

Building Interreligious Solidarity in Our Wounded World

The Way of 'Common Formation'



**World Council
of Churches**



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WCC Publications is the book publishing programme of the World Council of Churches. The WCC is a worldwide fellowship of 352 member churches which represents more than half a billion Christians around the world. The WCC calls its member churches to seek unity, a common public witness and service to others in a world where hope and solidarity are the seeds for justice and peace. The WCC works with people of all faiths seeking reconciliation with the goal of justice, peace, and a more equitable world.

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Introduction: Why Common Formation?

There are many different ways and paths of interreligious engagement, partly depending on the people involved. The classic four-fold division suggested by the Roman Catholic Church in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) speaks of

- the dialogue of life
- the dialogue of social action
- the dialogue of theological exchange
- the dialogue of religious experience

Each of these forms of dialogue will involve different groups and kinds of people. Some will be intentional; others will happen as part of the regular fabric of life. Some will involve occasional or one-off meetings, perhaps for theological discussion; others will be open ended.

A more recent and widely used classification suggests a comparison or distinction between interreligious engagement that is face to face or side by side, which overlaps with the types above. Face to face implies people of different faiths or religions discussing with each other their differences and similarities and, through this exchange, learning more about the faith of their dialogue partner (and perhaps, as a result, also discovering new insights about their own faith). It can be seen primarily as a verbal or theological form of interreligious dialogue and engagement. Side by side implies people of different faiths working together on projects that are intended to benefit their religious communities and/or the wider common good. It can be seen primarily as a practical form of interreligious engagement.

Common formation sees these two forms of interreligious dialogue as mutually enriching and thus seeks to bridge the gap between them. Those who participate in it engage with their dialogue partners in a way that is both face to face and side by side. They seek to learn from each other, with the intention of preparing themselves for future work which will be exercised both in their own religious community and in solidarity with others in multi-religious contexts. Both the process of learning and its goal are intended to help build interreligious solidarity.

What Is Common Formation?

We understand common formation to refer to a variety of educational situations and contexts in which people—especially, but not only, younger people—who are viewed in some way as representatives of their own religious community are enabled to learn together with those of other religions. The purpose of such common formation is to equip them to exercise a future ministry or role that will benefit their own faith community and to work together more effectively and cohesively in interreligious solidarity with others. Projects of common formation may be either short term and intensive or spread over a longer period. They require commitment by the participants and have a clear goal in view. Common formation intentionally seeks to be transformational: of both individuals and the religious communities to which they belong.

The World Council of Churches and Common Formation

Working especially through the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, the World Council of Churches (WCC) has, since its beginnings in 1948, been deeply committed to common formation in the service of ecumenism. In the 75 years since it was established, a primary function of the Ecumenical Institute has been to offer young people from many Christian churches the opportunity to study and live together over a period of months, learning together about our shared Christian faith. The Institute has expressed our vision that ideally, learning *about* one another and learning *with* one another are deeply linked.

During the early years of the 21st century, what was originally known as The Bossey Interreligious Course, now the Certificate in Advanced Studies in Interreligious Studies, was established. Over a period of years, this course, which takes place for several weeks in the summer, has brought together young Jews, Christians, and Muslims who are considered potential leaders in their own religious tradition. The aim is to enable them to learn more about each other as well as about a key theme of current importance in our world (the theme changes from year to year). The course is an example of common formation: with the experience gained from it over the past couple of decades, the WCC has insights to share but also acknowledges that it needs to learn from the wisdom and insights of others. The WCC has a widely recognized convening role which enables it to draw on the experience of churches, representatives of other religions, and interreligious organizations. In this capacity, it convened a conference in December 2021. The conference had been intended to be an in-person event, but the sudden resurgence of COVID-19 toward the end of 2021 made gathering impossible. A version of the conference took place via Zoom; this booklet is one of the fruits of that conference. It is, however, hoped that at some point in the future, it will be possible to meet in person to take further forward the discussions that began in December 2021.

