

A Study on Islam Adopted by the 199th General Assembly (1987)

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Events have made us more sharply aware of the immense renewal of religious, social, economic, and political dynamics among Muslim communities across the world. We have difficulty comprehending the depth of their significance, power, and challenge.

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Several actions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in recent years have been taken in response to this need for understanding. The Division of International Mission of the General Assembly Mission Board in 1982 appointed a new staff person, Dr. Frank Cooley, to design and initiate a study of the experience of Christian presence in Islamic lands. Doing this implied that such a study might lead to a reconsideration of our church's stances on mission, evangelism, dialogue, and social policy in light of new understandings that may emerge. In 1983 the General Assembly Mission Board, in cooperation with the Program Agency, appointed an Islamic Study Advisory Committee to oversee and assist this study. The 198th General Assembly (1986) affirmed the ongoing work of this committee and instructed it to report in 1987.

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For several years the committee has engaged in active study and data collection. Committee members are Joyce Cushman Stark, chair; Frank L. Cooley and Margaret Orr Thomas, staff; and Edward M. Heunemann, David H. Bowman, Donald D. Dawe, William G. Gepford, Yvonne Y. Haddad, Bing Kong Han, C. Eric Lincoln, Victor E. Makari, Morton S. Taylor, Otis Turner, J. Dudley Woodberry, and Lawrence H. Richards. M. Thomas Norwood, Jr., and J. Paul Frelick have served as liaison members from the Council on Theology and Culture since early 1986. Dr. Byron L. Haines, co-director of the National Council of Churches' Office of Christian-Muslim Relations, served the committee as a consultant. Committee members are pastors, ruling elders, missionaries who have served in predominantly

Muslim lands, and specialists in Islamic studies, evangelism, theology, and sociology of religion. Partner churches in the countries represented in the case studies have been consulted. Dr. Byron Haines served as editor of the drafts produced by the committee members and staff, with Dr. Frank Cooley assisting him.

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A. Background

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Presbyterians have a long history of witness among Muslim peoples. (Particular note should be made of the former United Presbyterian Church of North America whose global mission outreach was in areas with major Muslim populations.) That witness, along with others, led to establishing church relationships in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Ethiopia, Sudan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, China, India, the Philippines, Indonesia, Nigeria, Cameroon, Ghana, and more recently Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza.

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Islam has engaged the lives of countless millions of people. Today there are over 896 million Muslims in the world and it is projected that by the year 2000 there will be more than one billion. In the United States, Presbyterians along with other Christians find themselves increasingly in contact with Muslims. It is estimated that there are currently three million Muslims in the United States, hence the encounter with Islam is an inevitable part of our life. Our first response as the Christian community to those of the Muslim community should be to learn and understand.

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Contemporary Islam is in the midst of a deep and comprehensive revival. Muslim communities throughout the world are seeking to renew their faith. Their reaction, in many parts of the Muslim world, to current Western values perceived as a consequence of the spread of modern science, technology, and industry as well as to changes in political, social, and economic life, has been to return to religious traditions just as it has in many Christian communities.

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Since the end of World War II many countries with predominantly Muslim populations have emerged from the colonial era. In taking their place among the community of nations they are shaping in decisive ways the social, political, and economic direction of the world. They are caught in a struggle to achieve political order and economic growth while still preserving the integrity of their Islamic ways of life. This struggle is not easy. Muslims living around the globe sometimes find themselves a minority among people with unfamiliar traditions and religions. In other places they are majority that finds its way of life threatened by political antagonisms and secular indifference. In coping with these encounters, they have turned with fresh vigor to their scriptures, the traditions, of their faith and their law code to shape their communal life. There is, however, no unanimity among Muslims about the form the revitalization of Islam will take.

