

The Word "Ecumenism"

In the beginning of Luke's Gospel we hear that the Emperor Augustus decreed that the "whole inhabited world" (*oikoumene*) should be registered (2:1). In Matthew's Gospel (24:14), we read that the good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed "throughout the world" (*oikoumene*). The Greek word used in these texts is related to the word for a house or household of people (*oikos*) and refers to the whole inhabited world, or at least to the whole Mediterranean world. In the history of the church, one meaning of the word "ecumenical" is simply "universal." So we find the expression "ecumenical council" and the description of the Patriarch of Constantinople after the sixth century as the "Ecumenical Patriarch."

A second, but related meaning of the word "ecumenical" refers to the quest for Christian unity. Ecumenism is the movement whose goal is full, visible unity in Christ, unity in faith, life and witness. The aim of the ecumenical movement is "to proclaim the oneness of the Church of Jesus Christ and to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith, and one eucharistic fellowship expressed in worship and in common life in Christ, in order that the world may believe." (WCC Faith and Order meeting, Santiago de Compostella, 1993). It is a movement which involves dialogue, mutual understanding, reconciliation, expression of common faith, cooperation, common action, and common prayer.

The Modern Ecumenical Movement

The Modern ecumenical movement has taken two main forms. First, it has been an activity between individual churches or groups of churches, and between the members of these churches. Results of this can be seen in church unions such as the Church of South India (1947) and the Uniting Church in Australia (1977), in bilateral dialogues between confessional groups, and in cooperation between churches at the local level.

Second, it has had a conciliar form, beginning in this century from the World Missionary conference at Edinburgh (1910), and the first Faith and Order meeting at Lausanne (1927) and the formation of the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam (1948). The conciliar form of ecumenism also finds expression in the South Australian Council of Churches and in local inter-church councils.

Some Key Principles for an Ecumenical Theology

1. The church is fundamentally a communion (*κοινωνία*) which springs from, and gives witness to, the trinitarian communion of mutual love. The Christian experience is of God reaching out to us in Jesus Christ and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, inviting our participation in trinitarian life (2 Peter 1:4). This divine life is a community of mutual love, involving attraction, self-giving and fulfilment, in loving inter-relationship and respectful differentiation (John 17:21). The church is "a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (St. Cyprian). There is only one holy catholic church in God's plan of salvation. The Church of Jesus Christ is one.

2. According to the Scriptures, Jesus' will is that the unity of the church would be so obvious and so visible that the world will come to believe (John 17:21; Gal 3:27-28; Eph 4:4-5). The division of the church is not only destructive of the church's mission, but radically unfaithful to Jesus - "Certainly such division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages that most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel to every creature" (Vatican II).

3. Although people born into separate communities today cannot be held individually responsible for the past divisions, they must take responsibility for the healing of Christian communities. There is need to ask forgiveness of God of each other and to seek reconciliation.

4. Through "one faith, one hope, one baptism" (Eph 4:4) in Jesus Christ, Christians of different churches are already in a real but imperfect communion (*koinonia*) of love. There are significant elements of the one Church which exist in different communions: the Word and the Sacraments; the fruits and gifts of the Spirit; the life of grace, praise and prayer; a commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

5. We need to recognise that the Spirit of God has been at work in different communions, using them as instruments of salvation. We need to be able to recognise that the core heritage and charism of each tradition is a gift of the Spirit for the whole church. Diversity will be an essential characteristic of a united church (Acts 2: 8-10). Unity does not exclude diversity but includes it, both in the life of the Trinity, and in the church which is called to reflect trinitarian life.

6. In practice, ecumenical life involves an acceptance of our diversity. Such acceptance of diversity is a necessary preparation for cooperation in such matters as: planning worship exchanges and seeking other opportunities for learning about different tradition; joining together for worship, for other celebrations and for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity; cooperating in identifying needs of the local community and in service, outreach and common action; cooperating in the use of other resources for the sake of outreach in mission situations.

7. The concern for restoration of unity is not an optional extra but is central to Christian life. It needs to involve the whole church and every Christian. It is a call to continual conversion.

8. We are called to remember the "pilgrim" nature of the church, which is "on the way" between Pentecost and the final Reign of God. Continual renewal and conversion of our churches to conform to Christ is a fundamental dimension of ecumenism (1 John 3:2-3). The different ecclesial communities, are called to self-correction, and lovingly to correct one another, and to discern and strengthen, "in, with and under" our diversity, our essential unity.

9. Worship in common depends upon two main principles: first, worship together is a prayer for the grace of unity and a means towards unity; second, worship together is an expression of the unity of the church. Some churches see common eucharistic celebration more as a means towards unity, while others see it more as the expression of unity realised.

10. When churches enter into ecumenical dialogue it is helpful for each church to distinguish between truths that it considers the very central foundation of its Christian faith, and other truths which are not so central. It will be helpful if the participating churches can recognise that the truths of faith vary in how closely they are related to the centre of Christian faith. This is sometimes called the "hierarchy of truths." It can be an important tool for dialogue, which can enable dialogue partners to affirm common ground on central matters. It can also lead to the recognition that some remaining differences are not close to the centre of faith and should not be church divisive.

11. Our different traditions give priority to different teachings. The different histories and cultural contexts of our churches have led to a variety of theological concerns, emphases and modes of expression. Movement towards restoration of full communion must recognise that developments in doctrine or practice in one church since a time of separation cannot simply be imposed on another church. What will be needed is mutual understanding of these differences, and respect for what individual communities consider essential, at least the acceptance that these are not counter to the gospel.

12. In the quest for Christian unity it is important that particular churches do not claim exclusive identity with the church of Jesus Christ. It is important to recognise that the church of Jesus Christ does find expression in other Christian communities.

13. The ecumenical movement will reach its goal only in the common confession of one Christian faith. An enduring expression of this one faith is found in the great ecumenical councils of the first millennium. The *koinonia* of full visible unity which is our goal is "for the glory of God and for the sake of the World" (Santiago de Compostella).

14. Elements in the realisation of visible unity may include: common Scriptures and confession of the apostolic faith; mutual recognition of apostolicity and catholicity, and of sacraments and ministries; *koinonia* in the eucharist, in spiritual life and in mission and service in the world; partnership in conciliar meetings and decision-making, and common worship.

15. Models of church union include organic union or corporate union, and conciliar partnership. Another important model in recent ecumenical discussion has been that of *unity in reconciled diversity*. It presents an alternative to that kind of organic union in which the previously existing churches give up their existence and a new body comes into existence. The model of unity in reconciled diversity presents us with the possibility of a fully reunited church which preserves the authentic diversity of the different traditions.

16. The Spirit has always been in the church. The quest for unity has always been a work of the Holy Spirit. The modern ecumenical movement is the gift of the Spirit of Love to the church. It is a *gift for this moment in history*. It is a grace that must not be ignored or overlooked. This grace, given in our time, places a profound demand upon the churches and individual Christians.

Faith and Order Commission
SA Council of Churches