

Ecumenism in the 21st Century

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Abstract

This article explores the challenges facing the ecumenical movement at the beginning of the 21st century: global demographic trends and a shift in the centre of gravity of Christianity toward the global South; the need for ecumenical structures and institutions to change in response to new realities; the need to widen the ecumenical fellowship so that Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, and evangelicals who have not played a part in the WCC may participate more fully; the urgency of inter-religious dialogue; and the need to discover a “spirituality of engagement” in interaction with the world and its people.

Keywords

Ecumenical movement, Christian demographics, religious pluralism, inter-religious relations, spirituality

One of the foremost pioneers of the modern ecumenical movement, US Methodist lay person John R. Mott, who became the first honorary president of the World Council of Churches (WCC), had a favourite saying: “Take your stumbling blocks, and turn them into stepping stones!” When we consider the “challenges” facing the ecumenical movement today – as in any era – we may characterize them either as obstacles or as opportunities, as stumbling blocks or as stepping stones to the future.

New conditions and trends may pose impediments to business as usual, blocking one's well-travelled way or making nonsense of comfortable custom. If we are determined to act as we have always acted, to depend on institutions shaped entirely by past realities, we may be halted in our tracks. However, if we approach our ecumenical task with eyes ever new for seeing, we may discern changes in the cultures surrounding us as God's gift to believers, rich in potential for enhancing Christian service, progress in the world, and unity among the churches. I wish to speak today on several specific aspects of change that are experienced as "challenges facing the ecumenical movement," taking seriously the problems they pose for "business as usual" in church councils, yet at the same time seeking to explore possibilities that these challenges present for common witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Shifting Centre of Christian Population

In the April 2004 issue of the *International Review of Mission*, Todd Johnson and Sun Young Chung published an article tracking Christianity's statistical "centre of gravity" from the apostolic age to the present day, with a projection of the continuing demographic shift through to the year 2100.¹ They chart the progress of the geographical centre of Christian habitation on earth. In 33 CE, the heart of the Christian community was in Jerusalem, and for the first millennium it remained in the Near East (which is to say, western-most Asia). About the year 1000, the statistical population centre of Christianity crossed the Bosphorus into southeastern Europe. During the ensuing 900 years – with population growth in Europe, the colonial expansion of European empires, and the worldwide missionary endeavours of European and North American churches and mission boards – the "centre" of Christianity arced across Europe, through Romania, Hungary, Italy, and southern France until, in 1900, it was located just north of Madrid in Spain.

With the increasing independence of churches throughout the global South, a new age of Christian expansion occurred in the 20th century. Early in the century, Johnson and Chung's centre of gravity began to shift steadily southward, having reached the coast of western Africa by the 1960s, and then taking a southeasterly course across Africa from 1970 into the 21st century. By the dawn of the 22nd century, in the year 2100, it is forecast that the geographical heart of the Christian churches will be located in northern Nigeria.

¹ Todd M. Johnson and Sun Young Chung, "Tracking Global Christianity's Statistical Centre of Gravity, AD 33 - AD 2100," *International Review of Mission* 93:369 (April 2004), 166–81.

David Barrett, in his *World Christian Encyclopedia*, lays out the current trend in numerical terms:

- In 1990, there were approximately two billion Christians in the world. Of these, more than 40 percent were in Europe and North America combined, and a little over 15 percent were in Africa.
- In 2025, there will be an estimated 2.6 billion Christians, with about 33 percent – one third – in Europe and North America, and 25 percent – one quarter – in Africa.
- If these trends hold up, Barrett says that by 2050, just 45 years from now, there will be three billion Christians in the world, and more than half of them will live in Africa. The second-largest group will be in Latin America and the Caribbean, the third largest in Asia, followed by Europe in fourth place, and North America in fifth.²

Demographic trends alone do not explain everything about Christianity in the 21st century; however, these statistics do suggest important factors that will challenge the ecumenical movement over the next few years. Literally and figuratively, the map of Christianity and the churches' comparative influence is being radically redrawn. New configurations of the faith community will require a reconceptualization of relationships.

