

Christ's Love Moves the Church

An Ecumenism of the Heart

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Abstract

The ecumenical movement stands in need of renewal, a renewal inspired and moved by a depth and warmth of love. It has, for too long, been dominated by discourses of the mind (and particularly by styles of thinking of the West and the global North). A renewal that draws on the knowledge of body, mind, and heart might resonate with a much broader global constituency and fire passion and commitment in people who now pull back from what they experience as abstract forms shaped by colonial power and culture. A unity founded in a loving communion may open up new possibilities, and a new language of the heart might stir a revival in the ecumenical movement.

Keywords

ecumenical movement, renewal, love, communion, church

The ecumenical movement has often been understood as a movement for renewing the life of the church, but there is a need for ecumenism itself to be renewed. In these times, we need a renewed ecumenism for a postcolonial and decolonized world, an ecumenical movement that has a new texture and culture, that is at ease with embracing body, mind, and heart together. This is an ecumenism that is prepared to be shaped by people from the many different places and cultures of global Christianity, broader than the North American and European cultures that shaped it at its founding. For decades now, many have urged that the ecumenical movement should free itself from its entanglement with colonial history (much aware of its beginnings with the Edinburgh conference in 1910,

for example) and free itself from its captivity in Northern and Western styles of thinking. They urge the movement to shift away from a dominant rationality and the quest chiefly for doctrinal agreement to find a new beginning in a different place. A radical revival and a new turn is called for: one that is begun by those once marginalized by colonialism and the dominant cultures of the global North, one that takes into account the life of the body and the spirit as much as of the mind. This renewal begins from the command of Jesus to love (rather than the Cartesian presumption that thinking is the root of being) and celebrates the common life and action that the people of the churches affirm and celebrate.

Many in the churches have either walked away from the formal ecumenical movement or have never seen it as relevant to their lives. They see it as too tied to certain styles of faith or discourse and too dominated by professional theologians and elite Western traditions. Some have chosen to seek a more informal fellowship within global Christianity or to celebrate common action together. They choose to leave aside conversations about doctrinal disagreements or differences, disillusioned about the hope of resolving them. If the ecumenical movement represented by the fellowship of churches within the World Council of Churches (WCC) is to reconnect with its traditional constituency and with new ones, too, it needs to take account of this turn and renew itself.

The theme for the WCC's 11th Assembly – “Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity” – is the first such theme to put love at the heart of an assembly. This in itself is hugely significant and may mark a turning point. It has much potential to signal to a tired ecumenical movement that there could be a new beginning from a different, more holistic, more just, more passionate place. What could it mean to inspire anew an ecumenical movement that is founded on love, profoundly moved and inspired by love, and unafraid to talk about love? What could it mean to renew ecumenism so that it finds new shapes, forms, and styles in more holistic ways, embracing all of body, mind, and heart? What could it mean to discover a new ecumenism that refuses to simply take the easier option (to turn from the search for doctrinal agreement to a default “let's just work together” approach) and is instead ready to explore that “space in between” (between pure thought and pure action) – where faith is about feeling, passion, and prayer as much as it is about teaching and ideas? What could it mean to discover a new ecumenism that can somehow bring together the trinity of body, mind, and heart so that the churches may discover the gift of unity in receiving new ways to pray, think, and act as one?

Many positive advances have undoubtedly been made in the ecumenical movement, but we seem somehow stuck on the threshold of what we once hoped to cross. Neither more purely doctrinal debate nor solely “working together” seem to promise to take us

over the line to that unity for which we long. So, could the call to an “ecumenism of the heart” mark a turning point, an effective rallying cry, a newly unifying moment in which a new paradigm takes hold? A new beginning, from the place of love (bringing together thought, feeling, and action), may prove to be a moment of new inspiration for ecumenism.

Moved by Love: The Heart Is Stirred

A renewed ecumenical moment needs to begin with what it is that stirs us and moves us to join in Christ’s prayer for unity. It was only quite recently that I noticed the implications of an important part of my own tradition and commitment to ecumenism. When any minister in my own church (the United Reformed Church in the UK) is ordained, or even when they are inducted to a new pastorate, they are asked to make promises before the congregation: to declare faith in the triune God and to fulfil their duties as minister with faithfulness. But they are also asked to promise “to cherish love towards all other churches, and to endeavour always to build up the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church.” Significantly, this promise is not framed as one about respecting other churches, or working with other churches, or even abstractly seeking unity with other churches, but cherishing love toward all other churches. The value of love is even emphasized by that English word “cherish” – a word commonly known from the traditional English wedding service, as two people promise “to love and to cherish” one another.

