

Muslims point to common ground: A Common Word Between Us and You

by [John Dart](#) in the [November 13, 2007](#) issue

When Mark Hanson, who heads the 66-million-member Lutheran World Federation, read the open letter sent to Christian leaders by an unprecedented range of Muslim clerics and scholars last month, the Chicago-based bishop was not surprised at the erudition and content of the document.

On a 2005 trip to Jordan, he spent two hours with the letter's chief architect. "We talked about what a constructive global conversation would need to be to have an impact on world conflicts," said Hanson, who is also presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. One point of agreement was that it is important "to speak with great honesty about our core convictions."

The bishop was pleased, as were many other church leaders, that the 16-page letter, "A Common Word Between Us and You," quoted the Qur'an and the Bible extensively to show that the two central commandments for Muslims and Christians are love of the one God and love of one's neighbor.

Signed by 138 Muslim figures worldwide, the letter was greeted at Yale Divinity School with an affirming response, noting that "peaceful relations between Muslims and Christians stand as one of the central challenges of this century." The deans of the Yale and Harvard divinity schools and the president of Princeton Theological Seminary also endorsed the quickly written, but detailed, response.

The Muslim appeal, said Miroslav Volf, director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, has "enormous interfaith significance," comparable to that of breakthrough overtures to non-Christian religions made in the 1960s at the Second Vatican Council. Volf was surprised at the news media's "lukewarm response" to the letter. These Muslim leaders have "enormous influence—they are not 'ecumaniacs' getting together for a group hug," he said.

The document was announced in news conferences October 11 in the United Arab Emirates, London and Washington. Georgetown University's John Esposito said the hope was for "a shared understanding that will serve to defuse tensions around the world." It was the first-ever initiative by Muslims "across the spectrum" agreeing to "what binds them theologically with Christians," Esposito said.

Coordinated by Jordan's Royal Institute for Islamic Thought, the letter was thought to have been written primarily by Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad, 41, special adviser to Jordanian king Abdullah II. Prince Ghazi received a Ph.D. at Cambridge University after earning a B.A. at Princeton University.

Two years ago, a top-level Lutheran World Federation delegation, including Hanson and general secretary Ishmael Noko, toured traditional biblical sites in Jordan and had a long conversation with Prince Ghazi, the group's host.

"I remember him saying that we have to get to that point where we speak of what we deem to be heresies . . . but then [go] deeper into our respective sacred texts to come to common norms," said Hanson in an interview at California Lutheran University. "He was going with King Abdullah the next week to see Pope Benedict and plant the same ideas."

However, in September 2006, Pope Benedict XVI gave a lecture at Regensburg University in Germany that angered Muslims worldwide. The pontiff linked Islam to violence and quoted uncritically a Byzantine emperor who had denounced Islam's Prophet Muhammad as "evil and inhuman." In response, the Jordanian Royal Institute spearheaded a reply signed by 38 Muslim scholars and religious authorities.

The new document is more broadly focused. It notes that Muslims and Christians constitute more than half of the world's population. "Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world."

The letter acknowledges that some Muslims "relish conflict and destruction for their own sake or reckon that ultimately they stand to gain" from violence, but adds: "We say that our very eternal souls are all also at stake if we fail to sincerely make every effort to make peace and come together in harmony."

Addressees include Pope Benedict, Ecumenical Patriarch Theodorus II, heads of Western church bodies and a host of Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox

patriarchs, including Pope Shenouda III of Egypt, where Coptic Christians have suffered from persecution. Anglican archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams praised the document, as did leaders of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

Baptist World Alliance officials welcomed the letter's call for mutual respect, harmony and good will— especially as it applies to religious freedom. BWA president David Coffey of Great Britain said he discussed those related themes with King Abdullah II during his visit to the Middle East in September.

Methodist minister Samuel Kobia, the head of the World Council of Churches, said that the WCC "is ready to cooperate . . . in putting together a concrete process to implement what is being suggested."

Shanta Premawardhana, who has headed interfaith relations for the National Council of Churches, was elected September 28 as the new interreligious director for the WCC. He said in a statement that the Muslim initiative should help to demonstrate to Americans "what moderate Muslims are doing to counter the rhetoric and actions of extremists."

A Baptist minister from Chicago, the Sri Lanka native said that Christians need to stand up for U.S. Muslims, many of whom have suffered discrimination and hate crimes since September 11, 2001.

More than a dozen U.S. Muslim leaders signed the "Common Word" letter, including Nihad Awad, executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, an antidefamation agency. "This one-of-a-kind effort demonstrates what mainstream Muslims can achieve by working together to reclaim the true message of Islam, which forever remains a message of love, mercy and peace," Awad wrote on the CAIR Web site.

Another American signer, Muzammil Siddiqi, who chairs the Islamic Jurisprudence Council of North America, said the document does not call Christians to abandon their belief in the Trinity. "Even though the [Christian] interpretation of [God's] unity is the Trinity, the foundation is unity," Siddiqi told Religion News Service. "It's monotheism, even though we do not agree with every interpretation of monotheism."

Interfaith dialogues involving Jewish along with Muslim and Christian participants emphasize that all three faiths consider Abraham their faith's patriarch in scripture.

Hanson, the Lutheran leader, said he hopes that any Christian-Muslim international dialogue would involve Jewish scholars. The bishop noted, however, that Muslim-Jewish relations are strained, and even within Judaism, Orthodox rabbis tend not to recognize liberal and centrist branches.

While the Muslim and Christian faiths both have internal differences, the new Islamic call for religious respect and harmony achieved, by its organizers' account, a significant consensus—signers from every school of thought in Islam and from every major Islamic nation or region endorsed the first nonpolemical consensus statement on Christianity.

Volf, an editor at large with the Century, said that he and Joseph Cumming, who directs the Muslim-Christian reconciliation program at Yale's Center for Faith and Culture, wrote the divinity school response with input from Dean Harold W. Attridge, a former president of the Society of Biblical Literature, and Yale professor Emilie M. Townes, president-elect of the American Academy of Religion.

Their response to the "Common Word" letter began by quoting Matthew 7:5 on removing the log from one's own eye before taking the speck out of a neighbor's eye. "Christians have been guilty of sinning against our Muslim neighbors" in the Crusades and in the war in Iraq, they said in asking forgiveness.

The Yale text praised the Muslims for insight and courage, noting that love of God and neighbor is not marginal nor "merely important" to both faiths, but "absolutely central to both."

So is forgiveness, said the writers. When Jesus was crucified he prayed for his enemies—"Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). The Prophet Muhammad, according to Islamic tradition, said after being stoned and rejected by people in Ta'if: "The most virtuous behavior is to engage those who sever relations, to give to those who withhold from you, and to forgive those who wrong you."

The Muslim letter is at www.acommonword.com, and the [Yale response](#) is on the Web site of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture.