Interfaith Relations and the Churches

A Brief Theological Introduction to the Policy Statement
By Bert F. Breiner, Former Co-Director for Interfaith Relations, NCCCUUSA

Preliminary Notes

The following theological commentary is being offered as an additional resource to accompany the NCCCUUSA Policy Statement on Interfaith Relations. It may be freely downloaded, printed, and reproduced for the purpose of individual or group study provided the authorship and source are acknowledged. The appropriate source citation should include reference to this web page. All references to the Policy Statement are to the numbered paragraphs of the printed and electronic editions of the text. Where the word "paragraph" does not appear in the text, these references are preceded by the sign ¶.

It might be useful to say a word here about the process by which the Policy Statement was written and adopted. The work began in the Commission on Interfaith Relations of the NCCCUUSA. After preliminary discussion of the nature and scope of the document in the Commission as a whole, one member, Dr. Terry Muck, produced a preliminary draft which was submitted to discussion at the next bi-annual Commission meeting. At this time, three other people were added to the writing team. A new draft was prepared and brought before the Commission. Following discussion of the draft, writing was placed in the hands of the NCCC staff in the Office of Interfaith Relations. The present writer was a member of both writing teams and this commentary is an attempt to help clarify some of the theological issues and concerns that are reflected in the final text of the Policy Statement.

The proposed text of the Policy Statement received its first reading at the NCCC General Assembly in November, 1998. There were some comments from the floor which were discussed and worked into the final version of the document presented for a second and final reading to the NCCC General Assembly on November 10, 1999. At that point, it was unanimously passed and became the NCCC Policy Statement Interfaith Relations and the Churches.

This commentary limits itself to an exposition of the theological assumptions of the text. When it offers alternatives, they are always ways to arrive at the same theological destination as the current text. This explains why there is not, for example, a more far-reaching discussion of "pluralist" Christian approaches. While it might be possible to find a hook here and there in the Statement on which to hang a pluralist theology, that does not appear to be, in the opinion of the present writer, the theological thrust of the document as a whole.

If you have any comments or would like to engage in a more ongoing discussion of the theology of the document and its practical implications, please feel free to contact me at: bert.breiner@usa.net.

About the Policy Statement
The NCCC contains thirty-five churches. The traditions represented include, among others, the Eastern Orthodox, the Oriental Orthodox, the Anglican, the Lutheran, the Reformed, the historic Black Churches, and the historic Peace Churches. It is, of course, difficult to speak on many issues with a common theological voice. This is particularly true in an area such as interfaith relations. This topic raises fundamental theological questions of Christology, ecclesiology, missiology, and ethics.

The Policy Statement of the National Council of Churches does not attempt to resolve these issues. Nor does it seek to minimize either their importance or their urgency. In several places (for example, ¶ 14) the Policy Statement makes reference to major areas of disagreement and calls upon the churches to engage themselves and each other in deeper exploration of the theological questions. In doing so, it stands squarely in the mainstream of ecumenical experience. It reflects the extent to which the churches have experienced an enrichment of their life and thought through their constant dialogue with other members of the Body of Christ. It looks forward to the fruitful application of this method to questions of interfaith relations.

An honest appraisal of these difficulties does not mean, however, that the Policy Statement is reduced to seeking a theological least common denominator. Instead, the statement seeks to make a positive contribution to the understanding of interfaith relations by placing the theological questions within the context of Christian discipleship. It never loses sight of the fundamental question shared by all the churches: "What does it mean to live as a faithful disciple of Christ side by side with men and women of other religions?"

The structure of the Policy Statement reflects this approach. The Preamble establishes the theme of discipleship and the context of interfaith relations. A brief introduction is followed by a section on the historical, political and social context of Christian encounter with men and women of other faiths in the United States. The section on ‘A Continuing Dimension of the Church’s Life’ seeks to place the discussion of interfaith relations in the context of the Church’s historical and contemporary encounter with men and women of other religions.

The next major section of the Policy Statement is called "Reflections on Theology and Practice." It places the theological and practical concerns of interfaith relations within the context of Christian discipleship. It is trinitarian in structure. The first section, "God and Human Community," seeks to understand Christian discipleship in terms of the will of God as expressed in creation and as revealed for creation. The second section, "Jesus Christ and Reconciliation," stresses the Christological basis of Christian discipleship. The third section, "The Spirit of God and Human Hope," seeks a deeper understanding of how Christians can relate faithfully to men and women of other religions based on the work of the Holy Spirit.

The next section, "Marks of Faithfulness," brings together the insights of the previous theological reflection to provide the elements of a practical approach to men and women of other religions. In a sense, this section prepares the way for the final section of the paper. "Recommendations" (numbered separately at the end) are offered concerning the life and programs of the National Council of Churches, the specific responsibilities of the Interfaith Commission within the Council, and the responsibilities of the churches in service to each other as a community of communions. It places the practice of interfaith relations within the context of
Christian ecumenism. The final section speaks about the internal life of member communions, the wider ecumenical community (which includes churches that are not members of the National Council), and men and women of other religious traditions as well.

It is also important to note what the Policy Statement does not do. As mentioned, it does not attempt to resolve controversial theological issues in the life of the Church. These issues include disagreements about the salvation of non-Christians, Christian mission (both evangelism and diakonia), and the nature and role of interfaith dialogue. It does not seek to provide detailed guidance on the many practical questions of interfaith relations in America today. It does not, for example, provide guidelines for dealing with the problems of interfaith marriages, whether (or how) to pray together with men and women of other religions, the practice of Christian evangelism, or how to establish ongoing relations with men and women of other religions. While it makes frequent reference to Scripture, it does not purport to be a scholarly exegesis of the biblical text. On the other hand, it does seek to point to the richness of the biblical material and to indicate areas which are perhaps deserving of more attention on the part of biblical exegetes and of the Church in general.

The Preamble

The preamble immediately presents the major theme of the Policy Statement: Christian discipleship. It begins with a quote from John’s gospel. It grounds our life of Christian discipleship in the mission of the Church. It stresses that we are sent into the world as Christ was sent. It develops the implications of that mission in three major themes: "to testify to the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord, to embody that love in the world, and to respond to the leading of God’s Holy Spirit" (¶ 2). The Policy Statement then seeks to set our Christian discipleship in the context of our "religiously plural and culturally diverse time and place" (¶ 2).

In this way, the Policy Statement seeks to reflect the wide range of opinion within the Church about the place of interfaith relations. There is considerable debate about how Christians ought to spread the good news of Jesus Christ throughout the world and about the role of Christian diakonia in relation to men and women of other faiths. There is also considerable theological debate about the extent to which Christians may gain religious insights from other religions and from the men and women who practice them. However, the Policy Statement seeks to place all of these differences of opinion (or perhaps of emphasis) within our shared quest to be faithful disciples of Jesus in our time and place.

The Historical, Political and Social Context

The next two sections of the Policy Statement address the historical context of interfaith relations. After a discussion of the religious and cultural diversity of contemporary American society, it looks briefly at the historical aspects of the Church’s response to the challenge of living with and among men and women of different religious traditions. The reason for this approach is clear. The Policy Statement is speaking to the contemporary and religiously diverse situation of the American churches. It seeks to address a felt need on the part of many Christians.
In a brief historical survey of the diversity of religious traditions in the United States (¶ 5), the Statement begins with the indigenous Native American spiritual traditions which predate the arrival of first Europeans. American religious historians are still discussing the dates for the earliest arrival of several non-Christian traditions on American soil. There is much discussion, for example, about the origins of Muslim presence in North America and it is difficult to specify dates for the earliest presence of various Asian traditions in the United States.

Paragraph 3 deliberately avoids making statements about a number of controversial issues. It does not, for example, attempt a definition of what constitutes a "religion." Some Buddhists, for example, would not consider Buddhism to be a "religion." It is often difficult to determine exactly what constitutes a religious tradition and what does not. For the same reason, the document does not deal with the question of modern "cults" and what constitutes a "cult" and what should be recognized as a bona fide religion. It also does not deal with the borders of Christianity. It does not, for example, pronounce on whether or not Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons are to be considered Christian. It is, however, interesting to note that the NCCC conducts its growing relationship with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints as an interfaith relationship.

One paragraph (¶ 6) in this section deals with the lack of tolerance and inclusivity which have often marked American history. Another paragraph (¶ 8) stresses the relationship between our current religious diversity and the changed cultural and ethnic makeup of our society and of our churches. The Policy Statement notes that for many Christians today interfaith relations are family matters. Many congregations today contain families which have relatives who belong to another faith tradition. Engagement in interfaith relations requires an understanding of the complex interaction of race, religion, ethnicity, and culture. This deserves our attention especially against the backdrop of a persistent pattern of racial, ethnic, and economic discrimination in American society.

