

Ecumenism

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The|Church of Ireland

Unity - Local and Global

The Church of Ireland, as part of the universal Church, is committed to ecumenism and the pursuit of Christian unity. In common with many other Christian Churches, the Church of Ireland includes a creed in its liturgy. In celebrations of Holy Communion it is the Nicene Creed, which draws on two important early Church gatherings, or councils, held at Nicaea in 325AD, and in Constantinople in 381AD. Like other important councils of the Church, these were called ‘ecumenical’ councils, borrowing a Greek word *oikoumene*, which means the ‘one, inhabited earth.’ ‘Ecumenical’ conveyed the vastness of God’s creative and redemptive act in Christ; today, we might use other words, such as ‘global’ or ‘cosmic’, to connect the believing and belonging in our local parish with the mysterious and loving purposes of God.

Ecumenical engagement begins when we confront the pain caused by either our disunity or suppressed diversity. It calls us both to repent, and to recognise the communion into which God has called us, within which we are to bear one another’s burdens.

When Diversity becomes Division

The Nicene Creed expresses belief in a Church that is ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic.’ Tragically, and from its beginnings, the Church has struggled to receive God’s gift of unity in Christ. Conflict may be an inevitable part of human life, but it has often been addressed with inadequate care, resulting in deep and lasting divisions.

Often the issues at stake matter profoundly, but in the heat of conflict, or when living with the painful legacy of earlier controversies, self-interest can skew the judgement of those involved. As a result, it can prove challenging to acknowledge that, as Christians, we are called by the gospel to make visible the unity that we are offered as a gift in Christ.

Differences of opinion as to what is essential to Christianity have often helped divide Christian communities. Many divisions hardened over centuries into the denominations that we know today. These continue to profess belief in ‘one’ Church; but their divisions diminish the vision of unity that is offered to God’s world.

Doctrinal conflicts are also shaped by non-doctrinal factors, such as differences of language, politics or culture. This is the case in some of the most famous divisions: between Jewish Synagogue and Gentile Church; Latin Western and Greek Eastern Churches; northern European Protestantism and southern European Roman Catholicism. And in Ireland, the division between native and planter added ethnicity and politics to denominational differences.

Christians thus struggle to limit self-interest as they try to imagine the breadth of the truly ecumenical. At the first 'ecumenical council', many participants identified 'the whole, inhabited earth' with the Roman Empire. Christianity, they assumed, was for the civilised – and was not, therefore, for barbarians (strange peoples outside the Empire), nor for those within the Empire who did not dwell in cities (a pagan, literally, being someone who lived in the country). We may find these limits odd, but every age has its own ways of severely curtailing the gospel's vision of unity.

Hearing Again the Call to Unity in Christ

There were two driving forces behind the birth of the modern ecumenical movement: the first was the expansion of Protestant Christianity during the nineteenth century – a slogan at the time, more widely shared at the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910, envisaged 'the evangelisation of the world in this generation'. Christianity was becoming a world faith rather than a European religion.

The second was a mood of repentance: missionaries were acutely conscious that the growth of Christianity coincided with colonialism and imperialism. Christianity had travelled both with European political baggage, and with its own denominational divisions. Christian disunity in Europe might have become a familiar habit on the part of the Churches; in the mission field, however, it was a vivid source of scandal. Missionary expansion overseas thus provoked serious questions for the Churches from which the missionaries came.

Two influential movements in the early twentieth century helped to highlight unity as a missionary imperative. The Life and Work movement emphasised that unity could be realised through shared acts of witness: 'Service unites, doctrine divides' was its slogan. The Faith and Order movement revisited earlier doctrinal conflicts to see if these might be resolved in a

less heated atmosphere. By doing theology in an inclusive, prayerful and critical manner, Faith and Order has offered important resources to the Churches, assisting them to cherish their diversity whilst also making visible the unity of God's people. One of the best known resources, produced by World Council of Churches, is Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, (WCC, 1982) which has formed the basis for countless subsequent agreements in which churches have recognised one another as churches, and has been used in shaping new forms of prayer and worship for churches that are growing together.

In 1948, these two movements joined to become the World Council of Churches, combining the theological and ethical strengths of each. The Church of Ireland has supported these initiatives from the start, and locally it is a member of the Irish Council of Churches.

Growth in Communion

During the twentieth century, many churches have moved decisively from stances of mutual hostility to relationships that help in healing the pain and scars of disunity. A key element is dialogue: to enter dialogue with someone is to accept that one does not already know everything about one's partner in the conversation; indeed, both parties will learn something new about themselves and their understanding of faith in the process. Dialogue happens at many different levels of church life: some at a global or multilateral level, such as the World Council of Churches; some between specific church families, such as the dialogues between Anglicans and Roman Catholics (Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission), Anglicans and Lutheran (The Anglican-Lutheran Commission and the Porvoo Communion), Anglicans and Reformed (International Reformed-Anglican Dialogue), or Anglicans and Orthodox (The International Commission for Anglican–Orthodox Theological Dialogue) ; others between individual Churches in a specific context, such as the Covenant between the Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church in Ireland; and some in local parishes, where Christians of different denominations gather for joint worship as in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Bible study or other acts of joint witness. In all these cases, new relationships develop between people and traditions, and, as a result, people and traditions alike become transformed.

The ecumenical movement is a movement, and not an organisation or an institution: it connects together people, places, ideas, prayers, churches, beliefs, politics, and much else besides. Not every church moves at the same pace in making visible the gift of unity; nor does every Christian. Some Christians have reacted with hostility to the ecumenical movement. But the ecumenical movement challenges all Christians to move beyond what is familiar, to embrace a wider vision of the Church.

Walking Together in Faith, Hope and Love

Ecumenical discipleship – repenting of our shared failures, investing in our shared hopes, hearing together the call of our Saviour – is rooted in prayer and the reading of Holy Scripture. At our Sunday services, a widely adopted system for reading Scripture through the year (the Revised Common Lectionary) allows us to read and reflect on the same Gospel passages as many other Churches throughout the world, including the Roman Catholic Church. As we do so we are mindful of our need for God’s grace and mercy. The Book of Common Prayer invites our ‘Amen’ to following prayer:

Heavenly Father.

You have called us in the body of your Son Jesus Christ to continue his work of reconciliation and reveal you to the world:

forgive us the sins which tear us apart;

give us the courage to overcome our fears

and to seek that unity which is your gift and your will;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



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