Inter-Religious Committee
Report to the World Methodist Council
By Emmy Lou John, Chair

The Inter-Religious Relationship Committee is the newest Standing Committee of the World Methodist Council (WMC). It came into being with the new constitution and bylaws voted in Durban, South Africa, in 2011. In the new bylaws Article 7 F. 5 states that there is a standing committee called Inter-Religious Relationships.

The actual formation of the committee took place at the 2013 London Council Meeting when four people who had expressed a desire to be on this committee met for the first time. While in London, and with the assist of others, the committee drew up some proposals following the course set out for us. Our mandate states that the committee: “…will work to advance genuine open and loving relationships between member churches of the Council and peoples of other religions, by exchanging news, information, ideas and resources relating to inter-religious concerns.” This was adopted and is stated in the bylaw 1 Goals, c. Fostering Ecumenical and Inter-Faith Activities. This mandate reflects the purpose of the World Methodist Council that states: “The Council is a worldwide association of Methodist, Wesleyan, and Uniting and United Churches. It engages, empowers, and serves the member Churches by encouraging Methodist unity in witness, facilitating mission in the world, and fostering ecumenical and inter-religious activities.”

In our London deliberations we took the Beatitudes as our scripture and in particular the notion of peacemaking for the world. That drew us to this quotation from a speech given by theologian Hans Kung: “There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions.”

As Christians we want to be confident in our faith and not see other religions as threatening. We know that our sisters and brothers in the Evangelism Committee are working on ways to share our faith with confidence and grace. The other WMC Standing Committees also are assisting us on our journey to deepen and express our faith with wisdom and love.

It is the Inter-Religious Relationship Committee’s responsibility to assist in developing and sharing various methods of “grass roots” dialogue with their neighbors. It was decided that this would be done electronically. Over the past three years committee members have shared information via email and have posted items on the Council’s Web site.

In planning for this World Methodist Conference the committee requested that one of the Continuing Education sections would be on various world religions. Dr. Robert Hunt, Perkins
School of Theology, will be leading a bus tour on August 31. It will be a day of learning about various religions and touring their sacred spaces. Dr. Hunt is professor of Christian Mission and Interreligious Relationships and is director of The Center for Evangelism and Missional Church Studies. Dr. Hunt is also director of Global Theological Education at Perkins. Dr. Hunt works with students to help them grow in cultural intelligence and cross-cultural competence. Students gain firsthand experience in building intercultural relationships, resolving cultural conflicts, and guiding intercultural ventures. We are hopeful that a few of these understandings will be taken home from this field trip enabling the participants to venture on an inter-religious journey with their neighbors.

Our second offering is a panel on how to go about entering into inter-religious relationships with our Muslim neighbors. Bishop Sunday Onuaha, Methodist Church of Nigeria and Bishop Hee-Soo Jung, United Methodist Church, Wisconsin Conference will be sharing their hands on experiences of working on issues with their Muslim neighbors.

In 2009, Bishop Onuaha was chosen to lead the Nigerian Inter-Faith Action Association (NIFAA), which is the largest Christian-Muslim collaboration in Nigerian history. His area is interfaith medical collaboration, humanitarian service and peace. He will also be offering a separate workshop.

Bishop Jung led the Northern Illinois Annual Conference in active dialogue and joint actions with the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago. This has developed into cooperation between mosques and churches that focus on common challenges and annual dialogue dinners.

The Inter-Religious Committee is looking forward to sharing the diverse religious cultures of Houston and the world with Conference attendees. We hope the field trip and the panel will enable them on their journeys of walking in Jesus’ footsteps and working towards a more peaceful world.

Hopefully, this committee’s outreach will continue to grow over the next quinquennium as people share their inter-religious journeys with others via the Council’s Web site.

It has been an interesting experience chairing this new committee. I wish to thank the committee members, and WMC staff Barby Bowser, Bishop Ivan Abrahams, and Jeremy Bakker for their able assistance in helping to provide these two events at the Conference and in enabling our small committee of four to start the whole Council on a new journey of inter-religious relationships. To God be the Glory.

Committee: Chris Elliott, Jenny Spouge, Nicola Vidamour, Emmy Lou John, chair