GIVING AND RECEIVING HOSPITALITY:
Ecumenical and Interfaith Programs at the University of Indianapolis

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Since the All Saints' Day 2002 announcement by President Israel concerning the creation of the office of Ecumenical and Interfaith Programs, I have heard puzzled remarks on several occasions about what the words "Ecumenical & Interfaith" mean. Some students wonder if the two words at the top of the previous page are synonyms. Isn't that redundant? Other students believe that they have some sense of what the second word of the pair might mean, but what about the funny-sounding first word: *e-c-u-m-e-n-i-c-a-l*? Still other students, faculty, and staff think that they understand the meanings of the words in question, but they want to know what difference this new administrative arrangement will make in the way the University goes about staffing Christian ministries on campus. The following information is intended to provide some basic definitions and answer commonly asked questions about this new administrative and programming unit of the University.

Before explaining terms, however, perhaps I should offer a word about context. One of the stated missional purposes of the University of Indianapolis is to help students to "gain a deeper understanding of the teachings of the Christian faith and an appreciation and respect for other religions." (See *University of Indianapolis Academic Catalog*, 2001-2003, p. 4) Along with the Philosophy and Religion courses in the general education curriculum, the Christian Vocations program, and other curricular and co-curricular initiatives, the programs offered through the Office of Ecumenical and Interfaith Programs are intended to help achieve that stated purpose.

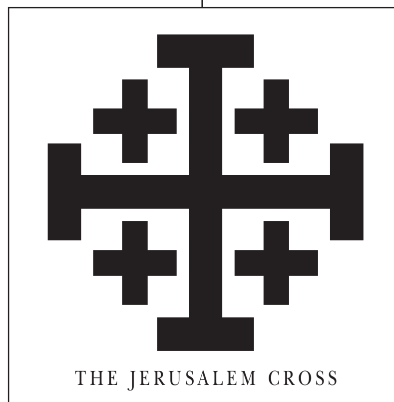
This is the first in a series of occassional papers to be published by this office. In future essays, we anticipate non-Christian writers will offer their own perspectives as Jews, Muslums, Hindus, etc. This essay explains how the United Methodist-related university will proceed to be ecumenical *and* interfaith.

I. ECUMENICAL

This is a very old word, rich with tradition and deep with meaning. It derives from the Greek word *oikoumene*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* still lists this word under the older Greek-influenced spelling of *oecumenical*: *belonging to or representing the whole Christian world, the universal church.* The word ecumenical signifies a rich kind of community that transcends cultural boundaries even as it also points to the reconciling hospitality of God in Christ.

The words "economics," "ecology," and "ecumenism" all share an image of the household or dwelling-place from the Greek word "oikos" or house. I do not believe that it is an accident that the image of the house or dwelling is embedded in the term "ecumenical." In the writings of the New Testament, some of the earliest Christian witnesses referred to their congregations as "households of faith." And when they described their resolve to carry the good news of the gospel to the entire earth, they imaged a worldwide community of Christian unity as a kind of shared habitation for worshiping God. Remembering the prayer of Jesus recorded in John 17:1-26 that his disciples be "one" even as he and his Father are united (verse 21), the early Christians regarded the gift of unity in Christ to be a mandate for engaging the task of Christian discipleship. Significantly, the author of the John's Gospel repeatedly stresses that the Church has been given this unity "so that the world might believe" (John 17: 21, 23). As the disciples gradually realized the significance of Jesus' farewell discourse, fostering unity amidst diversity became a mandate for the Church. "Ecumenism," then, is one of the words that Christians have used to describe this quest to receive and sustain the unity that Christ gave to his disciples as he sent them into the world.

That some Christians disagree with other Christians over issues great or small is a fact that is all too familiar to persons living in the first decade of the 21st century. What we probably do not appreciate enough is *how odd* the Christians of the first century would have found the multitudinous divisions that currently "house" Christian faith and practice in the American context. By contrast, Christians who travel to Israel and Palestine discover that in the "Holy Land" Christianity is marked not so much by denominational divisions as by the language of worship used in the gatherings.[1] It is common for the same building to be used for three different congregations. The German-speaking disciples of Jesus Christ worship at one time. The English-speaking Christians gather at another time. The Arabic-speaking Christians gather at yet a third time. Yet, they all share the same house of worship. We might call this kind of arrangement an *ecumenism of space.* In this context, many pilgrims to the Holy Land come to see the Jerusalem Cross as a *symbol of the Christian unity* for which they prayerfully long and faithfully hope amid the less-than-holy circumstances of mundane conflicts. [2]