Movements and Institutions

The statistics show us how maps charting populations must change to portray new realities. But over the past year or two, we in the ecumenical movement have spoken of a more figurative need for “mapping the *oikoumene*.” By this, we mean that today's constellation of ecumenical organizations is not immutable, and that we are called continually to re-examine our relationships, to ask if we may find ways of working together in more suitable patterns, more creative environments, more faithful ministries of service.³

In Geneva, it is our sincere intent always to remember that “the ecumenical movement” and “the World Council of Churches” are not interchangeable terms. There are moments in the life of any movement, if it survives long enough, when one or more aspects of its purpose must take on institutional form to achieve concrete ends in

² David B. Barrett, George. T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, eds, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); for statistics, see 12–25.

³ Jill Hawkey, *Mapping the Oikoumene: A Study of Current Ecumenical Structures and Relationships*, rev. ed. (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005).

the world. Just so, the ecumenical movement of the 20th century responded to the call of the holy synod of the Church of Constantinople for a worldwide *koinonia*, or fellowship, of churches that could provide a Christian equivalent to the League of Nations, or to today's United Nations. This appeal by Orthodox leaders in January 1919 eventually led to the founding of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948.⁴ Still, it must be remembered that the ecumenical movement has produced a number of institutions through the years, including not just the WCC but also various other councils of the church and the churches; confessional communions; federations of students, laity, women, educators, industrial workers, *campesinos*, and the poor; regional ecumenical organizations; commissions and conferences; mission agencies; and so on. Each of these expressions of ecumenism arose to meet the needs of a particular moment, and many have adapted to address changing needs. Yet none of these institutions – not even the WCC – is eternal.

“To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven.” In these familiar words from the third chapter of Ecclesiastes, Hebrew wisdom literature instructs us that we live in a world of continual transition, and encourages us to hone our discernment of life's seasons, so that we may differentiate between the moment for planting and the time of harvest, the occasion for celebrating new birth and the season of parting.

The ecumenical movement, so long as it remains true to its calling, bringing the whole gospel to the whole world on behalf of the whole church, will prosper through God's grace. In this knowledge and conviction, we who labour in various ecumenical institutions are freed to exercise discernment as to whether our own agencies remain instruments relevant to the demands of this hour – or if God is calling us onward into other manifestations of Christian ministry. The exploration of this question, the analysis of existing relations among churches and ecumenical bodies, the felt need for new relationships and institutions – all is part of what we mean by “mapping the *oikoumene*” while leaving ourselves open to a wide range of possible developments in the “reconfiguration of the ecumenical movement.”

Relations among the Churches, Traditions, and Regions

The churches are foundational to the conciliar expression of ecumenism. But most of the churches that have traditionally lent the lion's share of institutional support to

⁴ W. A. Visser 't Hooft, *The Genesis and Formation of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1982), 1–8.

organizations like the WCC, in terms of promotion, personnel, and finances, are based in Europe and North America, while the rapidly growing Christian churches of the South have been accustomed to putting their ecumenical focus on local and regional needs. The churches with broad ecumenical commitments of international scope – Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist, Disciples, and others – find themselves engaged in a multitude of unfamiliar and heretofore uncultivated relationships with emerging Pentecostal and charismatic communities, including African initiated churches, so-called mega-churches, and congregations influenced by conservative evangelical missionaries from the West. For their part, many Pentecostal, charismatic, evangelical, and Catholic communities in the global South are experimenting with ways of relating to ecumenical entities with which they have few historical links, but with whom they are in agreement concerning the Christian social agenda.

Manifestations of the ecumenical movement that have not been moulded into the shapes most familiar within the WCC challenge us to consider the danger that a “council of churches” may become too clerical, too dependent on leaders ordained by member churches. To the extent that this occurs, the council may lose the energy provided by active laity including students, youth, and women’s fellowships. Interaction with less formal aspects of ecumenism prods us to re-examine issues of formation, representation, and inclusion.

Our deliberations on “reconfiguring the ecumenical movement” seek means of widening the fellowship that some of us enjoy in the WCC so that laity and youth as well as Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, and evangelicals who have not played a part in the WCC may feel fully welcome and may participate more fully in forging the ecumenical future. This is complicated, for shifting membership in an existing council or the establishment of a new and broader global forum may be experienced as a threat to a given church’s well-established positions or accustomed sphere of influence. We pursue such matters with non-member churches, benefiting from a history of having dealt successfully with similar issues within the WCC.

