



Ecumenism Defined

Rev. Purity Malinga

Foreword

“He went on from there and saw two other brothers, James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John in a boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets. Jesus called them”.
(Matthew 4: 21)

Commentator Brian Stoffregen says of this Matthew 4 passage: *“I don't know if Matthew (or the original author) intended it, but the word for "mending" the nets in 4:21 (katartizo) is used in a number of other contexts. Perhaps most significant for us is its use in 1Cor 1:10. The word is translated "be united". It is the "mending" of the divisions or schisms within the church. Such unifying is necessary for the church to effectively carry out its purpose.”*

Stoffregen goes on to say: *“The noun form (katartismos) is also used in Ephesians 4:12 concerning "equipping" the saints. It is doing what is necessary to make them useful. That is why God has given them different gifts.”*

The *raison d'être* of fisher-folk (and congregations) is to be actively fishing with their nets, *“but sometimes they need to take time to restore what is broken, what is hindering their primary task of bringing in fish.”*

It is these two senses of ‘mending’ about which this booklet is essentially written: To equip 21st Century Disciples of Christ, to be more effective in their activities toward the unity of the universal church, local and global as we spread the net of the reign of God.

This is a handbook for those who are genuine transforming disciples to equip us to mend the net of factionalism; schisms; denominationalism and any form of ism that creates division within the church

This handbook will also assist our churches to have a better understanding of the critical importance of Ecumenism in a fractured church and world.

The Presiding Bishop, MCSA Ecumenical Advisory Committee and the District Ecumenical Affairs Secretaries have all had input into the development of this handbook. We especially thank our Ecumenical Affairs Unit Director Rev Purity Malinga for her leadership; guidance and input into this monograph on Ecumenism. Our prayer is that it will be well used in assisting with repairing our net of disunity at all levels of our beloved church and wider ecumenical family, so that the prayer of oneness by Jesus in John 17 will be become a tangible reality.

Yours in constant search of *oikumene* in the church and world,

Peace and Blessings,

Bishop Mike Vorster

Chairperson MCSA Ecumenical Affairs Advisory Committee.

INTRODUCTION

When I was appointed Director of the Ecumenical Affairs Unit of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), a number of questions were raised both by clergy and laity. The thrust of the questioning focused on the relevance of ecumenism. Further questions included, "Do we have such a unit in our church? What does it do?" To comments like "We have enough problems as a church without us getting involved with other churches"; "Ecumenism belonged to the apartheid era, do we still need it in democracy?" These questions and views signified a lack of understanding and even interest in matters ecumenical.

When members of the church raise such questions in particular, about ecumenism, it provides an opportunity for the church leadership to create an environment conducive for engaging and empowering its membership about the role and relevance of ecumenism in a young democracy such South Africa's. Creating a better understanding of ecumenism will enhance collegial interactions among Christians and other religious groups. Those who have been actively involved in the MCSA for some time, i.e. the older generation will remember a time when at every synod or conference would feature sessions of ecumenical guests/ fraternal greetings with other denominations sharing on what they do and wishing the Methodists blessings at their sittings. While this still happens in some areas of the Connexion, it is no longer common practice. The mainline churches in South Africa have experienced a noticeable drifting away and limited cooperation on ecumenical ventures or initiatives. Some people attribute such change to democracy. For instance under the apartheid regime churches were united to affirm equal rights. One school of thought contends that with apartheid dismantled, the cooperation lost impetus. Others attribute this to the closure or demolition of the Federal Theological Seminary (Fedsem), which was an ecumenical seminary. As a product of Fedsem, I do believe that its closure did contribute to the isolation of the clergy at training, resulting in isolated ministries in the community. Whatever the cause of this drifting away from one another, the MCSA has continued to take ecumenism seriously. It is for that reason, that "oneness" forms part of our continuing transformation call, "*We believe that the ¹church is called to a commitment to be one so that the world may believe*".

WHAT IS ECUMENISM?

Ecumenism is variously defined, for instance as:

- "Efforts and initiatives aimed at the unity of Christians of different denominations/ churches". (Wikipedia, 2015);
- "A movement seeking to achieve worldwide unity among Christian churches, through greater co-operation and improved understanding". (American Heritage Dictionary);
or
- "the principle of promoting co-operation and better understanding among different denominations: aimed at universal Christian unity". (Oxford Dictionary).

The origin of the English word "ecumenical" is from the ancient Greek word "oikoumene". The root of this word "oikos" means house or household. In the New Testament, the word

¹ The MCSA 2014 Yearbook and Directory, page 2 Transformation call number 5

“oikos” is used to mean stewardship - taking care of economy or building community and household of faith. While, the word “oikoumene” is used also in the New Testament to mean “the whole inhabited earth” or “the whole of life” or “the whole world/ creation.” e.g. Luke 2:1, Luke 4:5, Matthew 24:14. The word “oikoumene/ ecumenical” was used for councils/ gatherings of the church as early as the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. as the councils brought together representatives of Christian communities from around the then known world.

The realities and challenges of the 21st century have forced many Christians (especially those in the ecumenical movement) to embrace the original meaning of ecumenism. While seeking unity among Christians remains important to the nature and mission of the church, it has become clear that God’s call to the church is to serve the unity of ALL creation. As we are grappling with, among other things, the effects of globalisation, changing demographics of religion, climate change, poverty and inequality etc. it is clear that the ecumenical co-operations need to be broadened and all encompassing.

Ecumenism is no foreign concept to African people. Unity “ubunye” in the Nguni language, is inter-connected with the concept of “ubuntu”, “botho”, “humanness”, which is the way of life and the foundation of African morality. In the saying, “Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” we, in Africa express our inter-dependence irrespective of social or religious affiliations - a value of life that is timeless.

In the latest Unity Statement of the recent World Council of Churches (WCC) Assembly the member churches, including the MCSA, agreed that, “...the unity of the church, the unity of the human community and the unity of the whole creation are inter-connected. Christ who makes us one calls us to live in justice and peace and impels us to work together for justice and peace in God’s world. The plan of God made known to us in Christ is, in the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth (Ephesians 1:9-10)”².

ECUMENISM: A BIBLICAL IDEA

The unity that Christians are called to is founded and based on the nature of God presented to us in the bible. We learn from one of the Psalms of Ascent - those that were sung by the Israelites when they met to celebrate their festivals, such as the Passover, Harvest etc., in Jerusalem. For example, Psalm 133:1 states “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!” Jerusalem became a symbol of unity for the Jews because it was their place of gathering to celebrate their relationship with their God - whether they lived in or outside of Palestine. As a Jew, Jesus joined pilgrims every year at the Passover festivals and probably sang the unity song with fellow Jews.

When He prayed for His disciples, as recorded in John 17, He clarified the kind of unity He was praying for: “...that all of them may be one, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in You” (verse 21 a). In other words, just as it is the nature of God to be one with His son Jesus, it is the nature of God’s people, the disciples of Christ to be one. It is no co-incidence that the church was born in Jerusalem, in the place of **the** unity of God’s people. The Holy Spirit created a new unified people who experienced the power of God. People who came from all over, heard about God’s deeds of power in their own languages (Acts 2:6ff). Many who heard the gospel preached repented and believed and that was the start of the church; the fellowship of believers. These believers, as Luke tells us, “were together and had

² WCC 10th Assembly: Doc no. PRC 01.1-Unity statement-revised

everything in common" (Acts 2:44). Unity is therefore the nature of the church because it is the nature of God.

From the beginning the ecumenical movement (initiatives and activities organised to promote Christian unity) was and is still based on the scriptures – ecumenism understood to be God's will for and God's gift to the church. The World Council of Churches (WCC) defines itself as "a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit". The primary purpose of this fellowship is "to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe" (John 17)³.

Jesus's prayer in John 17 is the foundation for ecumenism. Before He was arrested to be crucified, Jesus prayed for His immediate disciples and the future ones - all who would believe in Him. His great desire was that His followers would unite and be one. The unity of believers would be based on God's unity with Jesus and it would result in the world believing that Jesus was sent by God.

A lot has been said and done by the church since its inception to try and be true to the desire of the Lord. There are churches that identify the one church of Christ as their own, and those that view their own churches as real churches and others incomplete. The general understanding among the Protestant churches today is that the unity of the church does not mean uniformity. Through shared faith in Christ, expressed in the proclamation of the Word of God and in lives of service and witness, each church is in communion with other churches.

Over the years, through the programmes of the WCC, Christians across the world have united and co-operated in challenging all kinds of injustices e.g. Apartheid; the Decade to Overcome Violence; a Call to Just Peace; etc. Despite differences, doctrinal and otherwise, churches are able to unite and act as agents of positive change in the world.

The letter to the Ephesians is one writing of the New Testament that teaches about the unity of the church. The author, Paul, uses the analogy of the body to explain the unity of purpose of the church.