THE JERUSALEM CROSS

Symbol of Christian Unity: We have chosen to emphasize the Jerusalem Cross as the primary symbol of Christian community on campus. This particular Christian symbol has a long and rich history with multiple associations. Jerusalem was a focal point of early Christian attention. In addition to the various legends about how Constantine's mother Helena found the "True Cross" in Jerusalem in the fourth century, the city of Jerusalem was the scene of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth in the accounts of the four Gospels. As Jerusalem became a site of pilgrimage for people from all over Europe and Asia Minor, the cross came to be thought of in relation to such biblical passages as Luke 13:29: *"People will come from east and west and north and south and feast in the kingdom of God."*

With this passage in mind, some Christians think the four crosses in the quadrants are intended to image the "four corners of the earth." The "arms" of the cross in the center are perceived to reach out to embrace the fullness of God's creation. Today, the Jerusalem Cross is one of the most recognized symbols of Christian unity. Christians in Western cultures (Roman Catholic and some Protestants) as well as Christians from the East (Orthodox Christians) resonate with it—albeit in their own ways, with their own sets of association that frequently vary from one another in fascinating ways. (See the back cover for "the rest of the story" of this rich and storied symbol.)

Symbol of Holistic Christian Practice: In some Protestant and Catholic congregations, the Jerusalem Cross has been used to bring into focus the *holistic* character of Christian discipleship. For example, if you have ever been part of a "Covenant Discipleship Group" in a United Methodist congregation, you will have seen a version of this diagram used to explain the structure of each group's covenant in relation to the "General Rule of Discipleship." [3]

We in the Office of Ecumenical and Interfaith Programs have adapted the Covenant Discipleship version of the Jerusalem Cross to explain the kinds of programs that we will be offering in our Christian ministries on campus. We believe that taking a holistic approach to Christian ministry on campus is important at a time when religious fragmentation is increasing in North American cultures. Some persons seize on one or more of these elements without taking into account the others. The Christian formation curriculum offered through the Lantz Center for Christian Vocations is based upon the conviction that Christian students at this University should be able to learn about and practice the Christian faith as *an integrated whole* even if the communities of faith in which they find themselves to be members are fractured and fragmented.

We use the Jerusalem Cross diagram to describe the kinds of Christian ministries programs that we offer on this campus. The two sets of terms that surround the image designate eight classic practices of Christian living. The inner circle describes four kinds of "actions" that can be related to the four sets of practices described in the outer circle. The outer circle, by contrast, envisions two different sets of distinctions between the "inner" and "outer" dimensions of the Christian faith.

The vertical axis marks the difference between those Christian practices that address the needs of those around us and those practices that focus on cultivating a rich life of spiritual intentionality. "Works of Mercy" include feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, visiting those in prison, etc. (Matthew 25: 31-46). "Works of Piety" is the traditional phrase that Christians have used to designate practices of prayer, fasting, public and private worship, and devotional practices such as "searching the Scriptures."

The horizontal axis marks the wide range of ways that we offer ourselves to God in private as well as the ways we offer ourselves in public witness. While the public/private distinction is an appropriate distinction to draw, this axis might also be described as a spectrum of different ways that we offer ourselves. According to Romans 12:1-2, Christians are to offer themselves as "living sacrifices" to God. Such dedication requires *both* spiritual transformation ("by the renewal of your minds") and social transformation ("be not conformed to this world").

The four sets of terms that are arranged roughly parallel to the four quadrants of the Jerusalem Cross designate practices that can be linked to the "works" and forms of self-offering that span the two axes. For example, *acts of compassion* can be done in private as forms of self-offering, but they also may be done in the context of ministering to those in need. Similarly, *acts of justice* may take shape in the context of extending assistance to those in need, but they can also contribute to bearing witness to the good news in the world by proclaiming the kind of justice and righteousness that changes social structures.

The lower quadrants of the diagram represent ways of offering and witness that pertain to our relationship with God. *Acts of devotion*,

which may be done individually or in groups, focus our attention on the wondrous way God works in the world around us as well as the wonder of God's grace in our lives. While we often associate prayers of adoration, thanksgiving, and praise with devotion, such acts may also be occasions for offering laments to God. Corporate *acts of worship* are by their very nature public. When Christians gather to praise God and confess Jesus Christ as Lord, they are making a public statement that has a bearing on how they understand themselves individually as well as on the quality of their "life together." When individual Christians worship God in the context of their own disciplined life of prayer, they are joining the Church's collective offering of worship, thereby reaffirming in solitude what the Church declares before the eyes of the watching world.

