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# INTERRELIGIOUS COMMITMENT AS AN ECUMENICAL CALL



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## Interreligious Commitment as an Ecumenical Call

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1. Interreligious engagement and commitment are parts of an ecumenical call, and they have renewed the ecumenical movement. By looking into the journey that the ecumenical community has taken and considering the current cultural contexts in which Christian communities are located, in this paper I aim to show how the Christian community's interreligious commitment is a call for Christians to be faithful about the ecumenical journey toward communion of the churches to build trusted relationships with other religious communities.

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE ECUMENICAL?

2. Every Christian church on Earth is ecumenical in nature. Simply put, being ecumenical means being in relationships with one another. As long as its members believe Christ's church is a community of the faithful built within various relationships, a church could not help but be ecumenical. The core of the Christian faith and the biblical narratives is to tell how Christ's followers are building relationships with God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, one another, all humankind, and creation. There is a redemption that occurs in the process of building relationships. Ecumenism is another expression of such an effort.

2.1. Existing divisions, schisms, and oppressions indicate relationships are broken. Christians are called to mend those broken relationships as Christ did at the cross (cf. Romans 5:1). Unfortunately, the churches perpetuated the status of division and brokenness for two millennia. Fortunately, the churches decided to adopt a Christian way of restoring relationships with one another.

3. The churches are also ecumenical, which means they have admitted the divisions among them betray the church's purpose. Nonetheless, "[e]ven in this one and only Church of God from its very beginnings there arose certain rifts (Cf. 1 Cor. 11,18–19; Gal. 1,6–9; 1 Jn. 2,18–19), which the Apostle strongly censures as damnable (Cf. 1 Cor. 1,11 ff.; 11,22)" (*Unitatis Redintegratio: Decree on Ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council*, 1964; para. 3). However, as Thomas Campbell—one of the founding fathers of the Disciples of Christ—insists, "[T]he Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one" (Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address*, prop. I). Because reality does not fully reflect this ontological state,

the Christian churches are mandated to restore the church's true state. The churches have chosen ecumenism as a way of restoring such a state.

4. The churches are ecumenical, which means they have chosen to be vulnerable by honestly opening themselves up to others. To be ecumenical is to make an intentional decision to seek the truth with fairness about each communion, each church, and even an individual. It is an act of forgiving and being forgiven. It is a process of turning from wrongdoings. For these reasons, building relationships is a wonderfully joyful process that can quickly become painful and hurtful. However, Christians must be honest with one another and face the truth about themselves.

4.1. Each communion's intentional decision to move toward reconciliation by facing the hurtful legacy of divisions was the formation of the ecumenical movement.

5. The churches are ecumenical, which means they have understood the churches need corrective witnesses from one another. Not a single church on Earth can claim to hold the whole truth about the Christian faith.

5.1. For example, through their dialogue, the Lutheran and Reformed traditions speak of how they need each other:

When Lutherans finalize and repristinate the theology of the sixteenth century, they need the corrective witness of the Reformed tradition concerning the continuing need for reformation and a fresh appropriation of the church's faith. When Reformed Christians overemphasize primacy of the contemporary situation, they need the corrective witness of the Lutheran focus on the authority of the ecumenical creeds and the Reformation confessions. (Keith F. Nickle and Timothy F. Lull, *A Common Calling: The Report of the Lutheran-Reform Committee for Theological Conversations, 1988-1992*, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1993; p. 30)

5.2. The Reformed-Methodist dialogue affirms that theological differences are mutually beneficial to grow into a fuller understanding of the gospel:

Historic differences of theological perspective and practice still maintain their influence, but [they] are not of sufficient weight to divide us. More positively, they should be regarded as mutually corrective and enriching.

Under present conditions, both traditions are increasingly benefiting from our common appropriation of new insights into the gospel granted through theological teaching in this century, through common worship and witness, and through our participation in the wider ecumenical movement. (Reformed-Methodist Dialogue, Together in God's Grace, Cambridge, England, 27 July 1987, Gros, ed. *Growth in Agreement II*; p. 270)

6. The churches are ecumenical, which means they have decided to grow together spiritually in God-given unity. Although a journey toward a mature relationship often entails growing pains, the journey is not an option “until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph. 4:13, NRSV).

6.1. I should note what Michael Kinnamon keenly points out about why growth could be the wrong metaphor for ecumenism. He says, “[E]cumenism is not (or not simply) a matter of gradual ‘growth’ in mutual recognition. It is a spiritual quest and, as such, is marked by a humble turning to God—and lots of surprises” (Michael Kinnamon, *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and How It Has Been Impoverished by Its Friends*, Chalice Press: St. Louis, 2003, p. 65).

