

A Common Word

A response on behalf of the Uniting Church in Australia
National Assembly Working Group on Relations with Other Faiths

To the Islamic scholars and leaders who are signatories to
A Common Word Between Us and You
and to Muslim brothers and sisters everywhere

“The God of peace be with all of you (Romans 15:33)”

In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful

Introduction:

On 13 October 2007, Eid al Fitr al-Mubarak 1428 A.H. 138 Muslim scholars and leaders issued a letter, *A Common Word Between Us and You* to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, 26 other Christian leaders, and ‘leaders of Christian Churches everywhere’¹. This paper is a personal response to that letter, commissioned by the Uniting Church in Australia National Assembly Working Group on Relations with Other Faiths. As such it seeks to reflect a response which accurately reflects the theology and polity of the Uniting Church in Australia, but we also acknowledge that the Uniting Church in Australia is a diverse church, and the comments contained within this response reflect the opinions of the author on behalf of the Working Group, and are not to be understood as official policy statement of the Uniting Church in Australia.

In the document *A Common Word* the Muslim scholars and leaders invite their Christian brothers and sisters to reflect upon that which we can affirm together as a significant step forward on a much longer process. As the letter states:

“Muslims and Christians together make up well over half the world’s population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The basis for this peace and understanding already exists.”²

There can be no doubt that at this point in history a spirit of understanding, and a willingness to converse between particularly (but not exclusively) Christians and Muslims is vital to the peace of our global community.

The Uniting Church welcomes the invitation offered to us by the issuing of this letter. We deeply appreciate the significant gestures of openness to dialogue that it contains, in offering us insight into a broader understanding of central issues of Islam, in recognising Christian scripture, and in identifying the centrality of the revelation of God to Muslims and Christians alike. We note with you that many of the

¹ From the address of *A Common Word Between Us and You* as published by Columban Mission Institute, Strathfield, 2007.

² *A Common Word* p.2

deep areas of difference between our faiths and communities with regard to theology, and our understanding of God's revelation to the world. There remain differences between our faiths, and we must continue to work together not only as Christians and Muslims, but as human beings created in God's image³ for the good of God's world. The Basis of Union, the document which called into being the Uniting Church of Australia from three pre-existing denominations of protestant Christianity in Australia states:

“(The Uniting Church) believes that Christians in Australia are called to bear witness to a unity of faith and life in Christ which transcends cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries⁴”

In our current global situation, in the context of a multi-cultural and multi-religious Australia, and in appreciation of the invitation extended to us through this letter, it is now time to extend this call to transcend, at least in our willingness to discuss and dialogue together, our religious boundaries as well.

2: A Common Word Between Us and You– The Love of God

The authors of *A Common Word* have taken great pains to constantly refer in their writing to Holy Writings of both Islam and Christian tradition. It is important for us to recognise that this is a significant step, and to respond in kind. This concern shows willingness to dialogue not at the margins, but at the very centre of what we consider to be authoritative. Without such intent to discuss our similarities, and our differences, from the very heart of our religious understanding, we cannot come to a meaningful common word. However, in so doing we must also acknowledge, to the best of our understanding, that Islam and Christianity understand their Holy Writings in different ways. As we understand Islam, the Holy Qur'an is the Word of God supremely communicated in what the Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon him – hereafter abbreviated as pbuh) is commanded to recite. For Christians, we understand the Word of God to be the living Lord Jesus⁵, the supreme revelation of the nature and person of God to whom the books of the Old and New Testament are 'unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which (we hear) the Word of God and by which

³ In the Jewish Torah, or the Christian Old Testament these references may be found in the books known to Christians as **Genesis 1:27** *So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.* and **Genesis 2:7** *then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.* (Note, all bible references unless otherwise stated taken from the New Revised Standard Version, 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America.)