Please note: There is no assumption that these Christian practices can be performed apart from God's grace. On the contrary, many Christians would readily agree that apart from the justifying and sanctifying grace of God, it is simply not possible to live this kind of "holy" and "holistic" life of prayerful and careful discipleship.

Holistic Learning Opportunities: To be intentional about offering opportunities for students to explore and live the eight practices that comprise the Jerusalem Cross image of Christian discipleship is to attempt to create the kinds of holistic *learning* opportunities that will enable Christian students to live holy lives. Notice the emphasis! The Christian ministries of our campus community take seriously that *all Christians at this University are still in the process of learning* what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ. This is no less true of faculty and staff at the University than it is true of students.

In this respect, the purpose of the Office of Ecumenical and Interfaith Programs is not to cater to the desires of consumers, but rather to be responsive to the needs of students defined in relation to the stated mission of the University. Among other things, this means each of the "quadrants" of the Jerusalem Cross image can be seen as a context for exploration and study. Not all students will want to take advantage of the Christian formation programs offered by the Lantz Center, but those students who do will find significant opportunities for spiritual and intellectual growth.

What difference does this "holistic" approach to campus ministry programming make? Some students, particularly students from evangelical traditions, come to our campus with great enthusiasm to bear witness to their faith. We hope that they will discover that there are multiple opportunities to do that on this campus within the "free space" that is this University. Indeed, we invite students to join in "bearing witness" to what they believe. At the same time, we want to make it possible for these same students to learn the importance of bearing witness in compassionate ways. In a world in which religion has been used as a means of abusing people, we cannot simply assume that because we have good intentions that we have not offended. Part of what Christians living in a world "after Christendom" must take seriously is the ever-present possibility that our words and actions may have consequences and effects that we do not fully grasp. This is why it is important that students who bear witness to their faith should be accountable to other Christians (and non-Christians) for the content of their convictions. When Christians "give and receive counsel" with each other, they prayerfully try to discern the truth of the matter as guided by the wisdom of Christian saints through the ages as well as by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the midst of our gathering.

Some students come to this University already steeped in institutional church life. Others are just beginning to explore Christian faith and discipleship. We encourage students to consider the ways in which the Gospels about Jesus call would-be disciples to combat injustice and to live their lives in ways that bear witness to God whether or not they choose to use words in bearing witness.

None of the above should be taken to mean that Christian students, faculty, and staff on this campus are going to agree with one another. On the contrary, it is very likely that we will disagree about many matters great and small. And it is precisely at this point that Christians face a choice. They can choose to explore the differences in the confidence that there is truth to be discovered, or they can choose to withdraw from one another and disengage. The tradition of "fraternal admonition" (based on Matthew 18:15-20) is in its own way a profoundly hopeful practice inasmuch as those who engage in the "giving and receiving of counsel" do so in the prayerful confidence that God can bring about reconciliation even in the midst of profound differences that may be the result of simple misunderstanding or complex recalcitrance.

At the Office for Ecumenical and Interfaith Programs, we do not presume that that there is a common mind about how Christians should practice the Lord's Supper or Eucharist. What we do think is important, however, is that students who profess faith in Jesus Christ have significant opportunities to learn about different ways of celebrating Christian unity, and have opportunities to be in conversation with one another about how they understand what it means to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in the world. In other words, *ecumenical engagement* with other Christians in the context of the *holistic practice* of Christian discipleship is part of the education that we offer students at this particular United Methodist-related institution of higher education.

The Symbol of the Cross & Flame: Some students and faculty have wondered what the "ecumenical and interfaith" programs have to do with the University's relationship to the United Methodist Church. Some United Methodist leaders have asked the same question. In September 2001, the "Cross & Flame" was put up on the exterior of Schwitzer Student Center. That is the official image of the United Methodist Church. The two flames are intended to signify the union of the two different streams of this denomination, one coming from the Evangelical United Brethren tradition, and the other coming from the Methodist tradition, the origins of which go back to the 1730s in England, where a few students at a university gathered to pray together on a regular basis in the context of a small group that today we might call a Covenant Discipleship Group. Not surprisingly, the United Methodist Church's *Book of Discipline* strongly endorses the kind of campus ministry that encourages the holistic practice of Christian discipleship.