The nature of this promise, to cherish love, is profoundly arresting and surprising in this context of an ordination or induction promise because of its contrast with the mood and style of so much present-day ecumenical encounter. Such conversations can sometimes become difficult, marked by resentment and anxiety rather than love. I have made this promise myself, to cherish love toward all other churches; so I know that I am called not only to think about ecumenism, difference, and unity but to “cherish love” and in that place to find what some would call “a heart for” ecumenism. And I recognize that the place of love is not one in which I can, or should, protect myself from pain or disappointment, but one in which I can only make myself vulnerable to the other and risk what might be so fruitful while also potentially so painful.

I have always been someone who can be persuaded by ideas. I thoroughly enjoy the intellectual pursuit of truth, the reading of academic papers, and the kind of debate that uses rhetoric and argument to persuade and change. I am well schooled in these traditional ways of presenting, arguing, and thinking, and I have used them well within the ecumenical movement over decades. I am not bad at the well-established ways of

being an ecumenist, of doing the work of Faith and Order, of taking steps forward and backward on the ecumenical pilgrimage of unity.

But, even so, even for one deeply schooled in the forms of theological debate shaped by white privilege and in the global North, it has been my own experience in the ecumenical movement that the most profound steps toward that visible unity for which Christ prays have always been taken in my own life when I am *moved* not only by powerful ideas but also by feelings, emotions, and passion, when I discover how to “cherish love.” I recall a speech I made at a Faith and Order plenary commission meeting in Crete in 2009, when I told the story of my engagement in a project on the teachers and witnesses of the early church and of how it happened that I was moved to change my mind. I reflected on what it was that had helped me to change and to *move and be moved* in reconciliation and unity. I said then, in telling the story of a profound change in myself:

This has not been, if anything ever is, only a purely academic exercise, but has engaged us deeply and spiritually, and has shown itself to be the kind of ecumenism for which many of us have longed . . .

The discussions often reached the deep places where Christian fellowship begins to mean something significant and where a sense of unity between us was being built. The quality of listening, of reflection and mutual honouring was high and, I and others too will testify, that this was one of the most beautiful, truthful and hope-filled ecumenical experiences we have had. This is not to say that there were no difficult moments or intractable discussions, that we did not struggle with unfamiliar ways of understanding or talking, but it is to say that something important happened as we met.¹

I wrote then about how I discovered, or rediscovered, the teachers and witnesses of the early church not as intellectuals and writers, abstracted from real life, but as belonging to times and circumstances of their own. I discovered them as pastors and practical theologians of their times, their witness being made in blood and tears as well as in the joy of the gospel. I learned, in short, to love them; and I learned this through what was a loving engagement with those from traditions other than my own. I discovered, through friendship with others in the project, what it means to talk of a *living* Tradition. I gained a new understanding of the dynamic movement of the Holy Spirit, as God works in past, present, and future to bring fulfilment and hope. I had come from an experience of the church in which the early witnesses and teachers of the church were not a living

¹ Susan Durber, “Tradition and Traditions: The Teachers and Witnesses of the Early Church,” in *Called to Be the One Church: Faith and Order at Crete*, Faith and Order Paper No. 212, ed. John Gibaut (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2012), 121–22, Faith and Order Papers Digital Edition: <https://archive.org/details/wccfops2.219/page/121/mode/2up>; see also Susan Durber, “Tradition and Traditions,” Commission on Faith and Order, WCC website, 10 October 2009, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/tradition-and-traditions-rev-dr-susan-durber>.

force in my faith. But I came away from that project deeply persuaded that the teachers and witnesses of the early church are and should be honoured as our common parents.

I came to see that learning what was called “patristics” in a cool, beautiful, and civilized room at Oxford University seriously misled me. I imagined each of the teachers I studied in their own book-lined studies looking out over gardens with lemon trees and warm sun, writing beautiful, elegant words by day and then perhaps enjoying wine at night, dressed in clean togas and with full stomachs. I may have learned something about desert monks and pictured them in quiet caves, troubled by little more than dreams. I knew about the work of the councils, but imagined the delegates sitting neatly and politely as though at an academic conference. I should have realized that this was a completely false picture of the early church. I had learned about persecution and suffering, about martyrdom and politics, but in another class on another day. And I had never learned about these teachers as people of prayer, of passion, of warm humanity.

