

STATEMENT ON ECUMENISM

1. “Ecumenism” refers to the movement for the unity of the church. The Greek word *oikoumene* carries the sense of wholeness or completeness and can refer not just to the household but also to the whole of the inhabited world. In either case, it speaks of unity. Our English word “ecumenism” is thus concerned with Christian unity.

The Church was born ecumenical

2. The message and mission of Jesus was one of reconciliation and the restoring of right relationship with God, with God’s people and God’s creation. For this reason, the message of the kingdom of God is a message of the restoration of a unity that has been broken. Not only is it a message of unity, but by his death and resurrection Jesus has brought about the reconciliation and unity that was at the core of his preaching. His mission reaches its culmination at Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit. The barriers of language, race and culture that were on display since the tower of Babel, are now broken down.
3. Jesus himself, before his passion and death, prayed to the Father for his disciples “that they may all be one” (Jn 17:21). This is a foundational text for ecumenism. With this prayer, he desired first, that the unity they experienced might be that unity which united him and the Father. In other words, Jesus prayed that the disciples might be drawn into the communion of life of the Triune God. Second, the prayer expresses the desire that the world may believe. In other words, the unity of the disciples would be a sign in the world of the unifying love of God. In this biblical text, unity and love are synonymous.
4. The intimate prayer of Jesus in the Gospel of John is “re-cast” in a cosmic dimension in the Letter to the Ephesians. There we hear of God’s plan that has existed before the foundation of the world, and now is made known in Christ: “a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:10). God’s action of gathering up reveals the gift of unity for all creation. In a series of phrases, this Letter points to the concrete expression of unity: Christ “has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us”; “he might create in himself one new humanity ... thus making peace”; and that he might reconcile divided humanity “into one body” (Eph 2:14-16). In a later chapter, the author exhorts his

readers: make “every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”; “there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:3-6).

5. These texts, and others like them, stand as a reminder that not only is unity God’s gift in Christ, but also that right from the beginning it has been fragile. Already in the New Testament, among the earliest Christian communities, various “instruments” of unity are emerging. There is the council of elders that met in Jerusalem to deal with a problem that threatened to tear the community apart, namely Gentile membership (Ac 15). There is Paul, faced with division among the Corinthians when they meet for the Lord’s Supper, who exhorted them to discern the body (1 Cor 11:17-29). There is Matthew addressing the question of authority in the community to whom he is writing and pointing to the authority of Peter (Mt 16:17-19). These examples and many others are the foundation of the very many instruments of unity that developed in the early church and in the subsequent history of the church.
6. Successive generations have been alert to the need to preserve unity, especially when tensions arose that would threaten it. Three particular moments stand out when unity was fractured. The first is in the fifth century after the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon. Later in the eleventh century, there was a major split between the East and the West. Then in the sixteenth century, there was a fracture in the West. Today, the members of these various churches are aware of the prayer of Christ that they may be one.
7. The biblical themes mentioned above have sustained the modern ecumenical movement, as instanced, for example, in this statement from the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Canberra 1991):

The calling of the church is to proclaim reconciliation and provide healing, to overcome divisions based on race, gender, age, culture, colour, and to bring all people into communion with God. Because of sin and the misunderstanding of the diverse gifts of the Spirit, the churches are painfully divided within themselves and among each other. The scandalous divisions damage the credibility of their witness to the world in worship and service. Moreover, they contradict not only the church’s witness but also its very nature.

We acknowledge with gratitude to God that in the ecumenical movement the churches walk together in mutual understanding, theological convergence, common suffering and common prayer, shared witness and service, and they draw close to one another.