- Chapter 1:8-10: The unity of all creation planned by God was revealed in Jesus Christ and will be fulfilled in Christ.
- Chapter 2:11-22: Christ' death has broken down all walls of hostility and has made believers members in the household of God.
- Chapter 4:1-16: the church a sign and an agent of unity.
- Chapter 6:10-17: the work for unity is a life-long battle NB vs 12

These biblical references and examples are to indicate that ecumenism is based on the scriptures. Ignoring it is to ignore who we are called to be as those created in the image of God and as Christians. The All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) sums this up in its description of the rationale for ecumenism:

³ The Constitution and Resolution of the World Council of Churches

“The primary underlying theological principle of ecumenism is that the entire human race bears the same origin and we are children of the same parent -God...To pray and address God “our Father” has a great ecumenical significance, a significance beyond the unity of the denominations of the Christian church, to that of the unity of humankind”.⁴

There is a sad reality however, that divisive issues remain between churches and within churches. At the local levels as well as at the international levels Christians do not always recognize Christ in each other. At the WCC level for instance we cannot all gather together around the table of the Lord! The experiences of divisions and competition tend to make us withdraw into our own traditions and grow weary of the ecumenical path.

ECUMENISM AND METHODISM

For the Methodist view on many subjects the starting point is usually the teachings of John Wesley. For ecumenism his sermon “The Catholic Spirit” based on 2Kings 10:15, becomes the basis. In this sermon Wesley explains what the “catholic spirit” does not mean. It does not mean “indifference to all opinions, indifference to the variety of ways of worship, indifference to all congregations/denominations”. This is what he meant, “Christians with a catholic spirit ... love all who believe in Jesus whatever their beliefs or forms of worship, or whatever denomination they belong to. They regard their fellow Christians as friends and brothers in the Lord, and they look forward to being with them in heaven. They pray for their fellow Christians and wish them well in everything they do. They help them in their material and spiritual welfare, even to the extent of dying for their sake if necessary.”⁵

As taught by Wesley, Methodists in general hold this view that a relationship of love, acceptance, trust and mutual co-operation is to exist among all Christians. It is for that reason that they take ecumenism seriously. The Methodist Church of Southern Africa’s commitment to ecumenism is recorded in conference resolutions and in actions that have been taken as early as the 1960s. For example, the 1966 Conference, “...desiring fuller realization of Christian unity, resolved: to consult prayerfully and in the light of scriptures with the members of our own church through the usual church courts and other organisations and fellowships, on ways and means of responding to the prayer of our Lord, “ that they may be one...that the world may believe”.⁶

At the same Conference it was resolved, “in the interest of the growth towards unity, and wherever applicable, the taking of opportunities be encouraged, for congregations of different denominations to worship together in one another’s churches”. The present fourth transformation call, therefore, follows a long history of commitment to unity among ourselves and to unity with other churches and, indeed, the whole of creation.

The MCSA has been one of the member churches of the Church Unity Commission (CUC) from its inception in 1968. This is a South African ecumenical structure that has focused on issues of ecclesiology and doctrine, with the aim of achieving organic union between the so-called English speaking churches i.e. the Anglicans, Methodists, Congregational, Uniting

⁴ AACC Website – Lets include the full website address

⁵ Sermons on several occasions by the Rev John Wesley-translated in modern English by d. Holway p.399

⁶ Minutes of Conference 1966 p.208

Presbyterian Church in South Africa and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in South Africa. While the union has not been achieved, there are milestones that have been achieved and worth remembering, celebrating and living out. They include:

- The free transfer of members between these churches;
- Mutual Eucharistic hospitality - the open table;
- Mutual acceptance of ministries of Word and Sacrament; and
- Forming united churches.

While these were achieved years ago, it is concerning that members and ministers of the CUC churches get subjected to unnecessary discrimination due to lack of knowledge, for example, a young woman who was a full member of the MCSA married an Anglican man and was asked to go through confirmation before she could participate in the Eucharist in the Anglican church. It is imperative that these agreements are communicated to clergy and members of all the CUC member churches.

The issue of divisions within the denomination comes up whenever ecumenism is discussed. How does a denomination that cannot deal with racial, ethnic and other. divisions within, begin to encourage ecumenism? It is to be highlighted that the unity to which Jesus Christ calls His disciples is not selective. The energy we put into ecumenical co-operation should be equal to that we put into being one as Methodists. The conviction "that it is the will of God for the Methodist Church that it should be one and undivided", (MBO, page 227) should continue to guide us in the way we relate and live together. It is for that reason that ecumenism cannot and should not be seen as an added responsibility but as an integral part of our efforts to reach the ideal of the unity and undividedness of the Church of Christ. It is also to be understood as a missionary strategy to ensure greater impact wherever we are, locally, regionally and nationally.

