

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS OF THE ECUMENICAL PARTNERSHIP COMMITTEE
September 1990

Assumptions behind our relationship of partnership in full communion:

1. The church is a fellowship of persons who have been made one in Jesus Christ and who are called to live out their unity visibly as a sign, instrument and foretaste of God's purposes of justice and peace for all creation. Our partnership is a response to that conviction, a conviction our two churches have held since their beginnings. (see Vision Statement, Par. 1)

2. All expressions of unity are provisional, on the way toward fuller life in Christ. There are various ways or models, however, for giving pastoral expression to our oneness. An earlier generation tended to think of unity in terms of creating a single local (national) structure with a new common identity (e.g, the UCC). The model we envision with the phrase partnership in full communion is one that , at least for the foreseeable future, does not insist on common structures and identity, but is nonetheless intended to be a relationship of genuine, substantive, tangible oneness focused on faith, sacramental life, ministry, and mission. We have said to one other that our churches and their members are part of the universal body of Christ, sharing a common (though diversely expressed) faith and a common ministry of word and sacrament, and that we will give visible expression to this relationship by joining together around the Lord's Table and by engaging, whenever possible, in common witness and service. (see Vision Statement, Par. 4, 6-9, 11)

3. Our partnership is deliberately set within the context of the whole ecumenical movement, especially as represented by the Consultation on Church Union and the theological convergence (in which our churches have participated) expressed in such documents as Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry. This means that we start with the assumption that we are one in faith, already partners in the gospel. The differences between us are understood as the differences of partners - diversities to be respected and, if possible, affirmed - rather than sources of division to be eliminated. (see Vision Statement, Par. 3)

4. Partnership, while a present reality, is deliberately future oriented. Previous models of unity were often dependent on a methodology of negotiations that paid considerable attention to what the churches involved did or thought in the past. Partnership in full communion involves a substantive, purposive commitment to envision and live out together what we are called to become. The "negotiating" or dialoging needed in order to affirm that the other is a partner in the gospel has already taken place in the wider ecumenical arena.

5. A goal of the ecumenical movement is to expand the range of "unlikeliness" (diversity) that we can legitimately embrace as, in some sense, our own through common participation in the body of Christ. Thus, this partnership is appropriately spoken of, to use the language of the Steering Committee, as "a dynamic sharing of gifts."

6. Unity and renewal are inseparable in the vision of the modern ecumenical movement and in the vision of partnership we hold. The ecumenical claim is not simply that churches should learn to get along and tolerate their differences, but that diverse parts of the church need each other for the sake of their own growth in faithfulness. The object of partnership is, finally, our transformation towards a truer expression of Koinonia, of the fellowship for which Christ prayed. Cooperative activities may be significant signs of growth in our life together, but cooperation alone is not a sufficient expression of the ecumenical goal since it is possible to cooperate without feeling the pressure to be transformed.

7. One major obstacle to growth in visible unity is the fear of losing a comfortable sense of identity. This underlies the importance of a model that deliberately seeks to build trust and educate for ecumenism through a series of steps or stages. It is important to stress that the goal of partnership is a deeper sense of identity in Christ. We have nothing to lose but our idolatrous sense of self-sufficiency and our division.

8. Unity - however it is understood, but especially in this model - must grow from local initiative (or from the initiative of different agencies and constituencies within the churches) and cannot be imposed. The task of the Ecumenical Partnership Committee is, therefore, to articulate the vision of unity as partners and to help remove obstacles for local (and other) initiative.