A similar phrase may be found in the Sahih 'And the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him (hereafter abbreviated as pbuh)) said: *Verily God created Adam in his own image* (Sahih Al-Bukhari, Kitab Al-Isti'than, 1; Sahih Muslim, Kitab Al-Birr 115; Musnad Ibn Hanbal 2:244,251,315,323). In addition similar sentiments can be found in the Holy Quran Al-Ghafir 40:64 *'God it is Who appointed for you the earth for a dwelling-place and the sky for a canopy, and fashioned you and perfected your shapes, and hath provided you with good things. Such is God, your Lord. Then blessed be God, the Lord of the Worlds!'*, Sad 38:72 *'And when I have fashioned him and breathed into him of My Spirit, then fall down before him prostrate'*).

⁴ The Basis of Union (1992 edition) Paragraph 2, see Constitution and Regulations of the Uniting Church in Australia 2008 edition p.21.

⁵ Basis of Union Paragraph 4

(our) faith and obedience are nourished and regulated'⁶. The difference is significant, and forms a place for further discussion and exploration between our faiths, but it does not prevent us from listening to each other's Holy Writings, and acknowledging those understandings of God we can hold together.

The letter *A Common Word* states:

“The central creed of Islam consists of the two testimonies of faith or Shahadahs which state that: *There is no god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God*”

and

“Expanding on the best remembrance, the Prophet Muhammed (pbuh) also said: *The best that I have said – myself, and the prophets that came before me – is: ‘There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things’*. The phrases which follow the First Testimony of faith are all from the Holy Qur’an; each describe a mode of love of God, and devotion to Him.”⁷

The authors of *A Common Word* correctly state that the understanding of the complete sovereignty of the One God, and the call for our human response to be complete devotion to God alone are common to Islam and Christianity alike. These are affirmations that we can share together.

As Christians, we are reminded of our scripture ‘*Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*⁸ This phrase, which remains central to the faith and worship of our Jewish brothers and sisters and is referred to by Jesus⁹ reminds us of the unity of the one God whom we follow. It reminds us to of the call to respond to God with the totality of our being, our mind, our emotions – all that we have and are. The authors of *A Common Word* remind us that Muslims must be devoted to God, grateful to God and that for all the bounties that God offers they should be always grateful, and trust God with all our sentiments and emotions.

“And if thou wert to ask them: *Who created the heavens and the earth, and constructed the sun and moon (to their appointed work)? They would say: God. How then can they be turned away?/ God maketh the provision wide for whom He will of His servants, and straiteneth it for whom (He will). Lo! God is Aware of all things. / And if thou wert to ask them : Who causeth water to come down from the sky, and therewith reviveth the earth after its death ? they verily would say: God. Say: Praise be to God! But most of the have no sense*” (Al ‘Ankabut 29:61-63)

⁶ Basis of Union paragraph 5.

⁷ *A Common Word* p.4

⁸ Deuteronomy 6:4-5, known to Jews as the opening line of the Shema.

⁹ See Mark 12:28-34, especially verses 29ff, this is paralleled in the gospels of Matthew 22:34-40 and Luke 10:25-28, however in the Matthean and Lukan accounts only the second half of the verse is quoted, and Luke further puts this quotation into the mouth of Jesus' questioner responding to Jesus reference to the Law of Moses.

This scripture reminds us of passages in the Psalms¹⁰ and the Book of Job¹¹ where we are reminded that God is the creator of all things, and that God has made all things fit for their place and time. Thus we are able to stand together with Muslims in affirming the sovereignty and unity of God.