At local level there is an ecumenism that has not died - carried out by women and their organisations in townships, towns and rural areas. The coming together of women across denominations in funerals, supporting one another in different church events and holding World Day of Prayer (uzwelonke) together, etc. We salute these women and at times some men, for their faithful obedience to the call of the gospel. Many do this without the support or encouragement from their ministers. More could be achieved with ministers' support, and them taking a lead in ecumenical co-operations locally. At regional, provincial and/or national levels, we are encouraged by the bishops who represent the MCSA ecumenically and play a prophetic role in society.

As a Connexion, the MCSA is a member of an ecumenical continental body - the All Africa Conference of Churches and a member of two world bodies - the World Methodist Council and the World Council of Churches. Belonging to all these ecumenical bodies provides us with many resources for dialogue, worship and for being in mission with people of other churches and faiths. There is therefore no reason why Methodist members and societies should fail to be in mission and co-operate ecumenically.

CONCLUSION

IS ECUMENISM RELEVANT FOR US TODAY?

- It is a timeless gift and call of the disciples of Christ.

- It is part of the Methodist ethos - a way of being.
- As such we all need to commit ourselves to it as individuals, organisations, societies, circuits and districts.

COMMITMENT TO ECUMENISM PRODUCES:

- An audible prophetic voice;
- Promotes co-operation on issues, which affect people's lives (mission);
- Learning and understanding different church traditions/religious traditions;
- Changed attitudes towards one another (no religion or denomination has pure doctrine); and
- Learning to worship and pray together.

WHAT THEN CAN EACH METHODIST SOCIETY, CIRCUIT OR ORGANISATION DO TO EXPRESS COMMITMENT TO ECUMENISM?

- Establish or participate in building meaningful relationships with Christians of other denominations and people of other faiths;
 - Seek co-operation on issues of mutual interest and of the wellbeing of all in the community;
 - Stand and act together on social justice issues, e.g. fighting poverty, HIV & Aids pandemic, abuse of women, men and children etc.
 - Seek and insist on mutual respect and learning from each other. Overcome prejudice, stereotyping others; and
 - Build inter- generational bridges to ensure ecumenical continuity in communities.
-

A CALL FOR INTENTIONAL ECUMENICAL ENGAGEMENT

Address to Ecumenical Secretaries of MCSA by Presiding Bishop Siwa

Greetings!

Charles Dickens in the Tale of Two Cities has these often quoted words:

It was the best of time; it was the worst of time. It was the age of wisdom; it was the age of foolishness. It was the epoch of belief; it was the epoch of incredulity. It was the season of light; it was the season of darkness. It was the spring of hope; it was the winter of despair. We had everything before us; we had nothing before us. We were all going direct to heaven; we were all going direct the other way. In short the period was so far like the present period. That of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil in the superlative degree of comparison only. (Chapter one called The Period.)

Steve Turner then invites us to reading the signs of the time, listening to God and one another when he writes – “History repeats itself; it has to because nobody listens.”

So it is said that our word Ecumenical comes from the Greek word “oikoumene” which means the ‘habitable earth’ (the world), as it occurs in Matthew 24:14 etc. (i.e. the whole human race). God’s family is the inhabitants of the world from whom or which God so loved that God gave the only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. In this ‘oikoumene’ God calls (kalew – invite, summon) all of us to believe and begin to live in a salvific way for the sake of God’s world. It is a call to participate in the privileges of the Gospel and those privileges have a responsibility for what God loves so much.

Then this beautiful ecclesia (the called ones) within the oikoumene, has over the centuries and decades been buffeted by the storms which only changed the shape but not the calling thereof. Samuel John Stone (1839 – 1900) sums it up well in that hymn 701 in the Methodist Hymnal;

“The Church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ he Lord; She is His creation by water and the word; From heaven He came and sought her and for her life He died... and to one hope she presses with every grace endued...By schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed; yet saints their watch are keeping. Their cry goes up: How long? And soon the night of weeping shall be the mourn of the song.”