7. The churches are ecumenical, which means they have understood that actions, programs, declarations, structural unions, and institutionalized ecumenical endeavors are provisional. All expressions of the ecumenical movement are presentations of various efforts. An expression of ecumenism could work well in a particular time and place—but not all times and places.

8. The churches are ecumenical, which means their commitment to one another is future-oriented and is for the world. A common misunderstanding about ecumenism is that it looks only to the past to point out what the churches have done wrong to one another. However, the churches investigate the past to correct their course of history and eventually to be one body of Christ for the sake of the world. Interchurch relationships and reconciliation among the churches are for the world that God so loves. Ecumenism is about the way ahead, not the path behind us.

8.1. As he sensed his time on Earth had come to an end, Jesus prayed to God that his followers may be one, as God and Jesus are one (John 17:11). Jesus

prayed, “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word” (John 17:20, NRSV). Jesus prayed not only for those committed now but also for those who would be committed to his call for reconciliation and redemption of the world. The churches join Christ in his prayer.

## **AN ECUMENICAL TRAJECTORY AROUND SEEKING VISIBLE UNITY OF THE CHURCH**

9. For a long time, ecumenism has been understood as seeking Christian unity. However, that is too simple an understanding. From the understandings stated before, ecumenism can be thought of as a way Christians are related to the world by fully manifesting God-given unity in Christ.

9.1. Especially in this postmodern era, ecumenism should not be interpreted as only church-to-church relationships. Unfortunately, this classical understanding of ecumenism presumes there is still Christendom where a church is the world. It is a Eurocentric worldview. In this understanding, Christians are still standing at the center of the world and blinded by our own prejudice, privilege, and pride.

9.2. Of course, there is no doubt that the ecumenical movement was formed as the churches were seeking a new way of relating to one another, which was a timely matter in the late nineteenth century. As the Western empires invaded and conquered most parts of Africa and Southwest Asia, many churches followed the road that those political and military powers had laid before them and helped those powers establish colonialism by offering theological justification. In this course of history, each empire brought different branches of Christianity into the colonies, and when those various Christian traditions encountered one another outside their designated European realms, they quickly realized they needed to find ways to relate to one another. In a certain part of the world, they realized there were *churches* in the plural, not *a church* in the singular.

9.3. To prevent the total destruction of each Christian tradition in colonies, Christians—especially nineteenth-century European missionaries—chose to live with one another . . . or at least to leave one another alone. Nonetheless, considering the religious history of Europe, this should be regarded as a



significant step forward in Christian history. At this point, Christians realized their mission was to convert those in the Western colonies rather than one another.

10. It was fear of the destruction of Christianity that first propelled the trajectory of the modern ecumenical movement; however, a genuine interest in one another later led the movement.

11. In the early twentieth century, there was a momentum within the ecumenical movement to move away from seeking a mere understanding of one another and to move toward reconciliation of the churches. Considering European history, in which the churches were deeply in conflict to the point of causing international wars, this shift demanded tremendous courage from the churches—truth-telling was a prerequisite for any attempt to reconcile.

12. In the way toward reconciliation among the churches, the ultimate destination was suggested: be in communion with one another.

12.1. Because the churches understood and experienced what it meant to commune with Christ, they also came to understand what communion with one another meant. Their understanding of trinitarianism, the perfect union among God, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, helped Christians understand what communion with others requires.

12.2. It is Christ who reconciled us with God and one another to live in communion, and Christians are made one at the Lord's table. Therefore, it is critical for the churches to be a eucharistic body because there is no more perfect union than a eucharistic body.

13. On this journey of ecumenism, there were many attempts to articulate what it would look like when the churches would live fully in unity.

13.1. In 1961, the World Council of Churches (WCC) and its member churches at its general assembly in New Delhi suggested the churches in unity this way:

We believe that the unity which is both God's will and his gift to his church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy

Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the task to which God calls his people. ("Report of Section: Unity," *The New Delhi Report*, ed. W. A. Visser 't Hooft, London, SCM, 1962; p. 116)

13.2. It is a beautiful definition of unity, yet almost all the phrases in this long sentence require further clarification. The most challenging part in this characterization of Christian unity is "breaking the one bread." The churches still refuse the eucharist to one another unless they are in a "full communion" relationship.