The Policy Statement notes the impact of religious diversity in international affairs (¶ 9), particularly in relation to the growth of "fundamentalism." The word is used without definition, which is problematic. Scholars of religion disagree about the appropriateness of this word when applied to non-Christian faiths and sociologists disagree about how such movements are to be understood and classified. The Policy Statement simply uses the word as it is used in the mass media and in everyday conversation. The Policy Statement then deals with social problems, including stereotyping, and the need for interfaith cooperation in dealing with them.

The Policy Statement as a whole does not spend a great deal of time discussing the international dimension of interfaith relations. There is no doubt about the extent to which these events influence the perceptions and practice of interfaith relations here in the United States. International events are also important for a number of non-Christian religious communities which feel very close religious, cultural, or historic ties with countries and regions overseas. While it is not, therefore, possible to talk about interfaith relations in the United States without making reference to international affairs, other policy statements speak about the international dimensions of the life and work of the NCCC.
Paragraph 10 helps to establish the general approach of the Policy Statement as a whole. It stresses the need for interreligious understanding and cooperation. This is another way of stating the main thrust of the document as a whole – the central role of Christian discipleship. Questions of interreligious understanding and cooperation relate to the way we live as faithful Christians in a pluralistic, multifaith society.

REFLECTIONS ON THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE

God and Human Community

With this section the Policy Statement begins its trinitarian approach to a theology of interfaith relations. It refers to the life of the Trinity as a model for relationship in (¶ 21). In doing this, it reflects a respect for the integrity of the distinction of persons in the Trinity. This approach, while part of the orthodox tradition of the whole Church, is particularly developed in Eastern Orthodox theology and in some strands of Anglican theology.

Theologically, it is important to note that the emphasis in the first section relates with special emphasis to the will of God in creation. It stresses God’s will that humanity should be a community and that the relationship between one human being and another is intended for their mutual support and fulfillment. The Policy Statement does not emphasize the act of creation per se.

In this way, the Policy Statement avoids implying any degree of modalism. Modalism was that heresy, condemned early in the life of the Church, which taught that the distinction between the three persons of the Trinity was merely one of function: that "Father" was a kind of shorthand for talking about the creative function or activity of God, and "Son" referred to God exercising the role of savior, while "Holy Spirit" identified the sanctifying work of God. The statement studiously avoids such a theology which would contradict its respect for the Trinitarian life of God as a model of human relationship and community. Human beings are not reducible to their functions or roles in human society and the document affirms a theological foundation for the integrity and theological worth of every human person. It is the will of God which makes the search for true community, respect, and justice a theological imperative and not a matter of sociological, historical, cultural, or political importance only.

The text might have quoted Genesis 2:18, "Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner,’” to help clarify the point being made here. Theologically, the account of Creation in Genesis serves as the basis for two major points. The first is that God’s will is for all of humanity to exist in a common relationship, a relationship of mutual love, respect, and support modeled on the trinitarian life of God. The second is that the Genesis account enables us to speak, in some sense, of a universal family of humankind. Thus, there is a sense in which all men and women are brothers and sisters to one another. This affirmation has caused a number of comments regarding the correct use of "family language" in the Policy Statement. Because of this there is some attempt to justify it later in the text.
In discussing Jesus’ teaching on the need for reconciliation in the Sermon on Mount (¶ 32), the opening and closing verses of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew are referenced. The last verse (7:28) in particular makes it clear that this teaching was addressed to the crowds and not just to the disciples: “Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.” The statement about being reconciled to your "brother and sister" is addressed not only to his followers but to the crowds. Presumably these crowds were predominantly Jewish. But it is unlikely that anyone addressing a large crowd in first century Palestine could fail to presume that it would also include Samaritans, Greeks, and Romans. There are other examples of familial language being used to include non-Christians in the New Testament. Paul seems to address both the Jews and the non-Jewish "God-fearers" in the Synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia as "brothers."

Of course, the word "brothers" clearly does not apply to Christians in this context in the Book of Acts. It is certainly true that, particularly in the Epistles, family language is used almost exclusively of the Christian community. However, this is not surprising since the epistles are addressed to the Christian community. It does not follow, based on examples taken from this particular context, that family language is restricted to such usage.

The next few paragraphs (¶ 22-23) interpret Biblical history in terms of humanity’s increasing separation from God and alienation from each other. This reading of Biblical history serves also as an analysis of the human condition. This is the import of (¶ 22) which introduce the Biblical examples of this theme.

The Biblical exposition of our increasing alienation from each other (¶ 23) could have been expanded. Mention might have been made of the story of Sarah and Hagar, of Jacob and Esau, of Isaac and Ishmael, of the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom, and of the Samaritan and Jewish animosity which permeates the background of several New Testament texts.

The following paragraph (¶ 24) presents the Biblical theme of hospitality, which stands in sharp contrast to the earlier biblical material. It is presenting the Biblical pattern of the way human beings were intended to interact and to relate, as opposed to the unfortunate ways in which we all too often do interact with each other. Again, the Biblical material here could have been expanded. Indeed, certain other aspects of the Biblical narrative provide an even clearer demonstration of the fact that such hospitality reflects the will of God and is an indication of God's concern for the whole human family. The book of Jonah, the role of Cyrus as the Anointed of God, and the story of Naaman the Leper come readily to mind, the book of Jonah and the story of Naaman both finding echoes in the New Testament.

This section also supplies the biblical foundation for the earlier statement that God cares for the whole human family. The theme of God's will for humanity to live in community with each other is originally developed doctrinally. Paragraph 21 relates the argument to the doctrine of the Trinity as we have already seen. In a sense this section also provides some Biblical support for the main argument of this section that God's will for humanity is that they live in a just and mutually supportive community.
The discussion of hospitality is central to this section of the Policy Statement, providing a biblical basis for its concentration on the theme of Christian discipleship. The emphasis throughout is on laying a theological and biblical foundation for Christian praxis in our relations with men and women of other faiths. While the Policy Statements notes important areas of doctrinal disagreement among the Churches, it seeks primarily to provide a common foundation for Christian life and action in an increasingly pluralist and interfaith society.

The structure of the next paragraphs on hospitality is particularly important. In the Biblical examples, the Policy Statement first gives instances where the people of God were treated hospitably by those who were not of the community of faith. It then refers to biblical injunctions to the people of God to treat others with gracious hospitality.

When the Policy Statement seeks to see the history of the Church in terms of "hospitality" it points first to failures. This is in keeping with its analysis of the human condition, understanding one of the ways in which we "all fall short of the glory of God" in terms of a lack of hospitality and so a failure to realize the community which is God's will for us and which is modeled for us in the life of the Trinity, in whose image we are made. Throughout the history of the Church there have been times and places when Christians have been (and still are) persecuted for their faith. This stands sharply over against the examples of hospitality shown to the people of God in the Biblical narrative. However, Christians have often failed to show hospitality to others and, in fact, have at times persecuted others for their beliefs. The Policy Statement points out that it is not only a question of religious persecution, but that any kind of bias or hatred is equally a sin against the community which is God's will, and against the hospitality which is the biblical command.

The next paragraph owns those aspects of our history where Christians have indeed struggled to realize genuine human community. It records how Christians have fought oppression on many levels in many ways and how they have joined with men and women of other faiths to build a just and peaceful community for all. In this way the Policy Statement bids us to give thanks for the true light of Christ which has shown forth in his saints in all generations.

The paragraph, however, breaks the symmetry of the rest of this section of the argument, for it does not make any mention of the continued hospitality which has been provided to the Church by those outside. There are many examples that could be given. Stories of help and support offered by non-Christians to Christians even in the lives of some contemporary martyrs and other faithful Christians who are remembered by some of our churches in their calendars, in their prayers, or in their living memory. There are also less dramatic examples, like the building of a church by the Sultan of Oman for his Christian subjects.