The WCC is fortunate in its recent experience of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC, for the debate it raised among our long-term member churches has given us occasion to address significant issues regarding the nature of membership in an ecumenical fellowship, channels of discussion, methods of decision-making, balancing of agendas, differences over theology, and common commitment to prayer. We have heard the Special Commission’s report and are implementing its recommendations; even so, this “stepping stone” to deeper fellowship and unity is an ongoing process as we move toward our 9th Assembly in Porto Alegre. We see this process both as a highly important chapter in relations among WCC member churches

and as a model for constructive dialogue with churches that are not members of the council. Lessons have been learned as we have studied our internal dynamics that may be applied to other relationships and dialogues.

For one thing, we have learned the importance of hearing authentic voices speaking for traditions other than one's own. And, as a corollary, we have learned the necessity of sticking to our task until all partners in dialogue hear clearly what the others have to say, and thus can proceed with shared understanding. Such learning has applications to the other areas where we face change.

In May this year, a WCC-sponsored Conference on World Mission and Evangelism was held near Athens. At the conference itself and in preparatory events leading up to it, the Roman Catholic and Pentecostal communities were better represented than at any previous such gathering. Catholic, charismatic, and evangelical non-members of the WCC participate regularly in the work of the council's team on mission and evangelism, as they do in our work on Faith and Order. Next month, we will celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Joint Working Group linking the WCC with the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. In each of these areas, we are exploring Christian relationships both within and beyond the WCC and raising questions of how these relations may influence the ecumenical movement's reconfiguration.

We also look forward to the 9th Assembly of the WCC in part because it is the first of our assemblies to be held in Latin America. The location puts us into close proximity and inevitable working relationships with Catholic, Pentecostal, and evangelical communities. The ecumenical conference of churches that will be our host in Brazil has as its largest member the Roman Catholic Church, and the assembly will meet on the campus of the Pontifical Catholic University in Porto Alegre. As we become ever more familiar with our partners in that part of the world, opportunities for continuing dialogue and cooperation abound.

In the context of the shifting balance of global Christianity, the ecumenical movement has come to realize that representatives of churches in the North must learn to listen more carefully to what theologians of the South are saying – just as southern Christians must reject the tendency to stereotype northern cultures, listening instead to the actual voices of people from churches in Europe and North America. Scholarship from the various regions must be given equal weight in our deliberations, even as we learn to take into account the fact that the “typical” 21st-century Christian putting her faith into practice lives neither in the New York suburbs nor in the international community of Geneva, but more likely in a Tanzanian village, a Brazilian *favela*, or the slums of Jamaica.

But wherever we find ourselves, one of the most significant challenges facing each of us is the imperative of learning to listen. As I have already said, this is essential to interchurch

understanding – but it is equally crucial in the spheres of mission and evangelism, politics and international affairs, and inter-religious relations. We ourselves need to become better listeners, and as churches we must teach those around us to listen with care. Listen to those with whom you disagree. Listen to members of other churches, and of other faiths, and of none. Create models of creative listening and clear communication within your own churches and ecumenical organizations, and at the flashpoints in your communities. Communication across barriers, based on disciplined listening, is a key to peace-making in our times. We need truly to understand the weight of the burdens carried by others, and also to discover their capacity to care. Having listened, having understood, we shall be expected to respond to those whom we have heard in faith, hope, and love.

The Gospel in an Age of Pluralism

I have already touched on the urgency of inter-religious dialogue in today's world. On a practical level, this is an undertaking that is best pursued ecumenically rather than on a church-by-church basis. But are the churches in sufficient agreement on matters of faith and practice to join in voicing a common “Christian” position on issues under discussion? The need for consensus on a wide range of issues – theological, cultural, pragmatic – is, in my opinion, one of the most convincing arguments in favour of multilateral dialogues among the churches. Bilateral dialogue between pairs of churches or confessions have their place, but they are insufficient in establishing a universal sense of Christian identity. To some extent, wider participation in councils or forums may complicate inter-Christian conversations on matters of Faith and Order or mission and evangelism, yet without the broadest possible representation the conclusions of any such gathering will remain open to pointed criticism.

It is precisely on the question of how Christians relate to people of other faiths that we currently require a new round of multilateral theological engagement. As Christians, as churches, we should be inquiring together as to God's purpose for us in a multi-cultural world characterized by a diversity of faiths. What is expected of us as churches in this day, and how does our Christian calling correspond to the tasks of proclamation, truth-telling, co-existence, and overcoming violence?