That said, it is also necessary to state that we understand that unity of God in very different ways. For Christians, the Unity of God cannot be fully understood without reference to the Trinity - One God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Not wishing to discredit or discount the difficulties, and at times the offense which this has caused to Muslims, we must also acknowledge that the One Triune God remains a central doctrine of Christianity. Whilst acknowledging the difficulty for Islamic, and even Christians believers to understand this doctrine, this must not be perceived as, or understood as a triumvirate of divine beings. As Christians we speak of 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit', but we do not mean two beings alongside God, nor three gods of limited power. As Christians we understand God through Jesus the Christ and in the Spirit. There is indeed only one God, the Living God, associated with no other, but as Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury has said "what God is and does is not different from the life which is eternally and simultaneously the threefold pattern of life: source, expression and sharing. Since God's life is always an intelligent, purposeful and loving life, it is possible to think of each of these dimensions of divine life as, in important ways, like a centre of mind and love, a person; but this does not mean that God 'contains' three different individuals, separate from each other as human individuals are."¹² Rather our understanding of the One true God recognizes that in some mysterious way, interdependence and relationship lies at the heart of the divine nature.

The authors of *A Common Word* remind us that love of God in Islam 'is thus part of complete and total devotion to God'. Likewise for Christians, our response to God's love shown to us inspires us to a love of God that is beyond emotion, or even devotion, but is rather an all-embracing response with intellect, will, action and feeling. As our Islamic brothers remind us, response to God's love is all-encompassing. Living our faith in response to the Love of the God who is Love¹³ is not a part of our life, but is, in effect our way of living. This is not to say that we manage to always successfully live our lives as God would intend, but rather that this is the goal to which we aspire. The Basis of Union of the Uniting Church concludes thus:

"The Uniting Church affirms that it belongs to the people of God on the way to the promised end. The Uniting Church prays that, through the gift of the Spirit, God will constantly correct that which is erroneous in its life, will bring it into deeper unity with other Churches, and will use its worship, witness and service to God's eternal glory through Jesus Christ the Lord, Amen."¹⁴

¹⁰ A large number of Psalms could be quoted here, however 1, 2, 8, 19, 93 and 136 are a starting point.

¹¹ See God's answers to Job at Job 38:1-39:30 and 40:7-41:34.

¹² Rowan Williams, 2008 'A Common Word for the Common Good'

¹³ See 1 John 4:7-8 "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."

¹⁴ Uniting Church in Australia, Basis of Union paragraph 18.

We affirm with you the unity of God. We wish to learn from you further regarding the understanding of the love of God in Islam as we continue to explore our relationship together, and as we each seek to worship the God revealed to us in our scriptures, and known to us in our life of devotion to God.

3. A Common Word Between Us and You: Love of Neighbour

In replying to Jesus about what is central to the Law in Luke's gospel, a lawyer says:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself”¹⁵

When he seeks to clarify just who is to be considered a neighbour, Jesus replies with the parable known to Christians as the parable of the Good Samaritan. In this Jesus overturns societal and religious custom, and reminds his listeners that God calls us to be neighbours to those around us, including people of different social, cultural, and religious backgrounds. It is not so much a question of who is our neighbour, but whether we are acting as neighbour to those we encounter. Luke's gospel in particular reminds us continually that God calls us to reach out and care for those around us – the poor, the widowed, the lame, the sick, and that this is part of our response to God's grace to us. Matthew's gospel, in the story commonly known as 'the sheep and the goats' reminds us that when we act for 'the least' of those in our community, we act as if we were caring for God¹⁶. So we see that love of our neighbour is central to our living out of the Christian gospel.

The authors of *A Common Word* remind us that in Islam love and mercy towards the neighbour is paramount. They quote the Holy Qur'an, reminding us

“It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces to the East and the West; but righteous is he who believeth in Allah and the Last Day and the angels and the Scripture and the Prophets; and giveth his wealth, for love of Him, to kinsfolk and to orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and to those who ask, and to set slaves free; and observeth proper worship and obeyeth the poor-due and those who keep their treaty when they make one, and the patient in tribulation and adversity ad time of stress. Such are they who are sincere. Such are the Godfearing” (Al-Baqarah 2:177)

and

“Ye will not attain unto righteousness until ye expend of that which ye love. And whatsoever ye expend, God is aware thereof (Aal 'Imran, 3:92)

It is clear that for Islam, as for Christianity, love of God calls us to be self-giving, calls us to acts of self-sacrifice for the welfare of our neighbour. The similarities with

¹⁵ Luke 10:27

¹⁶ Matthew 25:37-40 ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

the call of God to faithful Christians are self-evident. Christians understand that we are called to care for those around us as if we were caring for God. Whilst it seems that often we have understood and practiced this call within our community, at no point do our Christian scriptures restrict the call to love our neighbour as ourselves to those who think, act, or even believe like us – indeed, as the parable of the Good Samaritan makes clear, rather the opposite is true. Judgement belongs to God alone, we are simply called to love our neighbour, as we love God.