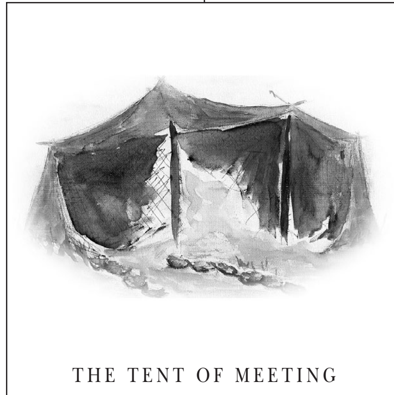
As the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* also indicates, the United Methodist Church authorizes ecumenical and interfaith exploration. "As people bound together on one planet, we see the need for a self-critical view of our own tradition and accurate appreciation of other

traditions. In these encounters, our aim is not to reduce doctrinal differences to some lowest common denominator of religious agreement, but to raise all such relationships to the highest possible level of human fellowship and understanding." [4]

This statement, which is part of the concluding section of the United Methodist Church's statement on "Our Theological Task," serves as a mandate for engaging other religious traditions, Christian and non-Christian, not because we want to disengage from our own religious practices, but precisely because we are engaged in the practice of our own tradition in ways that give us the confidence to engage persons of other religions who are equally grounded in a set of religious practices that may be very different from our own.

II. INTERFAITH

In contrast to the long, rich, and complex history of the word "ecumenical," "interfaith" is a comparatively new and relatively straightforward word. Apparently, this word came into usage during the latter part of the twentieth century. (One does not find it the 1970s editions of the multivolume *Oxford English Dictionary.*) The simplicity of the term, which designates *a kind of engagement* between different religious "faiths" or traditions, belies the fact that the meaning of the engagement is defined in a rather open-ended way. Indeed, there is something appropriately modest about the word that fits the kind of provisional engagement to which it points.



THE TENT OF MEETING

At the most obvious level, to say that this is an interfaith campus is to recognize that this is a community of learning that is made up of a variety of religious traditions as well as those professors, students, and staff who have no faith tradition. When we use the word "interfaith" to describe the kinds of programs that we will offer in the future, then, it *does not mean* that we are watering down our religious convictions. On the contrary, it means that we are taking them even more seriously in the context of relationships in which we are teaching and learning with one another. When we engage persons who do not share our convictions about God, the self, and the world, we are choosing to overcome fears enough to be able to ask searching questions. In sum: on this campus "interfaith" is not so much a programmatic declaration or agenda for action as it is *a recognition* that there are questions that are important enough that *we want and need to engage one another* as persons who are seeking truth. Interfaith friendships, then, can become contexts in which we conduct our own quests for truth as well as relationships in which we test what we think we have learned.

Seeking Truth—Appreciating Difference: Interfaith engagment *does not have to mean* that we assume that all religions are alike. Religious traditions do differ in important ways. Nor does it have to mean that all differences between religious traditions are *ultimate* differences. Some differences matter greatly. Other differences do not cause us concern. Interfaith engagement can mean that we pay close attention to the living examples of religious life around us and take the risk to engage in conversation with them.

The risk of interfaith engagement, of course, is that we will be changed by the encounter. That is as it should be. After all, what we learn from such encounters should matter enough to us that we would change our minds if we recognize that we misunderstood something fundamental about one another's religious convictions. And it may even be that at some point in the conversations between religious groups, someone will be changed so thoroughly that he or she decides to convert to that faith. The possibility of conversion, however, should not be our greatest fear. The greatest error that we could make—and the prospect that we *should* fear—would be to resign ourselves to living with mistrust, misunderstanding, and mistaken assumptions about one another. *That* is the way of the culture wars, but *that is not the way we have to live.*

At our best, Christians and non-Christians know that to make the boundaries between religious traditions *more ultimate than they actually are* is to ignore the truth that there really are signficant areas of commonality and shared understandings, as well as the truth of real areas of difference. To borrow a line from Professor Miroslav Volf of Yale Divinity School, precisely because the quest for truth does matter to us, we will not want to foster "the kind of false pluralism that ignores real differences." Therefore, we will "rejoice over overlaps and engage others over differences and incompatibilities, so as to both learn from and teach others." [5] When we display humility before the truth, respect for those with whom we find ourselves engaged and confidence in our own religious practice, we can face both the commonalities and the differences without fear.

HUMILITY: Interfaith engagement can mean that we dare to be puzzled, not because we have lost faith or the courage of our convictions, but rather because we have discovered that we do not yet understand even as we *continue acting in faith.* As St. Paul reminded the church at Corinth, our knowledge here and now is partial (I Cor. 8:1-3, 13:12). We dare not claim that we know all truth. There is wisdom in the humble Kenyan prayer "From the cowardice that dares not face new truth, from the laziness that is contented with half-truth, from the arrogance that knows all truth, Good Lord, deliver me." [6]

RESPECT: When Christians and non-Christians come together on a university campus to learn about one another's traditions, we take seriously one another's humanity. To respect one another does not mean that we agree with one another, nor does it mean that all views that someone holds are truthful. What it does mean, however, is that we resolve to keep the dignity of others always in view as we teach and learn. To do so involves making careful judgments about what we say. When we choose not to demonize those "others" with whom we disagree, we respect their identity and tradition. Respect is more than resolving not to say bad things about one another. When we challenge those same persons to engage in conversations that seek truth, we also are showing respect for them.