Based on the call to Christian Discipleship as understood in the context of the search for human community, the Policy Statement urges a "struggle to reject or reform all those human actions and systems that destroy or deny the image of God in human beings or that tear down the structures of human community" (¶ 27). This statement seeks to provide a Christian basis for interfaith cooperation in the struggle for justice and for cooperation in building a peaceful society together. This is, of course, a common theme in interfaith relations and much interfaith activity is conducted in the arena of seeking cooperation on social, political and economic matters.
The theological argument of the penultimate paragraph of this section (¶ 28) is clear: To deny that God is active even in the experience and history of non-Christian communities would mean to deny the reality of God’s sovereignty as the Lord of creation and of history. This is a carefully nuanced statement which follows the tenuous reference to the prologue to John’s Gospel in paragraph 20. Instead of quoting the reference to the "light which enlightens every person born into the world," the Policy Statement (echoing the language of Nostra Ætate) states that all people are "potentially open to receive ‘a ray of that truth which enlightens all [humanity].’" This formulation avoids committing the Policy Statement to the position that truth is *inevitably* to be found outside the community of Christian faith. It is an ambiguous affirmation. On the one hand, it could mean that we might expect to find truth from God outside the Christian community since all men and women are potentially able to receive it. On the other hand, it could also be understood to imply that all men and women are open to receive the enlightenment necessary to bring them to Christian faith.

The theological implications of the statement that we may find new understandings of faith through dialogue with people of other religions based on the doctrine of creation are not fully developed in the Policy Statement, although it is clearly a central theological affirmation of the document as a whole. It is echoed again in both of the following two sections (on the Son and the Holy Spirit) in paragraph 34 and at the end of paragraph 41. Taken together, the three references attempt to provide a theological rationale for an interfaith encounter which assumes that all human meeting takes place in the context of God's abiding presence, power, and purpose.

The theological problems associated with interfaith dialogue are addressed more directly in the next section "Jesus Christ and Reconciliation," where some theological differences existing in the Christian community are identified. In that context, it is made clear that the Policy Statement is *not* trying to present a common theological principle for a Christian understanding of interfaith relations. Instead, it is pointing to some theological resources widely available throughout the varied theological traditions of the Church which might help to inform an ongoing ecumenical dialogue.

The final paragraph of this section (¶ 29) sums up its central theme: how the Christian doctrine of God and of the human condition relates to the practice of Christian discipleship. Repentance and reconciliation, toward God and with each other, are the central points of the argument. The Church is seen as the sign of "fuller and deeper community" and also as a witness, in word and deed, to God's promise of such a "restored human community in Christ."

**Jesus Christ and Reconciliation**

The first paragraph speaks of Jesus as the basis for reconciliation with God and with humanity. It speaks of him as initiating a "new creation, a world unified in relationship as God originally intended" (¶ 31). It speaks of Jesus making real the will of God for a "life of loving community" and of God’s offer of reconciliation to all in and through Jesus Christ. In this way it hints at the conviction of a biblical "realized eschatology." There is a sense in which the salvation and reconciliation offered by God in Christ is already a present reality. On the other hand, it is still a challenge to the Christian community to realize it in its fullness.
It is the struggle for reconciliation which is at the heart of the Policy Statements understanding of Christian discipleship. The Policy Statement states that "reconciliation among people and with the world cannot be separated from the reconciliation offered in Jesus Christ" (¶ 32). This is immediately followed by a reference to Jesus’ command that we must first be reconciled to our brother or sister before offering our gift at God’s altar. The force of the argument in Policy Statement as a whole is that reconciliation with other human beings is central to any possible understanding of Christian discipleship.

This immediately raises questions about the relationship between the Christian quest for reconciliation among people and the reconciliation of people with God. The reference to a reconciliation "offered" to all, deliberately leaves open the question of how to understand the relation of non-Christians to the saving work of Jesus Christ. It is not surprising, therefore, that this section of the Policy Statement deals with most of the theological questions which divide Christians.

The third paragraph (¶ 33) localizes the major area of theological disagreement precisely in terms of how to understand the relationship between non-Christians and God. It makes reference to several different views which are prevalent in the Church today. First, it mentions the view that there is no possibility for salvation apart from an explicit confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In the contemporary literature this view is referred to Christian "exclusivism." It claims that Jesus’ work can have effect only if certain conditions of faith are met on the part of human beings. The second view stresses the objective efficacy of the saving work of Jesus Christ. This view correlates somewhat with the view referred to in the literature as the "inclusivist" view and is, in general, somewhat more ambivalent about the role that human faith plays in appropriating the saving work of Jesus. The third view presented is often referred as a kind of "holy agnosticism" on the question of God’s relationship to men and women of other faiths. This view is to be found among a wide spectrum of theological positions in the Church.