Purpose of this Booklet

The purpose of this booklet is both to share some of the key insights and learnings from the December 2021 conference and to prompt further interest in and discussion of common formation among a range of faith communities and interreligious organizations.

Transformational Formation: Five Fundamental Principles

The following principles and ways of working need to undergird work in common formation if it is to succeed in the goal of being transformational. They apply in the first instance to those who are responsible for leading the projects and initiatives, but they also need to be encouraged among those who are participants and learners.

- ***Taking responsibility***

Those who organize, lead, or participate in work of common formation are normally themselves members of established faith communities and religious traditions. Such communities may well have a chequered or ambiguous history—or even, possibly, present—in terms of how they relate to the other. It is important that we acknowledge and take responsibility for these ambiguities or harms and do not seek to distance our religious community from them or ourselves from our religious community. This may require participants to feel uncomfortable at times, but it is essential for building authentic relationships.

- ***Building relationships***

Building relationships is intrinsic to all forms of interreligious engagement, but it is especially important in work of common formation. Friendships rather than diplomatic relations define common formation. Developing healthy and enduring relationships requires us to receive as well as to give and to be learners as well as teachers. This will enable us to have courageous conversations on the basis of mutual trust.

- ***Ensuring respect***

Expressions of common formation need to ensure respect for all participants, perhaps especially those from religious communities that are underrepresented in a particular project or initiative. There is a dignity in difference, and we need to delight in discovering our differences as well as our commonalities. We should seek to discover what is particularly important to others with whom we are engaging and ensure that what is especially cherished by them is given due respect. This respect needs to be expressed practically, both in the planning and organization of the initiative and in mutual engagement among participants. Such mutual understanding is more significant than agreement.

- ***Considering context***

Our religious experience is never simply in the abstract. Even in the case of religions (such as Christianity and Islam) which are present in many parts of the world, religious experience is always impacted by the contexts—geographical, cultural, linguistic, and political—in which we find ourselves. Initiatives of common formation need to consider the contexts in which they are taking place and how these may inform both methodology and content. An awareness of the gift of context is particularly important when representatives of Indigenous traditions are participating in expressions of common formation.

- ***Always reflecting***

Individuals and communities need to be open to being transformed, deepening both self-understanding and our understanding of others. To work in such a transformational way requires us to be committed to a process of ongoing reflection first in relation to ourselves and then to our religious community and to the expression of common formation in which we are participating. Transformation is a continuous process rather than simply a goal; thus, it requires ongoing reflection. Common formation should encourage those participating to be companions on a journey which ideally extends beyond the immediate project.

Ten Practical Pointers for Initiatives of Common Formation

1. Aim for parity of background

As far as possible, there needs to be broad parity in numbers among the religious groups represented in the initiative. Sometimes this is not realistic, but it is important that no one religious group is so dominant among the participants that it creates an automatic imbalance. Parity also needs to extend, as far as possible, to the nature of the constituency representing each religious tradition in terms of issues such as age, gender, educational background, and professional or community roles.

2. Show hospitality as host and guest

Hospitality is intrinsic to common formation. However, one also needs to be aware of the power dynamics that can be part of the host–guest relationship. Hospitality needs to be interrogated: it is helpful if all participants can have the experience of being both host and guest. Offering hospitality has key practical implications—such as in terms of meeting worship needs, religious dietary requirements, and dress codes—and involves being aware of the importance of special days and times in the religious calendars of potential participants.

3. Recognize intracommunal diversity

Participants should, as a group, reflect the wider spectrum of the views of their religious constituency. It is vital to be aware of internal differences and streams within most religious traditions: religions are not monolithic, and it is unhelpful to pretend that they are. Within most religions there are adherents of exclusive viewpoints as well as inclusive ones; such viewpoints should be included in projects of common formation. Individuals who participate in common formation should do so on the basis that they have a real engagement with the worship, life, and spirituality of the religious community they represent.