CONFIDENCE: Of course, it is quite possible that someone can be humble about the limits of one's knowledge and respectful of other religions but not confident enough to participate in interfaith programs. In some instances, this may be the result of *not knowing enough* about one's own tradition. In other instances, it may be the unfortunate result of perceived abuse—either actual or the result of misunderstanding—that leaves us feeling insecure. The availability of learning opportunities through the University's Judaic-Christian Traditions requirement, the Lantz Center for Christian Vocations, and the office of Ecumenical and Interfaith Programs provides ways for gaining confidence. When we know our religious traditions well

enough to be able to justify our actions, we can be more confident in our interfaith engagement. We can explore the areas of overlap without feeling that we are in danger of forgetting the real differences. We display confidence, too, when we recognize that there are times when we do not need words to communicate. To extend the hand to one another can be a profound gesture that conveys our good will and the prospect of friendship in the midst of continuing differences.

Interfaith Prayer? Interfaith engagement *does not* necessarily mean that Christians and non-Christians will pray and worship together. In fact, we may have many important questions about what it would mean to engage in "interfaith 'prayer'" and there are good reasons to have reservations about such activities. [7] What it *can* mean, however, is that persons of different faiths are committed to talking with one another about what it means to pray in our respective religious "houses" and clarify in what circumstances it might make sense for us to come together to prayer *alongside* one another while continuing to be faithful to the traditions of the houses of worship with which we identify and in which we may hold membership.

We have to be honest with ourselves as students, faculty, and staff about this endeavor. In truth, as a campus community we are only now beginning to take on the challenge of providing interfaith opportunities for students on this campus (Christian and non-Christian). How we go about our "interfaith engagements" will vary with which religious groups are active on campus in any given year and what we discern to be the challenges at particular times. But even where we disagree significantly about beliefs, we may find that we can share in acts of justice and compassion as we engage a world of brokenness, war, and depleted natural resources.

Joining Together in Acts of Justice: For some on this campus, interfaith engagements may only take the form of sharing in common acts of seeking justice. For example, a group of students, faculty, and staff are currently working on a modest project to arrange for recycling bins to be placed in various buildings on campus so that we can all do a better job of being stewards of the earth's resources. It does not make sense to have one set of bins for Christians and Jews, another set for Muslims, and a third set for Buddhists or Hindus. Granted, this matter is fairly simple. Other issues can be much more complex and may involve significant differences. Nonetheless, it is quite possible to share the pursuit of justice even if we do not agree about the adequacy of various theories of justice.

Joining Together in Acts of Compassion: In times of disaster or distress, we can also find ourselves engaged in collaborative acts of compassion without giving much thought to our religious differences. For example, on the evening of September 11, 2001, many students went to nearby blood banks to give blood. There was no need to separate out the blood of Christians from the blood of Jews and Muslims that day. Although each of those traditions would offer different kinds of guidance in these matters, it is important that we can respect the different ways that religious groups offer their devotion, sacrifice, and worship.

Engaging in Acts of Solidarity With and For One Another: September 11th—the day of the World Trade Center attacks—is a day that we all remember. That afternoon students, faculty, and staff of the University gathered in the Atrium of Schwitzer Student Center to offer our anguish and heartache with one another before God. What were we doing there that day? I would like to think that we were standing in solidarity with one another in shared pain. In giving and receiving the gift of our presence to each other we were seeking that which is more powerful than we are to make sense of what happened that morning. In a world torn by terrorism, violence, and war, to stand with one another is no small thing.

That does not mean that we all do the same things when we come together in such gatherings. Not all present intended this gathering as a *witness to peace,* but I know that some of us did. Similarly, some persons present on that occasion felt moved to pray with persons of other traditions. Others felt that they *could not pray* to God in the context of that particular gathering, nor should they have felt coerced to do so. There will surely be times when Christians and non-Christians will bear witness in different ways even when we stand side by side. Even when we cannot join in worship with one another, we can stand with one another. The significance of acting in solidarity with one another and offering one another the gift of our presence in such moments should not be discounted.