Those familiar with the current literature will notice that there is nothing expressed here which corresponds with the view commonly known as the "pluralist" view. This view understands the truth about God to transcend any and every religious tradition. It believes, therefore, that all religions provide some insight into the ultimate truth but that none of them, including Christianity, presents a complete understanding of religious truth. While there may be many individuals in a number of the NCCC member communions who hold either a strong or a weak version of the pluralist position, it is does not reflect a consensus of the official positions of the member communions.

The last half of paragraph 33 is indicative of the theological and exegetical approach of the document as a whole. Four New Testament texts are presented. The first two verses are classically associated with the "exclusivist" view of interfaith relations, while the second two are associated with the "inclusivist" tradition. In this way, the Statement stresses that our deliberations together about the theological questions concerning interfaith relations need to be informed by the whole breadth of the Scriptures and of the theological traditions of the Church.

This section also makes reference to another theological question which divides Christians – the question of natural revelation. It makes direct reference to the New Testament *locus classicus* of
any Christian theory of natural revelation (Romans 1:20). While noting that "Christians disagree on the nature and extent of such 'natural revelation,'" the Policy Statement rather boldly goes on to assert that "no matter what our view on this may be, we can be open to the insights of others" (¶ 34).

The closing paragraph of the section returns to the main theme of the Policy Statement: Christian discipleship. First, it repeats the call for Christians to discuss together the theological areas of disagreement. "But as to our Christian discipleship, we can only live by the clear obligation of the Gospel" (¶ 35). The Policy Statement goes on to quote the "summary of the law" from Luke's Gospel. Earlier drafts had a reference to Mathew where the summary of the law is put into the mouth of Jesus. The reference was changed because the message of the final paragraph is better served by the version in Luke's Gospel (10:25-28). There the summary of the law is put into the mouth of a lawyer who "stood up to test Jesus." The lucan pericope goes on to report the story of the Good Samaritan. This is prefaced with a further question posed by the lawyer "wanting to justify himself." In his answer, Jesus presents a Samaritan as a model for what it means to "love one's neighbor." In deliberately choosing a group with whom the Jewish community of his day had, at best, strained relations, Jesus emphatically makes two points which the evangelist implies were not to the liking of his self-justifying interlocutor. The first is that love of neighbor crosses boundaries of community adherence. It applies to loving even those of another faith and even those of faith communities with whom we are not on the best of terms. The second point is that this kind of behavior is not limited to those of our own community of faith. Other men and women can and do love their neighbor as themselves. Any understanding of Jesus' teaching on how we are to relate to men and women of other faiths and how we are to value the lives and deeds of such people needs to take both implications into account.

As we have seen, the policy statement attempts to provide its theological basis for God's ongoing relationship with all of humanity in the section on God and Human Community. In that context, the basis is the doctrine of Creation. Another approach to affirming the fact that there is an ongoing an intimate connection between God and the whole of the human community may be found in the doctrine of the Incarnation. This approach is most developed in contemporary Roman Catholic thought, particularly in some of the statements and encyclicals of Pope John Paul II. A different attempt to develop an argument based on the Incarnation is in the work of the neo-Barthian David Lochhead. There is, as both of these views would argue, compelling reason in the doctrine of the Incarnation to understand that Christianity can learn a great deal about the things of God from the whole of the human family. If the Fathers of the Church and the doctrine enshrined at Chalcedon are correct, there is an important implication to be derived from their Christology. Jesus assumed "human nature" in its entirety, sin only excepted. This means that we can learn about the true breadth of our Lord's humanity only to the extent that we are willing to explore the breadth, depth, and variety of human nature. The questions and experiences of men and women can help us to deepen our understanding of the human condition and so of human nature. It may well be that different cultures and religions have questions couched in terms which are not ours. Perhaps even the questions are questions we have never asked based on our own experience. But if the Chalcedonian doctrine of the Incarnation is correct, we cannot fully understand the reality of the human nature of our Lord if we close ourselves to the insights, perceptions, and experiences of our common humanity which have been articulated throughout the millennia by all men and women.
The Spirit of God and Human Hope

This section picks up the emphasis on human behavior with which the previous section ended. It does so, however, by introducing the element of hope which is here associated with the work of the Holy Spirit. The Policy Statement developed a theological anthropology in the early sections which stressed two main points. The first point was that human beings were created for a life of community and fellowship, community with God and with each other. The second point was that in actual practice there is a tendency for human beings to act in ways which are destructive both of our relationship with God and of our relationships with each other. In this way, the statement takes very seriously that understanding of the human condition traditionally associated with the doctrine of original sin. In this section, the statement seeks to turn to the work of the Holy Spirit and to the hope which that presents for us.