13.3. There are many elaborate definitions of full communion. One example is from the report of the Anglican-Lutheran European Commission, which met in Cold Ash, England, in 1983. There, full communion is understood as a "relationship between two distinct churches or communions" in which "each maintains its own autonomy and recognize[s] the catholicity and apostolicity of the other." "Full communion carries implications which go beyond sharing the same eucharist." It also means "a sharing of life and of common concerns for the mission of the church" through "common worship, study, witness, evangelism and promotion of justice, peace, and love" (Gros, Meyer, Rusch, eds., *Growth in Agreement II: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982-1998*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 2000; pp. 7–8). This statement clearly indicates full communion enables the two churches to share the eucharist and urges the two churches to share a life.

13.4. As the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ in the United States entered into a formal ecumenical partnership in 1989, the two churches defined full communion as a "dynamic and growing relationship that is more than just accepting one another as we now are. It is a mutual commitment to grow together toward a vision of the church that enriches our theological traditions, enhances service and mission, and deepens worship. We will find diverse expressions of what it means to live in full communion in Christ as we experience life together" (Commentary,

*Resolution on Declaration on Full Communion between the Christian Church [Disciples of Christ] and the United Church of Christ*, adopted by the UCC General Synod, June 1989, and the Disciples General Assembly, July 1989). They further elaborated what marks of full communion would look like: (a) common confession of Christ, (b) mutual recognition of members, (c) common celebration of the Lord's Supper and Holy Communion, (d) mutual recognition and reconciliation of ordained ministers, and (e) common commitment to mission (Ibid.).

13.5. Additionally, there has been the uniting and united church movement, which is geared toward an organic union between churches and communions. For example, The United Church of Canada was formed in 1925 by merging the following Canadian denominations: the Methodist Church of Canada, the Congregational Christian Churches in Canada, and about two-thirds of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. Local churches or congregations also joined this union; however, it seems practical rather than theological reasons drove this partnership.

13.6. Of course, there have been examples of more theologically or at least liturgically based united churches, such as the Church of North India, the Church of South India, and the United Church of Christ in the United States.

13.7. The most significant effort toward forming an organic union of the major Protestant churches in the United States was the Consultation on Church Union (COCU). Chief Executive Officer of the United Presbyterian Church Eugene Carson Blake initiated the idea, and Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Diocese of California James A. Pike seconded it. In 1962, the four churches—the Presbyterian, the Episcopal, the Methodist, and the United Church of Christ—gathered to discuss this new venture and formed the COCU. Later, ten other denominations, including the three African American Methodist churches in the United States, joined in this effort. The effort to be united could “bridge one of the major cleavages that for 450 years had separated Catholic and Protestant variants of western Christianity. It would increase significantly the possibilities for intercommunion among Christians who for generations had been denied ‘communion in sacred things’” (Keith Watkins, *The American Church That Might Have Been*, Pickwick Publication: Eugene, OR, 2004; pp. xiii–xiv). Regardless, this endeavor did not come to fruition other than creating another ecumenical organization in 2002 called the Churches Uniting in Christ.

14. Because full communion or an organic union requires considerable effort to be established, some Christians have settled with the idea that cooperation and collaboration among Christian denominations to make the world a better place are sufficient for ecumenism.

14.1. The WCC launched a “program” called the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace at its general assembly in 2013 in Busan, South Korea. It was introduced to “call all people to engage their God-given gifts in transforming actions, together” (Message of the 10th Assembly). Although this program significantly affects areas that require its member churches’ attention and collaboration, it could have given a slight misperception about the ecumenical movement as a collaborative work among the churches. This misunderstanding could occur by virtue of being an institution and stressing one program over others. Therefore, there should be a balancing act between “life and work” and “faith and order.”

14.2. Surely, the WCC has tried to suggest the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace is not a WCC’s program but rather a way of ecumenism. *An Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice*, the founding document adopted at the 2013 assembly, defines the program as “a shift from a static to a more dynamic understanding of unity” (Document No. GEN 05, *An Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice*, rev., p. 2). This statement could have given the wrong impression that working together is more favorable than any other work by using the word *dynamic*. Does this statement imply having theological dialogue is static?

14.3. Undoubtedly, collaboration among the churches is one way to manifest God-given unity. Working together will help the churches feel closer to one another. But does it indicate any sign that the churches are indeed in unity?

14.4. There is a simple logic for this trend: “Let’s put our differences behind us. We are already made one by Christ. Then let’s work together.” But we cannot simply put our differences behind us if we want to be God’s one church. Working together itself cannot be the goal of ecumenism.