4. Ensure representation

Differences in identity—including age, background, class, gender, nationality, ability, race, and sexual orientation—can bring vital perspectives which make dialogue even more fruitful. It is good to ensure that traditionally underrepresented groups are present in initiatives of common

formation as far as appropriate and that their needs are accommodated to allow for full participation, although some initiatives in common formation may by their nature be designed for particular constituencies within religious communities. It is also important to ensure that all those who participate in initiatives of common formation are given the opportunity to feed their learning and discoveries back into the ongoing life of their religious community and that the community to which they return will be responsive.

5. Share goals and boundaries

It is vital that there is prior agreement, which is duly honoured, in relation to a variety of areas which will arise in relation to particular projects of common formation. These areas may include both internal and external aspects of the project. They need to include the expectation of the level of commitment on the part of participants, common understanding in relation to boundaries, expectations over any shared worship and the use of shared space, and agreement on how widely the project will be publicized. There also needs to be an acceptance of a shared goal for the process and for those participating.

6. Foster friendships

Projects of common formation need to include space for discussion and for relationship building between individuals as well as in the wider group. Intentional ways of fostering potential ongoing friendships between participants are an important aspect of the work. In common formation, we are companions on a common but transformational journey, and as such we do not abandon each other when difficulties arise. The word “companion” itself ultimately derives from a Latin phrase which means “eating bread together.” Common meals, as well as being an expression of hospitality, can be a valuable way of building such companionship.

7. Honour both differences and commonalities

Ways need to be found to explore differences as well as commonalities, and these differences need to be reflected both within and among the religious traditions represented. No one participant or group of participants has the right to claim that they are the whole of their community and that their voice is the only authoritative one. One aspect of this to bear in mind is the need to honour different contextual and geographical dimensions within faiths. The transformational bridges that may be built through initiatives of common formation may well include intra- as well as interreligious learning.

8. Include lived experiences and varied kinds of learning

Common formation projects naturally lend themselves to interdisciplinary learning in which academic and theological aspects work alongside social and cultural ones. The lived experience of participants, both positive and negative, in these projects should also be drawn on as resources for learning. Common formation projects are to be face to face as well as side by side. We understand “face” as referring to the deep identity and experience of a person or participant. For people to see the face of each other more fully is an intrinsic part of the educational process and may facilitate gender inclusiveness and the building of bridges between generations.

9. Make use of scriptural reasoning and other spiritual exercises

Within the learning framework of projects of common formation, the practice of “scriptural reasoning” may well have a particularly helpful role to play. This is a way of drawing on the authoritative resources of particular religious traditions to enable helpful interreligious conversations; this makes it clear that participants’ particularities, expressed in their sacred scriptures, can facilitate rather than hinder deeper interreligious relationships. In many expressions of religion, scriptural texts are integral to the formation of faith identities for both individuals and communities. A desire to know more about what is important for the faith of our neighbours and fellow participants is an expression of love. Other spiritual exercises particular to various religions which may help to facilitate a conversation between participants can be drawn on as well.

10. Sustain alumni

Common formation not only impacts present participants in individual projects. It is important to cherish and foster alumni as well. Alumni can both act as a resource to help with future sustainability of such projects and express in their continuing work and life the transformational vision of the project. Similarly, it is important to train those who will be leading projects of common formation and enable them to network and learn from each other. Ideally, there will be overlap between alumni and future trainers.

Directory of Groups and Organizations Offering Learning Opportunities in the Area of Common Formation

For each entry, the following information is offered: name (and website, if available); intended target group; brief description; and contact details. The organizations are listed in alphabetical order in English.