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In many instances Christian perceptions of this resurgence in Islam are distorted by ignorance and prejudice. Christians frequently view this renewal negatively. For instance, when Muslims manifest new zeal for their faith, Western Christians may see only militancy and revolutionary movements because they forget the painful experience of many Muslims under colonial rule. We describe the Islamic renewal in our own terms, calling it Muslim fundamentalism and referring to its followers as fanatics, zealots, or radicals. Our perceptions tend to obscure the immense spiritual and emotional force that has been released by this religious renewal. As the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) seeks to make a faithful response to the resurgence within the Islamic world, we must seek to recognize the creative responses Muslims are making to the circumstances, crises, and problems of modern life. The response of Christians must be one of discernment, realism, and faith in the sovereignty of God over the world. Both Christianity and Islam are intimately related to the cultures in which they exist. It is often difficult to separate what is essentially Christian or essentially Muslim from what is really American, European, Arab, African, or South Asian. Political clashes between the United

States and predominantly Muslim countries narrow our perceptions so that we and they may view the conflict as religious rather than as basically social and political in nature.

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The search for faithful witness must be motivated by a desire to love God, to be obedient to God's will, and to love neighbors as ourselves. Where this may lead and how it will bring new understanding and cooperation among Christians and Muslims rests in the mercy and grace of God. Both Christians and Muslims are challenged to allow God to guide them into a future free of hatred, free of fear, and directed by hopeful love. The future holds the possibility that in our common life Christians and Muslims may faithfully respond to God and realize the peace and justice so desperately needed.

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Results of the Study

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The General Assembly Mission Board and the Program Agency have developed resources to share with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) the learnings and insights gained through the work of the Islamic Study Advisory Committee.

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1. A study book has been prepared for use by the church that introduces the history of Christian-Muslim relations, presents a description of the faith and practice of Islam, and brings an overview of the contemporary Muslim world as well as case studies on Egypt, Indonesia, Nigeria, and the United States. The case studies provide a picture of the intriguing variety in Islamic practice across the world. They examine Christian-Muslim relations in Egypt where Islam is an overwhelming majority. They study Nigeria, where Christian and Muslim faith communities are of approximately equal size, and Indonesia where Christians are only one tenth the number of Muslims in a society committed to religious pluralism.

They also focus on the United States where Islam is a small but growing minority and where Christians, including Presbyterians, are finding themselves with Muslim neighbors. (Circumstances at this time prevented the completion of a planned case study on Lebanon.) The book also contains an exploration of the theological issues raised as we seek new understandings of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations. Finally it outlines some suggested directions for the future. A study guide is available for use with the book. This introductory study resource is for use in congregations, presbyteries, synods, and the educational institutions of the church. A brief study guide book is available from the Reverend Margaret Orr Thomas, Room 1144, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, NY 10115-0050.

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2. The extensive background papers developed through the committee's work were the basis of the book. These will be available for further study and information through the General Assembly Mission Board, the Program Agency, and their successor bodies.

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3. A videotape introducing the study has been prepared for use by the church to introduce the emphasis on Christian-Muslim relations.

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4. In the course of its three years' work, the Islamic Study Advisory Committee identified a number of matters it believes directly affect Christian-Muslim relationships. Already prefigured in its report to the 198th General Assembly (1986) (see 31.403), they are listed here, to challenge the continuing theological and social thinking of the Presbyterian Church as it seeks to

related more positively to the Muslim world community.

- a. The endeavors of Christians, as "ambassadors of Christ," to be "ministers of reconciliation" demand that serious attention be given to the historical, theological, and practical dimensions of religious pluralism and interfaith relations.
- b. The theological similarities and differences that both unite and divide Muslims and Christians call Christians to initiate cooperative efforts that will foster greater understanding and dialogue.
- c. Christians need to be aware of the important roles that Islam and the Muslim community play with respect to world peace and social justice and to understand those roles and their own relationship to them. Only in this way can maximum cooperation in the pursuit of these objectives be attained. Christians should be aware that Muslim responses to Christian overtures are shaped by what they perceive to be the role of the United States in the Middle East.
- d. The Western and Muslim worlds are becoming more interdependent, economically, politically, and culturally. Consequently, old attitudes, patterns, and structures are being challenged and new opportunities are being created.
- e. The bigotry and prejudice manifested in the U.S.A.

against Arabs, Islam, the Muslim world, and Muslim peoples produce in our society both attitudes contrary to the universality of God's love and activities that violate the law of the land. When the church remains silent on this matter it lends credence to such prejudice.

