

**Methodist Mission and Ecumenical**  
**Methodist Church of New Zealand**  
**Te Hahi Weteriana o Aotearoa**



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Prince Ghazi bin Talal  
The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought  
P O Box 950361  
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Jordan

Dear Prince Ghazi bin Talal

The Methodist Church of New Zealand is pleased to forward to you its response to the document *A Common Word Between Us and You*.

The document was summarised, some brief comment on Muslims in new Zealand provided and then it was circulated widely throughout the church for discussion. Finally a response was presented to our church's annual conference attended by some 300 people in November 2008. It received a very favourable response. The document circulated together with our response, is attached.

We noted that the *Common Word* document is a clear indication that leading Muslim leaders and religious leaders are committed to fresh thinking about the relationship between Islam and Christianity. An action we applauded.

While *A Common Word* affirms what the two religions have in common it also acknowledges that there are very real differences between Christianity and Islam and these should not be minimised. At the same time as we seek to enhance what we have in common, we see a pressing need for Christians and Muslims to find ways of acknowledging and respecting the differences between us, of attempting to understand these, and of not allowing them to fuel hostility. While affirming examples of humane mutual respect, we see a need for Christians and Muslims to actively work to heal hurts both, local and global, and to change attitudes and stereotypes.

Even when Christians and Muslims continue to disagree on matters of belief they should recognise and endorse what they hold in common with sufficient integrity to allow them to work together in the world. They should make it a priority to understand how the precious heritages they each hold can direct and even impel them to work together for justice and peace. So Christians and Muslims should come together not only in a common word but also in common action for the greater glory of God and the wellbeing of all.

Yours sincerely,

John Roberts  
For Methodist Church of New Zealand

# **Response of Methodist Church of New Zealand to an Open letter to Christian leaders from Muslim leaders**

**November 2008**

## **Muslims in New Zealand**

Muslims first appear in a New Zealand census in 1874. Most of the early Muslims to come here were from Fiji and India. According to the 2006 census there were 35,976 Muslims living in New Zealand. Their numbers have been growing rapidly with a 490% increase since the 1991 census. Today Muslims living in New Zealand have come from Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe, with a growing number of New Zealand born Muslims. Many have come to this country to escape conflict in their home countries, or to further their education, and seek employment opportunities. Many of the more recent arrivals have come under the New Zealand Government's humanitarian/refugee immigration category. In most of our larger urban centres mosques and Islamic centres have been established.

The events of 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001 in the USA lifted the profile of Muslims around the world, and led to negative stereotyping. Muslims came to be seen as fundamentalists and Islam a religion that breeds terrorists. As a result some Muslims in New Zealand have experienced harassment, physical attack and vandalism of their property. In January 2003, several of the New Zealand Muslim communities signed a declaration denouncing all forms of terrorism and stated clearly that Islam promotes peace and security for all humankind. In response to the growth in the number of Muslims in New Zealand and concern at stereotyping and negative experiences in the Islamic community, Councils of Christians and Muslims have been formed. These exist in various communities including Auckland and Wellington. The councils seek to encourage dialogue, build understanding, and create trust between the two religious communities. Methodists are active in the life of these councils.

## **Open letter of Muslim leaders**

In October 2007 138 Muslim leaders from various parts of the world met at the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought in Jordan. Their objective was to develop *A Common Word between us and you*. The result was a 29 page open letter addressed to 27 world leaders of the various branches of the Christian Church, as well as to leaders of Christian Churches everywhere. (Available at [www.acommonword.com](http://www.acommonword.com)) The letter was issued on the occasion of Eid al-Fitr al-Mubarak, the festivity that marks the end of Ramadan, Islam's holiest month.

The letter acknowledges that Muslims and Christians together make up over half of the world's population and says that without peace and justice between the two religious communities there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The basis of this peace and understanding is at the core both faiths – love of the One God and love of the neighbour. This they say is repeatedly stated in the sacred texts of both Islam and Christianity and is the common ground which Muslims and Christians can stand on together. It is on this basis that the Muslim leaders invite Christians to join them in expressing that which is most essential to the faith and practice of both – the two commandments of love.

The Muslim leaders state that while Islam and Christianity are obviously different religions it is clear that the two greatest commandments are an area of common ground and a link between the Qur'an, the Torah and the New Testament. They quote the Qur'an where God tells Muslims to issue the following call to Christians (and Jews) "O People of the Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you." That common word, the leaders say, is found in the two greatest commandments.

The leaders state that as Muslims, we say to Christians that we are not against them and that Islam is not against them (so long as they do not wage war against Muslims on account of their

religion, oppress them and drive them out of their homes). Quoting words of Jesus the leaders invite Christians to consider Muslims as not being against them, but with them. On this basis they invite Christians to join Muslims on the common essentials of the two religions. "Let this common ground be the basis of all future interfaith dialogue between us."

The leaders go on to say "Finding common ground between Muslims and Christians is not simply a matter for polite ecumenical dialogue between selected religious leaders." It is about the future of the world, for "If Muslims and Christians are not at peace, the world cannot be at peace." The leaders challenge those who relish conflict and destruction for their own sake, or reckon that ultimately they stand to gain through them, stating that "our very eternal souls are at stake if we fail to sincerely make every effort to make peace and come together in harmony."

The letter concludes: "So let our differences not cause hatred and strife between us. Let us vie with each other only in righteousness and good works. Let us respect each other, be fair, just and kind to [one] another and live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual good will."

## **Response of Methodist Church of New Zealand**

The annual Conference of the Methodist Church of New Zealand held in November 2008 welcomed the open letter addressed to Christian leaders by the Muslim leaders who met in Jordan in October 2007, and affirmed it as follows:

- a) while acknowledging some profound differences of belief between Christians and Muslims, affirming that the two commandments to love God and neighbour constitute a common element in the faith and practice of our two religious traditions;
- b) by accepting the invitation to see Islam as not being against us but with us as we seek to realise the two commandments of love;
- c) by acknowledging the need for the two religions to work together for a meaningful peace with justice in the world;
- d) by joining with Muslims in challenging those who would promote violence and conflict for their own sake, personal gain, or for ideological ends and purposes.
- e) by encouraging the promotion of justice, respect, fairness, kindness, healing, harmony and goodwill between the followers of Islam and Christianity, locally, nationally and internationally;
- f) by urging that the open letter be considered and promoted by local Councils of Christians and Muslims, Interfaith Councils, and be widely discussed within the Methodist Church of New Zealand;
- g) by encouraging local congregations to enter with care and sensitivity into conversation with local Mosque or Islamic Centre communities.