

Guidelines for relations with other religions

Adopted unanimously by the NSW Council of Churches on 2 September 2008

The following guidelines are intended to assist the NSW Council of Churches and its member churches in decision-making where joint activities with representatives of other religions are required or recommended. Where relevant, the guidelines also apply to people and groups of no faith (such as atheists).

We confess with sorrow that members of other faith communities have at times encountered a lack of welcome and respect, and even a spirit of racism, from some churches and Christians.

1. Personal relations

- (a) We commend our Gospel witness by expressing respect and friendship toward the leaders or representatives of other religions.
- (b) We seek to model Christian character and diplomacy in all relationships.

2. Dialogue

- (a) We encourage an active academic interest in the history, teachings and practices of other religions, seeking first to understand, then to be understood.
- (b) We recognise the importance of formal dialogue between different religious communities with the purpose of improving relationships and mutual understanding.
- (c) We oppose any pressure toward syncretism in worship, doctrine, mission and union.

3. Worship

- (a) We recognise the democratic and pluralist nature of Australian society, and the long-standing principle of religious freedom.
- (b) We affirm that the integrity of worship of different faiths, including our own, must be respected and not compromised; therefore we believe that interfaith gatherings which meet specifically for worship are ambiguous and inappropriate.
- (c) We recognise that there are civic and political occasions where our common humanity requires us to stand alongside others as religious leaders or representatives.
- (d) We respect established conventions relating to ceremonial robes and the use of religious symbols.
- (e) We recognise that, where a public event is convened on the premises of a particular religious community, the protocols of that community should be respected.

4. Evangelism

- (a) We affirm our biblical responsibility to share the Christian Gospel with people of other religions, and of no religion, in culturally sensitive and non-coercive ways.
- (b) We encourage all churches and Christians to engage in sensitive evangelism that involves a meaningful dialogue which listens as well as speaks, and an authentic witness which testifies by words and actions the love of Christ and the salvation which is found in Christ alone.
- (c) We acknowledge that people of other religions may seek to proselytize Christians; and respect the right of such people to share their faith in culturally sensitive and non-coercive ways.

5. Social issues

- (a) We commend, where appropriate, joint action with other religions to achieve economic, social and racial justice, offering a Christian perspective on all public issues.
- (b) We respect the right of religious communities to establish and maintain suitably accredited faith-based schools and other educational institutions.
- (c) We respect the right of religious communities to place suitably accredited faith-based chaplains in schools and other public institutions and in workplaces.

Recommended reading:

Gwilym Beckerlegge (ed.), *The World Religions Reader* (second edition; London: Routledge, 2001).

John Dickson, *A Spectator's Guide to World Religions* (Sydney: Blue Bottle Books, 2004).

Christopher Hitchens, *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Non-Believer* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2007).

Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1989).

Christopher Partridge (ed.), *The New Lion Handbook: The World's Religions* (third edition; Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2005).

Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

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