But I did come to learn about them in that way as I worked on this project with other Christians who I came, despite our profound differences, to love. I spoke then, in Crete, very personally as co-moderator of the project, about how I had found myself led into a larger space in which I found a beloved extended family. I recognized that I had to deeply desire the very tradition with which I knew myself still called to wrestle and struggle. I wrote then, “This is about love and community as much as it is about truth.”²

Again and again in the ecumenical movement we find that it is the relationships between friends, often relationships cherished and developed over years, that lead to movement in the debate and the dialogue. This is why ecumenism cannot happen, and will not happen, by conference call or webinar alone. It happens in the friendships built over time and depends on the love that builds over human encounter and even confrontation, in the passion for each other that spills over into the longing for unity. It is love that moves us, the love of Christ moving within us, and also the very human love of friendship and the companionship of pilgrims. Love is what can stir us to keep going when the work of dialogue seems intractable and hard, when the ideas clash and even the style of discourse is contested. When we are moved, when the journey moves on, it is love that does it. It is love that does it even when we think we are being pre-eminently scholarly and thoughtful, even when we are engaging in academic conferences and the writing of papers. It is love that does it even when we pretend that we are doing something else.

But love can and will surely find other ways to work, and will work among those for whom the traditional and dominant Western styles of ecumenical engagement are unfamiliar and alienating. So, we have to find ways for all of us and for the whole of each

² Ibid., 125.

one of us to be engaged in the journey of unity, as also of justice and peace. This finding of “other ways” is surely itself part of the calling of ecumenism. In its response to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)*, the Roman Catholic Church, for example, referred to all that might be made possible when we are truly open to receiving the gifts of the other: “The Catholic Church commits itself to the new paths opened by receptive ecumenism. In addition to Pope John Paul II’s description of ecumenism as an exchange of gifts (*UUS* [Ut unum sint] 28), receptive ecumenism emphasizes in a special way the importance of being open to learn from others.”³

Body, Mind, and Heart: Marking a New Style and Form of Ecumenism

In many of its manifestations, the ecumenical movement has undoubtedly been characterized by an emphasis on intellectual dialogue and argument. It has been populated by scholars and debaters and focused on texts, books, and documents. Ecumenical dialogues, meetings, and encounters have come in all the forms of Western culture’s love of words, with all the traditional academic apparatus of footnotes, journals, and bibliographies. Ecumenism has come, more and more, to be dominated by the English language, too, with its colonial history and its particular ways of dividing up the world.

These things are by no means all negative in themselves, but they mean that it is already decided who is marginalized, whose discourse reigns, and who is likely to prevail. Such forms are already being critiqued and examined by those within the places from which they originate, and it is already acknowledged that particular theological traditions are inevitably privileged when some cultural forms dominate discussion and encounter. Even more, then, should their dominance be questioned and their hegemony challenged, in the global spaces where many cultures and practices meet and where they seek to listen to one another and to find a new unity.

Perhaps the moment at which love is placed at the heart of a WCC assembly is the moment to ask what it would really mean to ground ecumenism in broader soil than the intellectual customs of the traditional colonial powers. An ecumenical movement that is grounded as much in feeling as in thought, in the body as the mind, in the spirit as the letter, that seeks to deconstruct all those traditional pairs by which one thing is oppressed or silenced by another, might have a rather different character from the one we know best and which we see declining right now in support and in influence. Could ecumenism become once more something more like a movement? (There has always

³ “Roman Catholic Church,” in *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 2, Faith and Order Paper No. 232, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 160–221, at 215, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/churches-respond-to-the-church-towards-a-common-vision-volume-ii>.

been a desire to speak of an ecumenical movement rather than an institution.) Could it exhibit a character that could be found beyond dialogues and agreed statements, convergence texts and study documents? If ideas and documents, as commonly framed, have not yet helped us fully to call one another to visible unity, could there be something else instead?

It is striking that so many of the responses of the churches to the Faith and Order convergence text *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* urged that ecumenical conversations, dialogues, and texts need to move away from traditionally intellectual and “academic” forms. This plea came from some of those who are well schooled and skilled in such forms, too. The North American Academy of Ecumenists, for example, wrote in its response:

TCTCV 39 notes that “on central aspects of Christian doctrine, there is a great deal that already unites believers.” We did not debate this affirmation. Rather, the discussion centered on what some felt was missing: the language and categories for describing the *life* of faith, as lived out relationally. They identified an excess of emphasis on the “order” of faith and order, and suggested that an explicit focus on doctrine erodes both the love at the heart of faith, and the spiritual connections out of which Christians live. We would like to see more experiential language in describing Christian faith.⁴

It would be sad if it were really true that an explicit focus on doctrine necessarily erodes the love at the heart of faith. But it is clear that where love has been eroded, or even ignored, it needs to be revived and attended to.

