitation of “A Common Word” were taken seriously by both Christians and Muslims, it would promise a turning point in world relations.

18. The above obstacles, generated by the character of each tradition with its differing conclusions and distinctions concerning God, could be seen as posing obstacles that thwart every effort at dialogue and understanding. Indeed, some have said as much. But is this really the case, especially since we all agree that God alone is the source of revelation? We pondered together the possibility of whether and how we can maintain our authenticity as Muslims and Christians, remaining true to our distinctive claims, and at the same time emphasize inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness in our attitudes toward each other. We reflected on the kind of shift this would require, namely, a willingness to forsake the spirit of absolutism concerning our faith that we have maintained in the past. By ‘spirit of absolutism’ we do not mean relinquishing those beliefs which for most Christians and Muslims are unconditional, such as: that, according to the New Testament, God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Godself; or that the Qur’an as revealed to Muhammad, in Makka and Madina, is the verbatim word of God. These beliefs, and there are others, we agreed, appear to be sacrosanct and are likely to remain so *ad infinitum*. Still, what isn’t unchangeable or unconditional and needs to be challenged is the spirit of absolutism, the way we as believers appropriate and interpret what these deep seated beliefs mean and ought to mean for all people and all times. Such a posture of absolutism involves the claim that we possess the whole Truth concerning God and salvation, giving us an ultimate authority and status in relation to all other religious claims concerning the Truth. It is an attitude that in the end is destructive. In effect, this kind of claim actually means that we possess God, enabling us to interpret the mind of God and to exercise the very judgment of God. It is this kind of absolutism and the spirit of intolerance it breeds, that we seek to relinquish. Here as Christians and Muslims we agree wholeheartedly to let God be God. God is greater! Allahu akbar!

19. The point was made that, for Christians, claiming such a spirit of absolutism runs contrary to the perspective of Jesus himself. For Muslims it means ignoring some of the most salient Qur’anic verses that speak eloquently to tolerance and forbearance, such as Sura 5:48 which says:

And to you We have revealed the Book containing the truth, confirming the earlier revelations, and preserving them (from change and corruption). So judge between them by what has been revealed by God, and do not follow their whims, side-stepping the truth that has reached you. To each of you We have given a law and a way and a pattern of life. If God had pleased He could surely have made you one people (professing one faith). But He wished to try and test you by that which He gave you. So [together] strive to excel in good deeds. To Him will you all return in the end, when He will tell you of what you were at variance.

And Sura 2:62

Truly those who believe and those who are Jews, the Christians and the Sabi'un, whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does right, for them is their reward near their Lord; they will have no fear, neither will they grieve.

20. In addition the spirit of absolutism bestows an authority that fallible human beings, whether individually or corporately, are not able to bear. It has led to horrendous acts of violence in the Name of God. We agreed that the further removed we Christians and Muslims are from each other, the easier it is to condemn one another as infidels and to relish the sense of power and superiority that such action evokes, the very opposite of the spirit of humility and service that both our religions have inspired. It is only in honest dialogue and exchange that we are responsible toward each other, for in those circumstances we are compelled to listen and to take each other seriously. That fact means that the "shrinking village" in which we now live provides a momentous occasion for learning not only about each other, but with each other and from each other. We face an enormous opportunity in the history of the world religions. Perhaps in this age of the global village we can learn that all we can and should do is to testify to the Truth as we believe it to be revealed to us, asking for the humility and the grace to *walk* in that Truth. For Christians that would mean that we walk in the way of Jesus, in the spirit of God's love that makes us brothers and sisters of one another. For Muslims it would mean walking in the Straight Path of God as denoted in and informed by the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet.

III. Obstacles Posed by the Current Geopolitical Situation

21. Our discussion inevitably touched on obstacles posed by the larger world in which we live, obstacles that at times can appear overwhelming. Many are rooted in raw fear, ignorance, and prejudice, each of which feeds on the other. Sadly, the gap between us is increased daily by an outpouring of slander and lies circulating freely via email and Internet, often incendiary, filled with bigotry, and completely un-Christian and un-Islamic in tone and intent. This phenomenon should deeply concern each one of us, for it undermines our relationships. It needs to be forcefully and honestly confronted from pulpits, *minbars*, and from whatever platform we are offered. The truth must be proclaimed that would challenge and counteract the chauvinism and hatred that is poisoning our national discourse on this and many other contentious topics.

22. Given this negative context in which we are living, it was not surprising that we found within ourselves a measure of ignorance and indifference that posed significant obstacles. It is a deep privilege, wrote one Christian,

to work together with persons who in my ignorance I had assumed didn't know God the Real God. My ignorance and my fears, though less, still continue as daily obstacles that get in the way of collaborating with God and everyone else who believes in God the Real God.

I thank God, he continued,

who daily provides me a space within myself to grow in my capacity to seek accurate understanding of other people's points of view on and experience with God the Real God. Understanding them accurately is not enough by itself, but I've experienced again here in our discussions how difficult and yet how necessary that accurate understanding of the other is, simply as a basic first step for "loving" another as I "love" myself. Committing myself to understand the other accurately is, I perceive, the foundational first step of transformation from the original creation to the new creation of the Family of God.

Ignorance of and indifference to the 'other', we concluded, encompass not only religious, but significant cultural differences between us, giving rise to formidable barriers in trying to understand, to say nothing of truly appreciating, what we have in common and what binds us together.

23. As we reflected on the current state of affairs in our world, and the violent actions on the part of individuals and nations that have contributed to the threatening circumstances we face, we are humbled by the redemptive initiatives that God has inspired in the midst of our confusion. It is the critical world situation that has inspired the "Common Word" statement and subsequent responses to it, efforts that have the potential to change the situation we face. Even as we write, events unfolding in Egypt (and elsewhere in the Middle East) may be such a sign; Muslims and Christians working together in a peaceful manner to unseat a ruthless dictator. This reminds us that our actions do not take place in a vacuum, but in response to the circumstances that surround us. While theology grounds the ethical decisions we make, we find ourselves moved by the moral challenges, even catastrophes, of our world to reassess and rethink the theology we profess. It was the Swedish theologian, Krister Stendahl, who aptly remarked, "There have been instances in history when moral outrage has profoundly influenced, and rightly so, the shape of our theology." We are experiencing now the truth of that statement.

24. We recognize that interfaith dialogue will always confront obstacles, real and imagined, both internal and external, to those so engaged. Yet we believe those obstacles can serve a useful purpose, for in struggling with them we can reach a deeper understanding of ourselves and of each other and begin to appreciate the distinctive gifts of each tradition that draw us together in a common loyalty and obedience to God. It is our desire and hope to see this “Common Word” initiative flourish and spread to communities around the world so that, in conversation together, people will promote the principles that are found over and over again in the sacred texts of Islam and Christianity: the imperative to love God who is One, and to love our neighbor. This is common ground between Muslims and Christians, a ground on which we stand together no matter how divergent the paths we travel. This is, perhaps, the essence of interfaith dialogue: voices from different backgrounds, speaking and listening to one another, actually finding a common language and common ground that together enables them to discover a new harmony and create something beautifully original. We believe, based on our shared experience, that now is such a moment for Muslims and Christians.

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