The aspect of trinitarian doctrine which is most obviously being applied in this context is what is often called the "economic Trinity" or the doctrine of "the divine economy." In other words, the emphasis is on the way in which the Trinity relates to the created world as opposed to the internal life or relations revealed in trinitarian dogma. Thus the statement immediately makes reference to the role of the Holy Spirit in creation. The ongoing work of the Spirit throughout human history and in our own lifetimes is then lifted up with a reference to John 3:8, where Jesus speaks of the Spirit blowing where it chooses.

After asserting the presence and power of the Holy Spirit throughout history and, indeed, stressing the power and sovereignty of the Holy Spirit of God over all creation and all people, the statement introduces the theme of discernment in paragraph 39. The Holy Spirit has always been associated in the Christian tradition with revelation and with spiritual discernment. One need only think of the traditional concept of the "seven gifts of the Holy Spirit," which always include among their number "wisdom and counsel."

This paragraph is central to the argument of this section of the statement. The need for discernment in our relations with non-Christian communities and individuals is related to the points made earlier about the increasingly pluralist, multi-cultural, and global culture in which we are called today to be faithful disciples of Christ. The statement stresses the role of the Spirit in enabling us to "discern how to nurture the loving community of persons which is God's intention for creation" (¶ 39).

This statement implies an inherent continuity between the life of the Christian community and its relation to the wider world. The Church is called to "live out" the new reality of renewed human community and to "be a sign of the restored community to which all people are called" (¶ 40). The love and service to which we are called by Christ are not only for those who belong to the community of the Church. The Policy Statement leaves no room for a kind of schizophrenic Christian existence with one sense of identity and pattern of behaviors to be lived within the household of faith and another to be lived outside it.

The statement places Christian witness in this context, but with an important expansion of the theme developed earlier. Although the word "discernment" is not used here, the document implies that part of Christian discernment is the ability to become aware of the presence and
activity of the Holy Spirit wherever it is to be found. "Since God is the Lord of history, we can be open to the presence of God's Spirit in these encounters" (¶ 41). Again the wording is careful, almost cautious. The statement does not quite state that God is at work among men and women of all communities, although that conclusion would seem to be in line with the theological argument as a whole. It states, rather more modestly, that we can be open to the presence of the Spirit in our encounters with men and women of other religions.

If, indeed, the Holy Spirit were at work in non-Christian communities, this would not be an object for Christian discernment apart from some level of encounter with the other religious community or with its members. On the other hand, even if one is reticent to allow the activity and inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the religious life of non-Christian communities of faith, one cannot deny the presence of the Spirit in our actual encounter with men and women from these traditions. This is true even if one interprets the Pentecost story, as a particular gift of the Spirit to the Church, in such a way that it would exclude inspiration off other communities, for in such a case the Spirit would be present in the encounter because of the Christian presence. Since the Spirit blows where it wills, one cannot preclude the possibility that the Spirit may use any and all of those present in such an encounter to challenge us and to give us inspiration and hope.

The Holy Spirit is also presented as that which binds all Christians throughout the world into the unity of the Body of Christ. In this way, the international dimension of interfaith relations is revisited, this time with emphasis on how the experience of our brothers and sisters in Christ impinges upon our own awareness of non-Christian religious communities. We support the members of the Church throughout the world and we learn from their experiences.

The Policy Statement, however, then makes reference to a major area of disagreement among the churches: how Christians ought to express their love for all our neighbors. The document notes the difficult questions of evangelism, witness, and dialogue. Over and above the differences revolving around these deeply held convictions, however, the Policy Statement raises up again the question of Christian Discipleship. The last paragraph emphasizes the common search for justice, a search shared by Christian and non-Christian alike. Quoting a passage from Colossians the text carries the vision of Christian living beyond even the search for justice and urges that we "clothe [our]selves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

At this point the stage is set for the section called "Marks of Faithfulness." In this section, the Policy Statement seeks to translate its theological stance into a series of guidelines for interfaith encounter. It seeks to "discern ways to approach the challenges of our multi-religious society.