On that particular day, I was asked to read several passages about peace from the *Qur'an* and the *Hadiths* of Muhammad. I *did not* read those passages because I believe that Muhammad's words are the Word of God. Rather, I did so as one who believes that Christians have been called to be "ambassadors for Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:20). I agreed to do so in order to make sure that the Muslim voice for peace was able to be heard that day at a time when it was all too tempting for some Americans to jump to unfair conclusions about who Muslims are and what Muslims believe in matters of war and peace. Precisely because Christians believe it is important to stand for truth, those of us who claim to be Christians should do what we can to make sure that *the truth about North American Muslim concern for peacemaking* was represented in that gathering.

What I did on that occasion was the kind of positive witness for peace that I believe is fully consistent with my Christian identity as a disciple of Jesus Christ. If a Muslim on campus were to offer such hospitality to the Christian witness for peace, I would like to think that our campus community might also appreciate the integrity of such an action in the context of Muslim religious identity and practice. In either case, to act in solidarity with one another is surely consistent with the mission of this University: *education for service.*

III. GIVING AND RECEIVING HOSPITALITY AT THE TABLE OF GATHERING

We display interfaith engagement in the ways in which we *share space* too. It is appropriate that we should offer one another hospitality in this University community, and the University Chapel is one of the important spaces where this happens. The beautiful oak and glass table at the center of the University Chapel is a symbol of unity—for Christians and non-Christians alike. "The Table of Gathering" marks this as a place where everyone is welcome.

Christian gatherings around the Table will also use it in different ways. Each will have its own way of being a "household of faith," and each will image what it has meant and continues to mean for the Church to be an *oikoumene* in the world. The Catholic "house" will gather for Mass, welcoming all persons who are in communion with the Bishop of Rome. The Fellowship of Christian Athletes "house" will gather for praise and fellowship. The Chaplain will host the University Community Communion Service for all Christians on campus who desire to participate.

Each of these gatherings will take place "under the sign of the cross"—i. e., with the Jerusalem Cross in view. Persons of different religious traditions will gather at different times according to their respective

calendars and celebrations. These will not be the only "houses" that take place around the Table of Gathering. Part of what "making space" for non-Christian traditions will entail is that from time to time, we will move the cross from the center of the chapel so that other religious communities on this campus can use this space for the purpose of worship as befits their own tradition. We take seriously that the way Jews would want to use this space is different from the way Christians use it, and the way Muslims or Hindus would want to use the space would be different still.

Here, perhaps, it is important to be reminded that giving and receiving hospitality on this campus first began with the *sponsoring* "household of faith," a company of people that called themselves United Brethren. In this case, because this University is affiliated with the United Methodist Church, we are explicitly authorized to offer ecumenical and interfaith programs on this campus. That same relationship grounds the hospitality that we encourage on this campus. United Methodists are not the only group, however, that is authorized to offer hospitality on this campus. We all can—and should—exercise the privilege and practice the responsibility of giving and receiving hospitality.

The Office of Ecumenical and Interfaith Programs will continue to encourage all groups on this campus to envision the Table of Gathering as a place for unity, *with or without* the sign of Christian community—the Jerusalem Cross—present in the University Chapel. Christian and non-Christian congregants will come and go from week to week and year to year, but the Table of Gathering will remain as a symbol of the hospitality we share as we embrace the opportunity to learn *with and from* one another.

IV. TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE TENT OF MEETING

As noted above, interfaith engagement on this campus is only beginning to take place. Time will tell how we ultimately come to make sense of interfaith conversations on this campus. In the meantime, provisional though our engagements between religious persons and traditions may be, we need to be able to image ourselves in relation to one another. For now, the Office of Ecumenical and Interfaith Programs has chosen to use the image of the "Tent of Meeting" to symbolize the kind of teaching and learning that we can experience together in the midst of our interfaith engagements. We proudly display Mr. Dustin Batson's watercolor of this image in the Ecumenical & Interfaith Programs office, and we have chosen to use it as the initial symbol of our interfaith programming. [8]

This is an ancient image, one that is associated with the journey of the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt en route toward the land that the Lord had promised to give them. In the Book of Exodus, we discover an elaborate set of specifications for how this provisional dwelling was to be constructed and maintained (Exodus 26f). Later, when King Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem, the holy vessels were transferred from the tent of meeting into the "house of God" (2 Chronicles 3-7), which was intended to be a permanent dwelling within which the Israelite descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob could worship God. But even before this image was used in these ways, it has been used in the book of Genesis in conjunction with the story of how Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 17-18) encountered three strangers to whom they offered the hospitality of their dwelling. Still later, the Tent of Meeting is used in various ways in Christianity in relation to the life, death, ministry, and resurrection of Jesus. [9] The image of the Tent of Meeting also is used in the Qur'an in reference to Muhammad the Prophet of Allah.

