

# National Dialogue for Christian Unity

## Towards a Theology for Christian Unity in Aotearoa New Zealand

*As agreed at the 8 September 2010 meeting  
of the National Dialogue for Christian Unity  
(Appendix 1 to the NDCU Constitution)*

### Introduction

It is comparatively easy for churches to agree on doing some things together, to engage in interchurch activity. It has proven more difficult to explore theologically what separates us as well as what we hold in common, in such a way as to further the visible unity of Christ's church on earth. It is hoped this document will serve the deeper theological discussion that needs to take place.

At the outset we recognise that ecumenism, as we now understand it, has not only to do with the unity of the church but also the unity of the whole of creation. This is in keeping with the Greek word 'oikoumene', from which our word ecumenical comes. It means the whole inhabited earth, or living household of God. This wider understanding of ecumenism and unity invites us to mission, mission to all God's people and the whole of God's creation.

Developing a contextual understanding of what it means to seek the visible unity of the church, and to engage in mission together, will be an ongoing challenge to any future instrument for unity in this land. A key question will always be "What is the Spirit calling us to be and do together as churches here in the Aotearoa New Zealand context?"

All dialogue calls for deep mutual respect; normally this grows as participants get to know one another better as people and at the level of faith. This respect is essential because theological dialogue is a conversation with the aim of laying hold of truth more firmly. This means the dialogue cannot be a negotiation nor a settling for the lowest common denominator in belief. Basic convictions of faith must not be diminished in dialogue but preserved; dialogue must never become a relativisation of truth or an indifference to it.

We are aware of the need to be sensitive in the language we use. Dialogue should offer the opportunity to interpret to each other the theological and doctrinal language seen by our churches to be necessary for expressing the faith. Here loyalty to the truth can lead dialogue partners to reappraise their own heritage, to challenge one another, as well as to seek to overcome distortions or misunderstandings that may have come about as a result of polemics from the past. On occasion it may be possible to find new language in which to express what has been discovered to be a now common understanding. At the same time this will always be governed by the awareness that the Christian faith is given, not made up by us. It will be important not to take for granted that all have the same theological understanding of commonly used terminology nor give it the same weight; e.g. church, mission, liturgy, culture, authority, unity.

## **Mission-shaped unity**

The imperative for Christian unity is mission-shaped. The unity of the church witnesses to God's power to reconcile. The unity of the church also serves the unity of humankind and the integrity of creation. Ecumenism calls for a rich, mutual interdependence. How can one part of the body say to another "I have no need of you"? (1 Cor.12:21) Ecumenical instruments seek to enable Paul's understanding of church to be a reality: "If one part of the body suffers, all suffer together." (1 Cor 12:26) and as another witness says, only the whole church can proclaim the whole gospel.

Both mission and unity, which ecumenism serves, are integral to the life of the church. When ecumenical activity is mission-shaped it is accountable to God's purposes. When mission is given priority it will give birth to expressions of ecumenical life that are open to faith sharing, relationship healing and building, as well as justice making. A mission-shaped ecumenism will always take the context of this time and place seriously. It will provide an environment for consultation and collaboration on finding ways to express God's love and justice in our own particular situation.

Those who come after us depend on our obedience now. Those who went before us on the ecumenical journey challenge us in the form of the Lund principle expressed as a question. "Should not our churches ask themselves whether they are showing sufficient eagerness to enter into conversation with other churches, and whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?" (A Word to the Churches, 3rd World Conference on Faith and Order, Lund, 1952)

## **Biblical basis**

The Scriptures of the First Testament affirm God as creator who has a passionate interest in the well-being of creation. Diverse experience of God's grace is witnessed to in traditions of covenant and liberation, law and prophecy, wisdom and apocalyptic. God's concern for the unity of humankind and all living creatures is seen in the covenant with Noah. (Genesis 8:9) Through Abraham all nations will be blessed. (Genesis 12:3) At the same time the Scriptures acknowledge that God has called Israel to a special vocation to be "a light to the nations." (Isaiah 49:6) The prophets speak of God's vision of shalom when nations will "beat their swords into ploughshares." (Micah 4:3) In God's new creation the "wolf and the lamb will feed together." (Isaiah 65:25)

In the New Testament God's love for the world in all its confusion and brokenness is focused in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. He proclaimed the reign of God (Luke 4:21); the disciples acknowledged him saying "Truly you are the Son of God" (Matthew 14:33) and testified that in him "the Word became flesh." (John 1:14) As the followers of the Way reflected on the significance of Christ they came to see that the Good News was to be shared with Gentiles. Paul wrote of our being given a ministry of reconciliation: "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself ... and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." (2 Corinthians 5:19) In John's gospel Jesus prays for his followers: "...that they be completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me..." (John 17:23)

## **Theological foundations**

God, the Holy Trinity, does not give up on the vision of shalom proclaimed by prophets and embodied in Jesus. God continues to search for ways in which this damaged world might be healed and find its fulfillment. The church is the first fruits of God's new creation. Unity is a gift of and the will of God, and is at the heart of the gospel. If we have been reconciled to God through Christ, then we are called to show forth this reconciliation. We are aware that our life can deny the gospel we proclaim. The church is a koinonia - a community, a communion of those who have been drawn into the life of God through Christ. In this koinonia our relationship with God is nourished and our relationship with other members of the Body of Christ is characterised by a shared faith, hope and love. The church keeps alive the disturbing memory of Jesus, including his mission to the poor, marginalized and oppressed. The unity of the church serves the unity of humankind.