4: Coming to A Common Word

We affirm and acknowledge with gratitude the openness with which our Islamic brothers and sisters have reminded us in *A Common Word Between Us and You* that we hold two key religious concepts in common: God is One, and God calls us to love our neighbour. Yet Islam and Christianity remain different religions. While we may seek to minimise our differences, and accentuate that which we can hold in common, there remains much that divides us. It is important to acknowledge this openly and honestly. We cannot build dialogue and common understanding unless we are prepared not only to acknowledge those things we can affirm together, but we must also acknowledge those things which divide us, and listen with care and humility to each other as we seek to explore our relationship further.

Along with open and honest acknowledgement of that which divides us, we must also openly and honestly acknowledge that we have not always treated each other as neighbours. In our past actions, on both sides, there are incidents which have brought great pain and suffering, and which have not been, in any way, to the glory of God.

All this we bring to the table as we seek to explore how we may live together in the world that God has created. This, as the authors of *A Common Word* remind us, cannot be simply a matter of polite dialogue between select religious leaders or theologians. In the interest of the well being of our world, this must penetrate to the very roots of our religious tradition and observance. We note the quote from the Holy Qur'an with which you conclude your letter:

“And unto thee have We revealed the Scripture with the truth, confirming whatever Scripture was before it, and a watcher over it. So judge between them by that which God hath revealed, and follow not their desires away from the truth which hath come unto thee. For each We have appointed a law and a way. Had God willed He could have made you one community. But that He may try you by that which He hath given you (He hath made you as ye are). So vie one another in good works. Unto God ye will all return and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ.” (Al-Ma'idah 5:48)

Echoing this message, Christians are reminded in the writing of Paul 'For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face'¹⁷. We do not know the whole truth of God. We do not understand all God has done, or all God is. And so we can affirm, and accept your invitation to not let our differences cause hatred and strife

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 13:12 – note this can also be translated from the original Greek as 'now we see in a riddle, but then we will see face to face'

between us. We affirm and accept your invitation to vie with each other only in righteousness and good works, to respect each other, be fair, just and kind to one another and to live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual goodwill.

We thank you for your letter. We thank you for the steps already taken. A long road lies ahead of us, and there are many things we need to discuss along the way. We urgently need to understand one another more clearly, so that we do not fall into the potential traps of media stereotyping and generalisation. We need to further educate both clergy and laity, scholar and worshipper. We need to build opportunities for encounter between our people, and then further to include other religious beliefs and traditions, certainly including the other 'people of the Book', our Jewish brothers and sisters. We need, above all, to commit ourselves to facing the difficulties and tensions that building such a relationship will entail – but only in committing ourselves deeply and honestly to this process may we move beyond these first basic steps and grow into a relationship of respect, affection, collegiality and friendship. We note that considerable work is being undertaken around the world towards these objectives, under the auspices of the World Council of Churches and other bodies. We note particularly the ongoing initiative "Learning to explore love together" and the youth gathering 'Building an Interfaith Community' at Bossey in July 2009. We are grateful for, and strongly support these initiatives. This will be an expression of love for neighbour. It will also be a step taken in response to God's will, and to God's love.

You have opened a way forward. You have set our feet on a path toward better understanding and relationship. We can together affirm *A Common Word Between Us and You*. We thank you for this beginning, and look forward to the journey that lies ahead.

Salaamu 'Alaykum

In the name of God, peace

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