One of the advantages of focusing on the particularities of religious traditions is that we can identify commonalities that arise from the depths of the history of Christian and non-Christian traditions. The Tent of Meeting is a case in point. For example, the "Tent of Meeting" is a symbol that can be recognized in all three of the Abrahamic traditions, even though the image is regarded in different ways and subject to diverse interpretations. [10] We hope the image of Abraham's hospitality to others—"rushing, with Sarah, to offer hospitality to his three visitors" [11]—can inspire the religious communities of this campus as we extend hospitality to one another.

The Tent of Meeting may also serve as an image for interfaith teaching and learning on this campus. In his Showers Lectures for 2003, Peter Ochs described the unique opportunity that we confront in our time as the "Third Epoch, a time when the three monotheistic religions reaffirm their distinct identities but in a way that also affirms the identities of the other two—not merely as faiths, but now as different but mutually supportive missions in service to the one God of Abraham." [12] Ochs' perspective is challenging, even as the hope that he expresses causes one to pause in wonder. Can it be that Christians, Muslims, and Jews can live out their respective "callings" and thereby realize more of the commonalities that we share while also taking seriously the very real differences that remain?

Not everyone will be able to embrace the vision that Professor Ochs describes, and we should not presume that all parties involved always will be ready or able to "participate" in the Tent of Meeting. Nevertheless, this ancient image can help us imagine the kinds of encounters where Christians and non-Christians engage one another with humility, respect, and confidence.

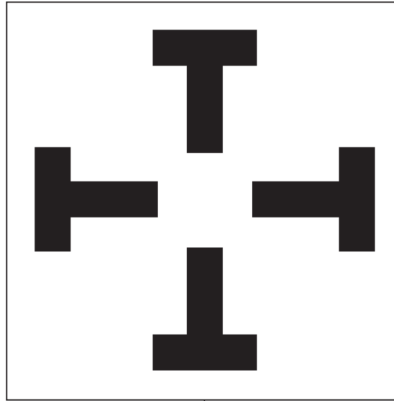
The Tent of Meeting might also serve as an image of what can happen when we take seriously the missional purpose of "enabling students to gain a deeper understanding of the teachings of the Christian faith and appreciation and respect for our religious traditions." Perhaps we will realize that in order to truly grasp Christian teaching about hospitality, we need to learn how those teachings relate to the traditions of Judaism and Islam. Perhaps part of what it means to be hospitable to truth in these matters is to learn to appreciate that the multiple witnesses do in fact converge in very important ways. And perhaps in the process of showing one another hospitality in this educational environment, like Abraham and Sarah, we will be blessed by what we learn when we venture forth from our respective "houses" to share the Tent of Meeting.

V. THE REST OF THE STORY OF THE JERUSALEM CROSS AND STORIES YET TO BE DISCOVERED

Some of what we may learn in the Tent of Meeting may have significant implications for how we understand our own traditions, the houses in which we have our primary memberships as persons of faith. In fact, we may discover that—like the ancient image of the tent of meeting—some of our oldest and most treasured images have come into existence amid shared memories.

The Jerusalem Cross turns out to be a case in point. According to one historian of Christian symbols, the Jerusalem Cross originated as a composite image made up of four "Tau crosses" whose lower ends meet.

The Tau Cross is “one of the very oldest forms of the cross.” [13] Sometimes known as the “Old Testament cross,” this image is composed of “a Latin cross minus its upper arm.” St. Anthony and St. Matthew are both said to have died on such a cross, and it is often used as a symbol for these two martyrs.



The origin of the Tau Cross turns out to be an outstanding instance of early Christian appreciation for the writings of the *Tanakh*, or the Hebrew Bible. Early Christian readers of the Hebrew Bible read the account of Moses raising the serpent up in the wilderness (Numbers 21: 4-9) as a “type” of the Cross. In doing so, they were influenced by the text of John 3:14-21, where the story of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness is regarded as a “type” of Jesus being lifted up on the cross. As a result, the Tau cross came to be thought of as the “cross of prophecy.” When four Tau crosses are arranged according to the four points in the compass, a new image is formed. Sometimes referred to as “Cross Potent” because of its resemblance to an ancient crutch, Christians have seen it as a symbol of the power of Jesus Christ to heal the diseases of bodies and souls of humankind. [14] When surrounded by four smaller versions of this same image, the Cross Potent came to be known as the “Jerusalem Cross.”

