

Interfaith Dialogue Is Important for Our World Today

The last century's rise of technology, the exponential development of global communication, and a vast improvement in mobility have contributed to a diversity that has flourished in our society. With the globalization of society, "other" religions have migrated into the neighborhood of the church, raising awareness of and questions about other faiths in light of Christianity.

Hans Küng has noted that "for the first time in world history it is impossible for any one religion to exist in splendid isolation and ignore the others....discussion with the other religions is actually essential to survival, necessary for the sake of peace in the world."^[1]The world is not getting any smaller: the migration of peoples, new methods of communication, and the vast expanse of knowledge about others are increasing rather than diminishing.

Addressing our response to other religious traditions is both unavoidable and valuable as the church attempts to understand the reality that surrounds it. In a society that has become increasingly diverse and complex, what it means to be religious in this society has shifted. The church, like other religious groups, must reconsider its role in the midst of a changing society.

What should be the church's response to this change in its environment? The church could see pluralism as a problem and choose to be separatist, claiming its own superiority and vowing to remain unmoved by society. Or, the church can follow its call to transform the world and choose to be an active and vital part of society.

The church must recognize the necessity of growing in its understanding of and relationship with other faith traditions. The gospel calls Christians to live as neighbors with those who surround them, learning to love and minister even to those with whom they wholeheartedly disagree. If the church will have any impact on its society, the church must learn to live with its neighbors, not merely in toleration, but in a respectful relationship that seeks the best for all parties involved.

While interreligious dialogue is necessary for the church to assert a meaningful voice in society, interreligious dialogue also offers rich possibility for the church. As it recognizes its situation in a world of abundant diversity, the church must overcome its fear and mature in its own understanding of the presence of other religions as an opportunity rather than a problem—a chance for church renewal, building relationships, growing in understanding, and expressing the love and grace of the Christian message in a way that is non-confrontational and open-minded. Interreligious dialogue provides the greatest of opportunities for the church to grow in appreciation of the abundance of other traditions while maintaining the integrity of its own commitment to the gospel.

-- Submitted by Julie Long