This dynamic koinonia in the Holy Spirit rejects injustice in God's world and within the church as contrary to the divine intention. The unity prayed for by Christ is not a bland or regimented uniformity. Because God's creation is multiform and God's own life is characterised by relationship, God's purpose celebrates diversity. The church welcomes the rich variety of gifts that all peoples bring to the koinonia of Christ. If unity is experienced as oppressive or violent it cannot be the unity of Christ. Visible unity does not require the extinguishing of any particular identity. Our task is to find models of this koinonia that witness to a unity that preserves freedom. Examples of such models are 'reconciled diversity' and 'conciliar fellowship'.

## **Spiritual experience**

Under the impulse of the Holy Spirit the last century has seen Christians, Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox, become aware of the scandal of division, bigotry and isolation. As the Holy Spirit has shaped ecumenical encounter we have discovered that what we hold in common is greater than what separates us. Prayer is the basis of ecumenism because it calls us to be open before God and our sisters and brothers. We have come to see that a proud self-sufficiency is alien to the gospel. A new humility has been born among us that rejects the spirit of triumphalism and ethnocentrism. We embrace the insight that each ecclesial tradition, though existing in good faith and integrity, is partial. Each has gifts to offer the wider church and each is enriched through a willingness to receive. The ecumenical spirit nurtures a catholicity in which we come to know each other, respect each other and cherish each other. A unity in diversity is possible where no spiritual treasure is lost.

As pilgrim people we are given companions for the Way not of our own choosing. Some have a very different experience of God's grace in different locations and times. Those who belong to sacramental traditions recognise baptism as a basis for ecumenism which stimulates a longing to gather around the same Eucharistic table. Yet all, including those not from sacramental traditions, draw encouragement to work for the visible unity of the church from reading the scriptures and from prayer inspired by the Spirit. We have reached the point in our ecumenical journey where we know that "There is a recognition of an already existing real, though imperfect, communion between the churches." (Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness 5th World Conference on Faith and Order, Santiago de

Compostella, 1993.) The challenge now is to recognise the apostolic faith in the life of those from whom we are separated and to assist them to see the same faith in our common life. Ecumenism calls us to be prophetic housekeepers of God's creation especially in our own social and historical context.

## **Ecumenical space**

In recent ecumenical discussion some significance has been attached to the concept of “ecumenical space”. This refers to the setting in which, even in a state of division, churches witness to their common allegiance to Jesus Christ and cooperate together to further the visible unity of the church. It is in this space that our common Christian identity is affirmed. It is here we can talk together in a new way, with a greater opportunity to discern together Christ’s will for the church, in ways that are not possible in isolation from one another. This is a space where there is commitment to overcome former divisions and search for unity. It uses the process of dialogue to achieve transformation and renewal in the light of our common quest.

In the midst of divergent affirmations, “ecumenical space” encourages us to seek to maintain fellowship with each other. This is the space where frank and serious discussion that embraces questioning and listening, searching and discovering, takes place. In this space no church is required to deny its identity or heritage. Here we refrain from judging one another as churches. The opportunities of “ecumenical space” include reconciliation of memories, renewal of the churches, common witness, guidance into the will of the Spirit, and discernment of what will advance the visible unity of the church. There are certain obligations that go with being together in this “ecumenical space”. They include: compatibility of attitude and behaviour within and outside the space; making sure our actions are consistent with brotherly and sisterly relationships; and a fostering of mutual support, forbearance and accountability. We need more, not fewer, of these “ecumenical spaces” at this time.

## **Achieving the immediate goals**

*(Appendix 2 to the NDCU Constitution)*

The National Dialogue for Christian Unity has suggested the following as a possible way of beginning the life of the NDCU . The proposal is to spend time getting to know one another and to begin to take each other seriously on a theological and doctrinal level. It begins with a time of confessional sharing. Later it should be possible to move on to meetings with formal agreed themes.

### **First phase: Confessional Sharing - getting to know one another theologically.**

This could take place over the course of a year or more with a couple of meetings, ideally of two or three days each. A representative of each confession represented on the Churches Forum for Christian Unity in Aotearoa New Zealand would make a presentation, with opportunity for questions and discussion.

Ideally each presentation should include a prepared paper available to participants beforehand. A secretary appointed for the process would record discussion. Out of this could come themes for further joint study and discussion.

The papers for the first stage of confessional sharing might be prepared by taking into account the following or similar:

- confessional documents
- revelation/scripture/tradition
- Jesus Christ/the Gospel
- the commandments/the moral life
- grace and the spiritual life

The advantage of having such a list would be to help move the dialogue towards common areas for future discussion.

The approach envisaged here gives full account to the reality of each participating confession in an open encounter with other confessions; it allows the participants to express their own distinctive heritage so that they may share it with others. This can help open up the next stage in the dialogue and can look to the growth of communion by an eventual exchange of gifts between churches as these are found to complement each other.

### **Second phase: Dialogue Discussion**

Ideally the themes for this phase would begin to emerge from phase one. There should be a small working group of two or three, including the secretary, to see to this. Topics such as the following might be envisaged:

- unity/the goal of ecumenism/dialogue
- the Church -- visible/invisible
- revelation/teaching authority
- scripture/tradition
- mission/evangelisation