- f. The growing Muslim community in the U.S.A. has concerns about its identity and involvement in American society that parallel those of their Christian neighbors.
- g. The ways Christians related to Muslims in the U.S.A. affect the relations between Christians and Muslims in other countries, and vice versa.
- h. Christians need to seek fuller understanding of the effects of the Christian missionary movement upon the Islamic world. This may necessitate exploring the possibilities for change in the theology and practice of the missionary enterprise.

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- 5. The recommendations below suggest ways churches and Christians might employ in learning to live with Muslim neighbors. These have been drawn together under categories described as searches for understanding, cooperation, and faithful witness. The recommendations do not propose specific answers for the complexities that arise from examining what faithfulness requires of the church. Such responses will become clearer as Christians and Muslims work together to discover new ways for the future and as Christians reflect

theologically on the meaning of such experiences.

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B. *Response and Recommendations*

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The 199th General Assembly (1987) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in consideration of current realities and of the need for new directions in Christian-Muslim relations, adopts the following recommendations:

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- 1. **Calls upon the church through its agencies and governing bodies to support the search to promote understanding by:**
 - a. **Urging the dissemination and use by local congregations and other groups of the study book entitled 'Christians and Muslims Together,' and its study guide, together with other materials in Islam and interfaith relations, which present a wide theological approach and viewpoint concerning Christian and Muslim relations, such as the World Council of Churches Study Guide, *My Neighbor's Faith and Mine* and *The Bible and People of Other Faiths*.**
 - b. **Coordinating the development and distribution of additional resources for study and reflection as they become available, such as the 1989-90 study materials on the World of Islam being prepared ecumenically by the Friendship Press (National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.).**
 - c. **Recommending to Presbyterian seminaries**

- that they emphasize programs on Islam and Christian-Muslim relations in the next two years, addressing especially the kinds of theological and missiological issues identified in Chapter VI of the study book, namely, the questions of truth, revelation, mission, ecumenism, religious identity, secular ideologies and mores, social justice and human rights.
- d. Recommending to church-related colleges and campus ministries that they give priority to promoting programs on Islam and Christian-Muslim relations.
 - e. Recommending to Presbyterians that they take every opportunity to come to know and become friends with their Muslim neighbors.
 - f. Calling on the appropriate agencies and governing bodies of the church, and on individual Presbyterians, to identify, expose, and counteract the bigotry and prejudice manifested in the United States against Arabs, Islam, Muslim peoples, and Muslim world, especially in children's games and toys (e.g., "Nomad") and in television films (e.g., "Iron Eagle").
 - g. Monitoring the church's own Christian education materials for sensitivity toward stereotyping Muslim peoples.

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- 2. Calls upon the church through its agencies and governing bodies to support the search for cooperation by:
 - a. Providing for the promotion of interfaith relations with Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and others within the new Global Mission Unit.
 - b. Undergirding efforts of presbyteries and congregations now involved in ministries with Muslims, including networking for dialogue, dialogue groups of Jews, Muslims, and Christians, and cooperative service and witness endeavors.
 - c. Urging presbyteries to become aware of the presence of Muslims in their areas and explore ways in which common concerns can be identified and addressed through cooperative efforts of Muslims and Christians.
 - d. Engaging with Muslims and Jews, and those of other faiths, at all levels of the church and, ecumenically, with the wider Christian community in the mutual search for peace and justice.
 - e. Exploring through the new Global Mission Unit the feasibility of engaging in cooperative work with Muslims while continuing historic forms of witness through work and deed in the Muslim world.

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- 3. Calls upon the church through its agencies and governing bodies to

support the search of faithful witness by:

- a. Examining our forms of Christian witness through word and deed in light of present realities of Christian-Muslim relations in the U.S.A. as well as other parts of the globe.**
- b. Reaffirming our partnership with Christian churches in areas with major Muslim population and supporting such churches in their search for full freedom to witness to their faith.**
- c. Working for full religious freedom (including the right to change one's faith community) and for equality of citizenship for all persons in the societies in which they live.**
- d. Monitoring the political use of religion for the purposes of power and oppression.**
- e. Supporting and working through ecumenical and interfaith channels and organizations whenever possible.**
- f. Continuing exploration of theological and missiological issues lifted up in *Christians and Muslims Together*.**