The Christian Council of Sweden, in its own response to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, arguing for a more holistic ecumenism, reflected that

the theological perspectives from WCC’s *Together Towards Life* and the methods proposed in WCC’s *Moral Discernment in the Churches* could be applied to doctrinal issues. All doctrinal issues must relate to the task/mission of the Church. Here we would like to underline how important it is that the perspectives from Life and Work and from Faith and Order enrich each other mutually. The being and doing of the Church cannot be separated from one another.⁵

It has long been a familiar cry within the ecumenical movement that there should be more integration and that the early segregation of ecumenical work into different

⁴ “North American Academy of Ecumenists,” in *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 1, Faith and Order Paper No. 231, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 315–25, at 320–21, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/churches-respond-to-the-church-towards-a-common-vision-volume-i>.

⁵ “Christian Council of Sweden,” in *Churches Respond*, vol. 2, 228–36, at 236.

specialist areas has left a fearful legacy. But this plea is now much more common and commonly accepted.

The Presbyterian Church of Canada, in the letter accompanying their response, made clear what many had hinted at: that *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* was framed in language that did not have the immediacy and accessibility that the document they also received (*Together towards Life*) from the WCC's Commission on World Mission and Evangelism had in plenty. They wrote,

Because the documents were distributed at the same time, there was a tendency among respondents to compare and contrast them, especially in terms of their accessibility and perceived usefulness. *Together Towards Life* was certainly experienced more positively because it was somewhat easier to read and understand, and there was a sense of its immediate applicability to congregations in their day-to-day ministry as well as their planning for future ministry and mission . . . In contrast, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* was a very difficult read.⁶

More telling still, perhaps, is the complete lack of any response to *TCTCV* from some churches, communities, and contexts. Of the 78 responses received, none came exclusively from Latin American or African contexts. Not to respond at all is, of course, in itself a response that needs to be heard. The absence of responses to this latest Faith and Order convergence text, and notably from the global South, is profoundly significant and demands both careful understanding and interpretation and also a radical change in approach in some way or other.

It is glaringly apparent that in many contexts, and perhaps particularly in the very contexts where global Christianity is presently growing, these kinds of texts or the classical ecumenism carried in these forms is not catching fire, inspiring passion, or building real connections. The need to face the question of what needs to change is profound. Many voices, even in the very heart of the present Faith and Order Commission, will testify that a way of engaging in ecumenism that is about intellect alone, or that seems to have little connection with the most pressing concerns of many in the global South, will not inspire the kind of passionate commitment that Jesus' prayer for unity demands. When such theological questions, forms, and styles also seem to wear the clothes of the former or present colonial powers, they are even less appealing and compelling. A thorough renewal is called for: a renewal that considers the concerns of the body (of poverty, of suffering, of the oppressions that gender, ethnicity, and caste make visible in our very bodies), and a renewal that recognizes that our hearts and souls – those deepest parts of us that pray, desire, and cry out – also belong on the path of unity.

⁶ "Presbyterian Church of Canada," in *Churches Respond*, vol. 1, 65–67, at 65.

Even to frame the problem in the ways I have done can already suggest that mind, heart, and body are entirely separate in a way that they plainly are not. But many have suggested, over the years, that the ecumenical movement has become captive to ways of thinking that characterize the global North. These ways of thinking are overly intellectualized and not drawn enough from the concerns of the body, of women, of those who experience poverty, of those who live with disability, or of those who are Indigenous and close to the land. We have only to take out photographs of the first or early meetings of Faith and Order (in 1927) or of the WCC (at its beginning in 1948) to see that it was originally shaped and dominated by white men from the global North, that events were planned like academic conferences, and that the privileges of the mind reigned supreme. Patterns set early in the life of any organization are very hard to shift. The early pioneers of the ecumenical movement were often heroic and saintly, but they were, of course, part of the world as it was then, with all its disruption, injustice, and power imbalance.

Just as so many in the world now are saying loudly that Black Lives Matter, that our institutions need to be decolonized, and that truth is to be found sometimes where it has been pushed – at the margins – so it is within the churches and within the ecumenical movement. The time is right to ask what an ecumenical movement that is truly *moved* and also *shaped* by the concerns of the body, heart, and soul as well as the mind might look like. Changes have already begun in some ways in terms of who is *invited to* the conversation and whose bodies are present at our gatherings. But a much more radical change needs to come in terms of what kind of conversation happens at those gatherings. It is not enough to change who is at the table: we need to change what happens at the table and in what way. Otherwise, those newly invited simply remain silent or silenced. It may also be that those church traditions, long part of the movement and yet still feeling marginalized within it – those who have always found some forms of the Western academic style of discourse excluding and alien – may find that they have new allies and a more ready welcome at the table in a renewed ecumenism.