The journey of ecumenism has been tough. The story of the various councils is the story of pain and seeking to be obedient to the call. Nearer home, David Thomas writes the story of the SACC, which he says started as the Christian Council of South Africa (CCSA) in 1936. It had its share of difficulties, which exist to this day. When the NG Kerk, withdrew from the Council in 1940, the tensions were generated between the English speaking and Afrikaans speaking communities. The Anglican Church also withdrew, questioning whether the body had any role to play without the Afrikaans churches. The Methodists also threatened to withdraw. The constitution had to be amended and the Anglicans re-joined after a year’s absence. There were other difficult moments, especially when the Council was now becoming more black, taking the pain of the black majority into the council in a less neat

Comment [A1]: Is this word correct ma?

way, resulting in churches becoming less comfortable. But the calling remains the same – we are called together in the oikumene, even when we become uncomfortable with each other at times.

Like in much discussion, recently, the divide between pre- and post-1994 is a regular feature especially in South Africa. Of course there are councils in all the countries of the Connexion. The SA churches had their mission defined for them by the struggle for liberation and some engaged the process forward-looking whilst others, even within the same church, engaged or disengaged resisting. Since 1994, it has become even more difficult, with churches not clearly understanding their own decision of being in critical solidarity with the democratic government. There are however serious challenges facing the nations including those of our Connexion. Recently, with the floods in Mozambique, we made an appeal to the churches and bodies within the Connexion and beyond. One organisation responded that they have already given assistance to the United Methodist Church there. That raised the challenge of cooperation between Wesleyan family churches within our Connexion. The crisis is calling the Methodist family to seriously begin talking to each other and work together.

Also in Swaziland, there are churches that are so close to the Government that it is difficult for the Christian Council of Swaziland not to be sidelined. The Methodist Church in that country is caught in between. The same in South Africa, some church leaders run to be so close to the Government that the lines are blurred. Until the church regains her identity and calling, we shall continue to limp along. The secretaries are to encourage the local ministers and leaders to play a significant role in the ecumenical movement/activities in their local contexts. The members themselves do participate in various forms, e.g. the chains of cooperation etc. with or without the support of local leadership. This will then influence the role at Regional/Provincial/ National, Continental and Global level.

We have the local, regional, national, continental and global bodies and it is interesting to observe our understanding and relationships at these levels. I guess that it is for the Secretaries to reflect and report on this and suffice to make some examples. When Rev Dr Mvume Dandala joined the AACC, the comments were that he had left the church. Recently when Rev Ivan Abrahams took the leadership of WMC, it is the same perception that he has “left”. You may have noticed also that the World Methodist Conference included all the Wesleyan family churches. We meet there and rarely see each other back home. These are the areas of engagement

We cannot afford to be disjointed in action. Think of the challenges we face: the situation in Mozambique where one leader threatens to go back to the bush (civil war threat?), the floods in that country; the economic and political crisis in Swaziland; poverty in Lesotho; moral decay in all Southern Africa; refugees and displacement of people all over the Globe especially so in Southern Africa; a dysfunctional education system in South Africa; the challenge of HIV/Aids and the ailing public health care, violence especially against women and female children. What about the well-being of clergy families? The house is on fire in the oikumene. We cannot afford to bury our heads in the sand. This is the time to strengthen our ecumenical ties, join hands and move together in serious **prophetic action and living**. There is a difference between Prophetic voice and prophetic action. We sometimes confuse media statements as prophetic voice. Of course they have their place, but what is needed most is prophetic action, which culminates in helping the voiceless to find their voice. That is where we shall meet Christ the Divine Stranger as articulated in Matthew 25:35-36; “I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me; sick and you visited me; in prison and you came to see me.”

As fellow citizens in the Oikumene, we are called to wrestle with the question; "what is God's will in this situation at this time and we will be better served when we do this TOGETHER. The Ecumenical movement is built on the premise that the Church of Christ is one – yes the formulations may be different, but they are more often than not legitimate expressions of the Gospel. As we respond to our pain, the pain of the world – suffering, justice and peace issues, we discover the connection more than what separates us.

TOGETHER a healing community!

Comment

“We are living in a society that is plagued with corruption, lawlessness in schools, woman & child abuse, drug abuse; child pregnancy. Sadly, these seem to have become a norm, which is not strongly challenged.

Surely, we cannot continue with business as usual while our communities are falling apart. Churches need to start embarking on “prophetic actions” for the wellbeing of all God’s people. 1 Peter 2:9 is a reminder to all Christians of their role “But you are chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now obtained mercy”

This document encourages joining forces with other churches and all people of goodwill to bring about justice and peace for all.”

Linda Mtwisha