Centre of Christian–Muslim Understanding and Partnership, Anglican/Episcopal Province of Alexandria (www.ccmup.org/en)

- A variety of initiatives encouraging Christians and Muslims, both within Egypt and abroad, to engage with each other and work together for the good of society
- The Centre is committed to promoting peace and religious harmony among faith communities in Egypt and the wider Middle East. It hopes to achieve this through better understanding of the other and by joint work in the community.
- Contact: ccmupegypt@gmail.com; phone no.: +20 122 325 1379

Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, Certificate of Advanced Studies in Interreligious Studies, Switzerland (CAS-IS)

- An interreligious summer school aimed at young people (aged 20 to 35) from the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths
- CAS-IS encompasses a study period of six weeks: three weeks of distance learning and three intensive weeks of a residential period of study, research, and community life. The residential period includes lectures, courses, workshops, and study visits to places of worship of various religious communities. Each year has a specific thematic focus to address topical issues in relations between religious communities as well as the role of religious actors in society today. The Certificate is validated by the University of Geneva.
- Contact: Bossey_Admissions@wcc-coe.org

Emouna, Belgium (www.emouna.be)

- Aimed at religious professionals (in particular, Christian clergy of all traditions, Jewish rabbis, Muslim imams, Buddhist priests and officiants, and, in Belgium, the secular officiants of *Laïcité Organisée*), either in training or already qualified
- It is sponsored and supported by the legally recognized lifestances in Belgium, which gives it official credibility. The aim of Emouna is for religious professionals to learn together about the social issues which face them all, but it is also about common strategies for organizing local faith community life.
- Emouna is a year-long programme spread over 15 full days. It meets in the buildings of the participating faiths. Each day consists of a theme (such as pastoral care, science and faith, women in religion, religion and the State, religious radicalism) that

is introduced by eminent professionals along with workshops for the participants (talking, writing, art, drama). A substantial lunch is shared in the middle of the day. During the year, each participant must create a piece of work, normally with other participants, which will be a lasting memory of their Emouna year. Emouna alternates between a French-speaking group one year and a Dutch-speaking group the next year.

- Contact: info@emouna.be

International Centre for Interfaith, Peace and Harmony, Kaduna, Nigeria

- A range of interreligious initiatives involving Christian and Muslim groups in Nigeria, with a particular focus on secondary school pupils
- Development of Peace clubs in 40 secondary schools in the states of Benue, Kaduna, Nasarawa, and Taraba aim to educate future generations on the competencies, perspectives, attitudes, values, and behavioural patterns that could enable them build and maintain peace.
- Contact: iciphkaduna@gmail.com

John Paul II Center for Interreligious Dialogue, Rome (www.jp2center.org)

- Prepares the next generation of religious leaders for interfaith work, action, and peacebuilding
- Every year, the John Paul II Center welcomes a cohort of about 10 Fellows from around the world. They are selected to come to Rome for a one-year in-person academic programme in interreligious dialogue. The academic programme is complemented by an intensive programme of extracurricular activities, including a visit to Israel, practical workshops offering tools for implementing dialogue projects, and diverse engagements with leaders in the field. Upon completion of the Russell Berrie Fellowship year in Rome, Fellows are welcomed into a network of active alumni who receive many opportunities for ongoing training, workshops, and connections, as well as the possibility to apply for mini-grants for their initiatives of dialogue.
- Contact: berrie@iie.eu

KAICIID International Fellows Programme (www.kaiciid.org/what-we-do/kaiciid-fellows-programme)

- Intended for diverse religious leaders, educators, and dialogue practitioners from Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, and other religious backgrounds
- The Fellows programme is an ongoing training and networking programme with members from 86 countries that starts with one year of hybrid training. The programme is designed to connect and cultivate a network of leaders committed to fostering peace in their communities through interreligious and intercultural dialogue.
- Contact: fellows@kaiciid.org

Rose Castle, United Kingdom (www.rosecastlefoundation.org)

- For emerging leaders of different faiths
- The programme focuses on encouraging scriptural reasoning in younger leaders. This involves reading and reflecting together on their scriptures, leading to a deeper understanding of others' and one's own scriptures and perspectives.
- Contact: contact@rosecastle.foundation

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