14.5. Visser’t Hooft once explained why cooperation does not indicate the churches are in unity:

Cooperation is not unity. A consensus about social action combined with a moratorium on theological and doctrinal discussion leads easily



to the conclusion that the churches have done enough when they have established cooperative relationships. But this is a false conclusion, for unity in Christ is unity in the deepest convictions and unity which embraces all of life. Those who accept cooperation as sufficient are in danger of retarding the growth of that true unity. (W.A. Visser't Hooft, *The Pressure of Our Common Calling*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959; p. 18)

14.6. In ecumenical relationships, developing stages such as conflict and competition, coexistence, cooperation and collaboration, commitment, and communion are often established. These stages do not mean every church follows exactly the same steps in its relationships with others (Cf. Michael Kinnamon, *Can a Renewal Movement Be Renewed? Questions for the Future of Ecumenism*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014; pp. 8–9). However, this scheme indicates the most mature stage is to be in full communion with one another.

14.7. The ecumenical movement exists in the tension between the Life and Work movement and the Faith and Order movement. But it is evident that because the Faith and Order movement itself cannot be the purpose of ecumenism, the Life and Work movement cannot be the goal of the ecumenical movement. Unity and collaboration cannot be distinctive initiatives.

15. There has been a growing frustration toward the ecumenical movement. There are metaphors for ecumenism's current status, such as "the winter of ecumenism" and "a stagnant pond." Some Christians are getting tired of endless theological conversations that seem to produce only theological statements and papers. Others doubt there is a future for ecumenism.

16. Despite the growing frustration, as long as the churches are engaged with one another yet divided, the churches are nothing but ecumenical. They may not agree with all suggested methodologies, but the ecumenical movement always finds a way to refresh itself. This is why the ecumenical movement is still a movement. As long as the churches seek corrective witness from one another and still want to grow in many aspects of life, the movement will continue. The question is and always has been about how to do so.

## REFRESHING THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

17. Certainly, any effort to refresh the ecumenical movement should start with assessing the current cultural and interreligious contexts where the ecumenical community is placed. We must understand that the Christian unity movement is not for Christians but for the world. This understanding of ecumenism will help the Christian community see why ecumenism is still relevant today. We must view the Christian community from cultural and interreligious perspectives.

18. Once we place the churches in the current contexts, we can easily see the churches are only one part of the world. In the larger contexts, it looks irrelevant if each church attempts to relate to the world individually. The churches must interact with others in the world as a whole and as an earthly reality of the Church.

18.1. As stated before, for a century the ecumenical movement has given the most attention to how the churches would be reconciled with one another. This has been the approach because the ecumenical movement started its journey at the edge of the falling Christendom. European churches were closely attached to the Christian empires and dominated world culture. Thus, the churches were not concerned about their relationship with the world. Christian churches influenced society both religiously and in every aspect of life. Western culture was characterized as Christian.

18.2. Although America's religious reality in the early twentieth century differed from that of Europe, many Americans inherited the same cultural understanding—the United States is religiously and culturally Christian.

19. Despite Christian culture prevailing for a long time in the Western world, society has been rapidly secularizing. The churches have been struggling to maintain their status in society, yet attempts to revitalize religious influence seem unsuccessful. Consequently, the churches' demographics quickly have become relatively old.

19.1. What are the characteristics of the generations of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries? Although published in a fairly outdated study, David Brooks's insights about them still seem relevant today. Andrew Root summarizes Brooks's findings:

By the early 1970s . . . [e]veryone was a bohemian now. Because marketers and admen had been the priests, and middle-class rebel youth had been the revolutionaries, everyone was a bohemian capitalist, using the youthful spirit as the adhesive binding two historically opposed groups into a unique hybrid. David Brooks has called this hybrid “bobos.” Brooks defines bobos as those who combine the bohemian (one “bo”) with the bourgeois (the other “bo”), making experience, emotions, and hip individuality—the bohemian—achievable through association with the right products, fashion, and elitist style—the bourgeois. (Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academy, 2017; p. 74)

19.2. Some churches have tried to appeal to the bobos and create a comfortable church environment for this new social class. Despite these efforts, bohemian capitalists have accelerated the secularization of society. And this is not merely a Western phenomenon.

20. Some people argue that Christianity is growing in general in the Global South. It is true, yet the numbers of Christians in those regions remain small compared to those of other religious groups. In the Global South, Christians are only one of many religious groups, and they have never experienced what Western Christians have experienced: wholly dominating culture and society.

20.1. I should note that Christianity in the Global South has stripped the traditional understanding of ecclesiology to survive among many other competing religions. For many of them, ecumenism is a less urgent matter than evangelism, if it matters at all.

21. In the world now, Christianity is standing at the margin with other religious groups because of secularization. When Christianity completely domineered Europe and North America and ruled most of the world from the divine throne with the iron fists of militarism and imperialism and later capitalism and Western culture, the Christian community could not help but look into matters within the churches because they *were* the world.