Given this intricate link between the two testaments, the Jerusalem Cross can also serve as a reminder to all of us of the importance of the Hebrew Bible for the way Christians have interpreted the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth across the centuries. The question that this raises might be put this way: Is this image an example of *expropriation* of the Jewish tradition, that suggests that Christians have little or no appreciation or respect for the Jewish tradition? Or is the Jerusalem Cross an example of the kind of respectful *appropriation* that is legitimate precisely because those who use this symbol do appreciate and respect the Jewish tradition and its Scriptures? If it is the latter, then Christian readers will want to respect the fact that the image of the serpent in the wilderness has been understood in other ways in the Jewish traditions. If it is the former, then Christian readers are showing disrespect to the Jewish sacred scriptures by acting as if their own interpretation of the image is the only one.

There is no way to resolve that kind of question once and for all. Indeed it is a subject for ongoing interfaith dialogue between Christians and non-Christians. What we can say, though, is that according to the stated mission of this University, students of Christianity should learn about the origins of this particular symbol and learn to appreciate the sacred writings of the Jewish tradition from which this Christian image originated. In any case, Christian students, faculty, and staff on this campus who still find it meaningful to regard the Jerusalem Cross as a symbol of Christian unity should have the humility, respect and confidence to recognize that we would not have the Jerusalem Cross if it were not for the interfaith engagements of the past.

We need not regard the symbol of the Jerusalem Cross as either free from taint on the one hand because we prefer to think of it as a “healing” symbol or utterly contaminated on the other because we have discovered it to be marked by practices of expropriation. In truth, if we care to explore the history of the Abrahamic traditions, we will certainly discover that there are many more stories of influence that display traces of (positive and negative) interfaith engagements in times past. Just because most contemporary Christians in Western cultures do not recognize the overlapping relationships that have existed between Christian and Jewish worship practices does not mean that we have to continue to ignore them. Indeed, we can teach one another and we can learn from one another.

We can listen to the chanting of contemporary Coptic Christians and learn to hear the ancient Jewish influences. We can observe the ways that American Muslims prostrate themselves on the floor when they pray and learn to see the Byzantine Christian practices of prayer that shaped Muslims in Turkey, Syria, and elsewhere in the Middle East. And we can dare to enter the Tent of Meeting, a space where we can be reminded of the relationships of times past and where we can imagine *a time when* people will come from east and west and north and south . . . and *a space in which* all those who have gathered will discover that they have entered “a house of prayer for all peoples.” [15]

NOTES

1 Given the declining numbers of Christians in Israel and Palestine, congregations find themselves needing to share space with one another even as they also try to show one another hospitality as a witness for peace.

2 Of course, these same pilgrims to the “Holy Land” are scandalized by the disputes over property that continue to take place between Jews, Christians, and Muslims over disputed holy sites in Israel and Palestine.

3 While the Covenant Discipleship Group program is officially linked to the United Methodist Church, the practice of “mutual accountability in discipleship” is by no means confined to the Methodist tradition. Indeed, the practice of holding one another accountable for living as faithful disciples of Christ in the world is recognized in a wide variety of Christian traditions. For more about this conception, see David Lowes Watson, *Covenant Discipleship: Christian Formation Through Mutual Accountability* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1991).

4 Para. 104 *The Book of Discipline 2000* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House), p. 85.

5 Miroslav Volf, “Be Particular” in *The Christian Century* Vol. 120, 2 (January 25, 2003): 33.

6 “For the Spirit of Truth” from *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), No. 597.

7 Gilbert Meilaender, “Interfaith ‘Prayer’: What is it and should we do it?” *The Christian Century*, Vol. 119, No. 22, 32-37.

8 This image has been chosen for use in the Children of Abraham Institute. The Office of Ecumenical & Interfaith Programs gratefully acknowledges that permission has been granted for us to use this image created by Mr. Dustin Batson, who painted the watercolor of the Tent of Meeting in the spring of 2002 while he was still an undergraduate student at the University of Virginia.

9 When the writer of the Gospel of John wanted to convey the significance of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, he used the metaphor of the tent to describe the Incarnation (John 1:14)

10 Peter Ochs, Daniel Hardy, David Ford, and Bosit Kashul, “The Tent of Meeting”; see the introduction to the forthcoming book by the same title.

11 I am grateful to Professor Peter Ochs for this way of putting the matter.

12 See Brochure for Showers Lectures for 2003 published by the Philosophy & Religion Department.

13 F. R. Webber, *Church Symbolism*, 2nd Edition Revised (Cleveland, OH: J. H. Hansen, 1938), 104.

14 Ibid., 125.

15 Here I invoke the words of the prophet Isaiah 56:7. I am grateful to my wife, Mary Wilder Cartwright, and my Ecumenical and Interfaith Programs colleagues Lang Brownlee, Janice Kemp, and Michael Williams for their comments and criticisms in response to an earlier draft of this set of reflections.