Whatever our need for internal dialogue on theological responses to pluralism, there remains the unavoidable necessity of engaging ecumenically in what some call “a broader ecumenism,” that of inter-religious dialogue, especially in clearing away misconceptions between Christians and Muslims and rediscovering our shared values. The WCC actively pursues such dialogue, initiating further occasions for interaction among world faiths whenever we are able, for the sake of mutual understanding and the defusing of tensions among peoples.

The Spirituality of Engagement

In meeting with a group of Danish students who were visiting Geneva shortly after I became general secretary of the WCC, I recognized that each of them was searching for a more profound meaning in life than they were being offered by their society. But almost all of them were engaging in this search outside the traditional channels defined by their churches or other faith traditions. For them, the old forms of religion ring hollow; they are looking for something of substance. What is it that so many churches – and the ecumenical movement to which they have been exposed – fail to provide?

The term that usually comes into play in discussing this phenomenon is “spirituality” – a spirituality understood as existing “over against” organized religion. This yearning must be taken into account as we discuss the challenge facing ecumenism in the 21st century. I fear that the emphasis on “spirituality” in contemporary religious discourse provides one more enticement to battle-weary church leaders, and members, to retreat from social action and public controversy. If people are obsessed with the purely “spiritual,” runs the argument, then it might mean that our theology and our practice will turn inward once more.

It seems to me that the issue of spirituality as we know it arises as a question of identity. Just as this question arises in matters of interchurch cooperation and interfaith dialogue, it also affects us both in personal and public life. Unlike the 20th century, which was dominated by the politics of ideology, the 21st century will most likely be dominated by the politics of identity. Who are we? What is the meaning of our lives and of our relationships to God and one another? How can we explore the “depth dimension” of human existence? Over the past two decades, it has become almost “politically correct” to speak of spirituality in positive terms, where use of the word “religion” may breed suspicion and contempt. So let me risk saying one or two politically incorrect things about “spirituality” as it is often described.

The contemporary concept of “spirituality” too often embraces a vaguely psychological orientation toward the search for identity and meaning. It may present itself as an adjunct to the therapeutic, yet often in an uncritically self-affirming way. Indeed, especially in Western culture, “the self” can easily become the object of an ill-defined, egoistic spirituality. Joseph Campbell’s mantra, “Follow your bliss,” has been used as an excuse for selfishness – when it could as easily be interpreted as an invitation to discover the bliss of engaging creatively with the world.

John Wesley, who like John R. Mott is one of my Methodist forebears, once observed, “The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion.” To the extent that present-day spirituality threatens to turn a new generation inward, to focus minds on the self, to exalt the

solitary, ecumenical Christianity has a word to say. And an important part of our ecumenical calling today is to face the challenge of an ingrown spirituality and promote its alternative – a spirituality that rejoices in the continuity of things of the spirit with action for liberation, justice, and peace. The discovery of identity, meaning, and purpose must not be accepted as our ultimate goal. It is simply a spiritual starting point.

In 1975, M. M. Thomas of India, then moderator of the WCC's central committee, spoke of the need for a "spirituality of combat" in confronting the principalities and powers of this life. What is needed today is a spirituality of engagement that takes hold of real-world as well as personal challenges, and will not let them go unresolved.

Such a spirituality of engagement may begin in a profound encounter with the self, yet from the beginning we must be prepared to move beyond self into close community, and from there into action in the world God loves. In the solitude of self, we experience a yearning for companionship; in community, we find the desire and commitment to help build a more just and caring world. In our interaction with the world and its people, the Holy Spirit will affirm our identity as followers of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

I have tried to lay out, for our further discussion, some of the challenges that face the ecumenical movement today.

The primary question for each of us, and for all of us together, is how we are to respond to the challenges ahead. It helps to remember that what appear to be stumbling blocks may turn out to be stepping stones. It helps even more to realize that we do not face these challenges alone. The triune God is with us, gathering and guiding us in company with the whole people of God.

In facing the challenges of this century, I commend to you the prayer which is our theme for the 9th Assembly of the WCC: "God, in your grace, transform the world." Although some of us spend a great deal of time contemplating the reconfiguration of existing institutions, or the founding of a more inclusive forum, the ecumenical movement is not ultimately about such instruments. It is fundamentally about faith in God, proclamation of new life in Christ, confidence in the Spirit to lead us into visible expressions of the unity we possess as God's gift to the church. The ecumenical movement is also a declaration, despite any challenge that may face us, of our sure and certain hope for God's gracious transformation of this world.