21.1. As the churches humbly recognize that the Christian community is now one of many in this world, they are called to build authentic relationships with other religious and nonreligious groups.

21.2. As a small part of the world and as one body of Christ, what kinds of gifts could the Christian community offer the world? Would it be ideal to live in harmony with differences, or would this prove to be divisive and without any significant sign of unity—as well as confusing to other religious communities and nonbelievers alike?

22. Interreligious conversations matter to the ecumenical movement because they challenge the Christian churches to engage with other religious groups as one Christian community. As Christians engage in dialogue with other religions, Christians also must give greater effort to be one body of Christ. The question now is whether a Christian can represent Christianity regardless of their denomination: a member of the Disciples of Christ, a Lutheran, an Episcopalian, a Presbyterian, a Methodist, or a Catholic.

22.1. Expanding Christians' interreligious commitments is an ecumenical call. Gaining self-understanding of who we are with a confessional identity will be present as each Christian engages in interfaith activities. However, we should be able to present ourselves ecumenically as we do.

22.2. Ecumenically minded Christians have trained for embodying this call by engaging in ecumenical dialogue and cooperation. In doing so, these Christians expand their relationships closely and intentionally beyond Christians.

22.3. Of course, as Christians engage in interfaith activities, there are particular challenges about which they should be in dialogue among themselves. Kinnamon points out five challenges: the theological challenge, the ecumenical challenge, the moral challenge, the missional challenge, and the identity challenge (cf. Kinnamon, *Can a Renewal Movement Be Renewed?*; pp. 107–118). It is critical for the Christian churches to theologically justify these challenges to build trusted relationships with other religious groups. Identifying these challenges together and organizing conversations around these themes are ecumenical tasks that cannot be delegated to one group of Christians.

23. The call to build relationships with other religions should not be confused with the call to be in communion with them. Seeking the unity of all humankind is different from seeking Christian unity. The Christian



community as one body should articulate with other interfaith dialogue partners what it means to seek the unity of humankind.

23.1. Kinnamon has raised legitimate concerns about the confusion that may occur when some ecumenists call for “wider ecumenism”:

I am afraid, however, that this is not the case with some who now use the language or concept of wider ecumenism. Many of my seminary students, for example, regard Christian ecumenism as exclusivist and passé. They see it contrasted with interfaith relations and clearly prefer to devote their energies to the latter. Meanwhile, local councils of churches throughout the U.S. have “expanded” to include interfaith members. (Kinnamon, *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement*, p. 105)

23.2. From the same concern, it is essential to frame our interreligious commitment as an ecumenical *call*. It is an ecumenical call—not ecumenism itself. Our interfaith engagement should not be defined as an expanded or wider ecumenism. All the theological efforts to build relationships among the churches in the ecumenical movement cannot be directly reinterpreted for interfaith relationships.

24. If it is not the same, then what are we seeking? We seek mutual understanding and collaboration to build a human community and a just and peaceful world for all. There is a different kind of unity that the churches can *achieve* with other religious groups as one body of Christ.

24.1. There are different starting points for ecumenism and interfaith engagement. Ecumenism starts with those already given unity in Christ, but interfaith engagement begins with our genuine intent to understand and live with others in this world.

25. While Christians are committed to interfaith dialogue, we should not attempt to understand others by substituting other religious terms with Christian ones and their spiritual understanding of God and Creation with Christian theological doctrines. The United Church of Christ phrases it thusly: “We acknowledge the strong temptation to ‘read ourselves into others’ as a way of softening the edge of difference, because the result has often been to mute the distinctive gifts of others” (United Church of Christ, *A Study*

*Resource on Interreligious Relations for the United Church of Christ*, adopted by the United Church of Christ General Synod Twenty-Five, July 2005; para. 21).

26. There are challenges that humankind faces together, such as climate change, injustice, war, famine, and Pandemic. The Christian community should collaborate with other religious groups to overcome these challenges because they are too massive to be tasked by Christians alone.

## CONCLUSION

27. Many have dismissed ecumenism as a movement irrelevant in the modern world. Suppose we understand that being ecumenical means being in authentic relationships among the churches in terms of God and the world. In this case, the churches are nothing but ecumenical. From this understanding of ecumenism, Christians see the churches within the larger context of the world and seek relationships with other religious peoples to build together a better community for all. Thus, Christians' interreligious commitment is an ecumenical call that will ensure the churches are related to the world as one body of Christ. In this process, interfaith engagement might be tense with other works in the ecumenical agenda. Nevertheless, tension can bring a balanced view of the works among faith and order, life and work, mission and evangelism, and interfaith relations in refreshing our commitment to the ecumenical movement.

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