Ecumenism is movement

8. When the ecumenical pioneers of the early twentieth century met, they styled themselves as a movement. They met together outside the official structures of any one church and outside the oversight of any one church. The ecumenical movement offered the freedom to explore the unity of the church outside their customary frameworks. It offered the freedom to engage with each other by putting aside long-held suspicions.
9. Even though this “movement” soon developed institutional structures, it endeavoured to maintain a sense of people on the move. This became more evident as the years rolled on and the movement presented itself to the world and to the churches. At the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Amsterdam 1948), the delegates sent a message to the world, “we intend to stay together”. At the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order (Santiago de Compostela 1993), the delegates declared in their message, “*there is no turning back*, either from the goal of visible unity or from the single ecumenical movement that unites concern for the unity of the church and concern for engagement in the struggles of the world”. At the Tenth Assembly of the WCC (Busan 2013), the delegates declared, “we intend to move together”. They called this movement a pilgrimage, specifically a pilgrimage of justice and peace. The Message from that Assembly developed this theme. “God our Creator is the source of all life. In the love of Jesus Christ and by the mercy of the Holy Spirit we, as a communion of the children of God, move together towards the fulfilment of the Kingdom. Seeking grace from God we are called, in our diversity, to be just stewards of God’s Creation. This is the vision of the New Heaven and Earth, where Christ will ‘fill all in all’ (Eph 1.23).”

Ecumenism fosters relations between churches

10. One of the most important characteristics of the ecumenical movement is its capacity to foster friendship between people and between their churches. This is a friendship forged through prayer together, through joint study, and through shared service in the

world, particularly towards the neediest. Friendships cannot be programmed, but develop as people listen to each other, respect each other, and so come to recognise the faith that binds them together.

11. The statement from the Canberra Assembly recognised that ecumenical friendship “is indeed the fruit of the active presence of the Holy Spirit in the midst of all who believe in Christ Jesus and who struggle for visible unity now.”
12. Furthermore, ecumenical friendship between individuals can be the source of deepening ecumenical relations between churches. Deeper ecumenical relations allow the churches “to recognise a certain degree of communion already existing between them.”

Ecumenism encourages reform, renewal, reception and transformation

13. The freedom of being associated with this “movement” allowed churches to face some of the hard questions of reform. At the Third Assembly of the WCC (New Delhi 1961), the delegates declared, “the achievement of unity will involve nothing less than a death and re-birth of many forms of church life as we have known them. We believe that nothing less costly can finally suffice”. The Ninth Assembly of the WCC (Porto Alegre 2006) noted that the churches need each other to help bring about renewal and reform: “The relationship among churches is dynamically interactive. Each church is called to mutual giving and receiving gifts and to *mutual accountability*. Each church must become aware of all that is provisional in its life and have the courage to acknowledge this to other churches.” The statement encouraged them to “maintain dialogue in the face of differences, refusing to say ‘I have no need of you’. Apart from one another we are impoverished.”
14. Mutual accountability will be a prerequisite for the unity of the church. The Canberra Assembly lamented those situations where “churches have failed to draw the consequences for their life from the degree of communion they have already experienced and the agreements already achieved. They have remained satisfied to co-exist in division.”
15. Steps forward on the ecumenical journey are being taken as churches engage in a process of reception. On the one hand, reception involves the study of the results of theological dialogue. If churches can recognise the truth of these formulations, they can find themselves considering the consequences for their own faith, life and

witness. They also begin to consider the consequences for their relationship with other churches that have also begun to receive the text. On the other hand, reception can involve one church learning from another church. This process of “receptive ecumenism” sees churches interacting with each other, not primarily to understand the other or reconcile differences, but so that their own self-reform may be enhanced by the insights, teaching and practices of the other church.

Ecumenism: the churches acting together

16. On the pilgrimage to unity, the ecumenical movement is an opportunity for churches to act together. This principle was articulated at the Third World Conference on Faith and Order (Lund 1952). “Should not our churches ask themselves whether they are showing sufficient eagerness to enter into conversation with other Christians and whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?”
17. Acting together builds the unity that the churches seek. The Faith and Order Statement, *Come and See* (2019) highlighted the link between common action and the church that was born ecumenical. “Walking together, even now while not yet fully united, can and often does build community among Christians. Very importantly, it can help to overcome a characterization of the ecumenical movement which has sometimes placed efforts to seek unity in ‘doctrine’ in competition with efforts to collaborate in ‘service’. Being together on pilgrimage implies that Christian service is rooted precisely in our common faith in God’s saving and renewing plan for the world.”

Faith and Unity Commission

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