A Thoughtful, Active, and Prayerful Ecumenism: Shaped First by God's Love

In *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, a glorious sentence states, “the first and foremost attitude of God towards the world is love, for every child, woman and man who has ever become part of human history, and, indeed, for the whole of creation.”⁷ What difference could it make to the way we live and shape the ecumenical movement if we, too, started with love? What would it mean to be part of an ecumenical movement that

⁷ *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), 33, Faith and Order Papers Digital Edition: <https://archive.org/details/wccfops2.221/page/33/mode/2up>.

was moved first by the heart, that was moved by compassion rather than defensiveness, that was lived in imitation of God's foremost attitude toward the world – love itself?

In the most recent meeting of Faith and Order, one group of commissioners was tasked to work not so much on overcoming the traditional doctrinal divisions but to start from a different place. They were to ask what things press upon the churches of the world together, what things we can say together out of love for the world we serve and from concern and love for the whole creation. So began a new way of approaching Faith and Order work, and three short, accessible, and yet profoundly theological papers were created that address some of the most pressing issues of our times. It is no coincidence that many commissioners from the global South were drawn to this study group.

The first of these texts – *Come and See: A Theological Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace* – speaks of ecumenism as a journey in which “pilgrims may be opened unexpectedly to new experiences of the holy and be renewed in heart and mind”⁸ and offers reflections on “significant issues affecting the churches as we journey through the world.”⁹ This small and remarkable text reflects on the challenge of moving toward a just and sustainable world and calls the churches to be active and prophetic, affirming human dignity and the integrity of creation. In writing that is clearly wrenched from lived and living experience, the text says,

In the context of the suffering of creation and of those living on the margins, the movement toward unity serves the healing of the whole inhabited earth . . . If the churches are to be in pilgrimage together, it can only be in the context of journeying toward the unity of the church with creation.¹⁰

This text was followed by two more: *Cultivate and Care: An Ecumenical Theology of Justice for and with Creation* (Faith and Order Paper No. 226) and *Love and Witness: Proclaiming the Peace of the Lord Jesus Christ in a Religiously Plural World* (Faith and Order Paper No. 230). They are short, readable, passionate papers written by theologians drawn from the broadest theological forum in the world as they reflect on their real, lived, thoughtful, and prayerful engagement with things that are having a real impact on the world today. They are written with all the wisdom of scholars, but also from the heart and lives of faithful Christians experiencing faith in today's world, and they are carved in prayer.

⁸ *Come and See: A Theological Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace*, Faith and Order Paper No. 224 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2019), 9–10, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/come-and-see>.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

They may be slim booklets, but they are significant markers of a new and renewed possibility for Faith and Order and for the WCC.

Conclusion

In many parts of our own lives, we know so well that unity and love belong together. The very word “communion,” *koinonia*, a word that ecumenists sometimes now choose to use above unity, is itself often used to describe the kind of dynamic unity or union that is made when people are encountering love. When we “commune with nature,” we recognize our unity with it and we celebrate that. In our most intimate lives, we may experience, if we are truly blessed and if it is our vocation, the wonder of the kind of love that brings human beings together in such a way that they are made one – not just physically but, we might say, spiritually. Love draws us to one another, makes us want to be together, to share everything we have, to make a new community, to bring forth life, and to stand beside one another even when trouble comes and when suffering is deep. Love and communion, love and unity, go hand in hand, and we often discover the second when we are moved by the first.

In Faith and Order, and in the wider work of the WCC, we often work tirelessly to reach agreement on texts and to find doctrinal agreement, doing the kind of slow, patient work over decades that, in sometimes small and sometimes significant ways, does bring about change. But it has often been the experience of those who work in the ecumenical fields that the words come best when we have got to know one another so well that the will and the desire to cherish love between us is deep. Then the words flow much more easily. Then the defences can come down, the anxiety and even sometimes the resentment can be overcome, and a new wisdom can be spoken. The work is done as much in the friendship as in the debate. An ecumenism of the heart has the potential to cut much more deeply than even the most rapier-sharp minds among us. And an ecumenical journey that is more like a pilgrimage – engaging body, mind, and heart – is more likely to be one in which all of us can find ourselves on common ground, on level ground, and on fruitful ground. An ecumenism newly inspired by love, moved by love, and shaped by body, mind, and *heart* may find that it beats more strongly for new times and among new communities.