

Ecumenical Vision: An Indian Church Perspective

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I come from a background (Mizoram) where there are more than sixty denominations and Christian sects within a population of nine lakhs. Where different denominational churches are fighting for their numerical growth; where sheep stealing has been common for so long; where back-biting and mud-slinging prevail among those churches. We seem to love our respective churches; we preach oily sermons on unity among ourselves. Although Zoram Churches Leaders Committee has been formed by the major Churches to address social, political, and economic issues, there has never been serious attempt for more visible unity and cooperation.

Beginning in the year 1949 there had been talks for church union between the Presbyterian Church and the Baptist church of Mizoram, which continued in 1957, 1969, 1970, 1972, 1974, 1977 and 1979. But those talks 'began with the leaders and ended with the leaders.'² Ecumenism is not taken seriously by many churches. It has never been a 'people's movement.' Churches as a whole are either lukewarm to ecumenism or seeped in denominationalism. With such a background, how am I supposed to affirm our ecumenical vision? What kind of vision do I have? Anyway, what kind of ecumenical vision do we have that we can affirm or reaffirm? What kind of ecumenical vision does the CCA have? What kind of ecumenical vision do the member churches have?

The rationale for this Consultation does not help to answer these questions but rather tells us that even after fifty years since the East Asia Christian Conference (EACC) affirmed that "the purpose of God for the Church in Asia is life together in a common obedience of witness to the mission of God in the world," the spirit of competition among churches continues with the sprouting of many more church groups and the resurgence of denominationalism. Moreover, today we live in a broken, disintegrated, and an alienated world. In the midst of all this, it is not easy to affirm our ecumenical vision. Yet, we cannot deny that in this context the church is called to witness for unity and to be the presence of a healing community. So we are gathered here 'to appraise our respective ecumenical vision – with the hope of mutual enrichment towards a common and wider ecumenical vision that is appropriate for our unique region of Asia.'

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² Vanlalchhuanawma, General Editor, *'Kum Sangbi thara Mizo Kohhrante Inpumkhatna leh Thawwhona'* (Union and Cooperation of Mizo Churches in the New Millennium), M.T.A. Series No. 3 (2004), p. xvi.

What is our understanding of 'ecumenism'?

The adjective 'ecumenical' or noun 'ecumenism' is derived from the Greek word '*oikoumene*', meaning 'the whole inhabited world.' The Greek used it in a colloquially universal, non-theological, popular and inclusive sense to describe the earth and human inhabitation or dwelling. The New Testament writers used the word '*oikoumene*' with a variety of expressions such as 'the entire inhabited world' (Rom. 10:18; Lk. 4:5; 21:26; Acts 11:28; 17:31); the Roman empire (Lk. 2:1; Acts 17:6). Later, a difference was made between the 'ecumenical synods' to which the bishops from all over the world came together, and the regional synods for certain countries and regions. With the separation of the Latin-speaking church from the Greek-speaking church, the Greek word '*oikoumene*' disappeared from the language of the church. In the end of the 19th century the term was rediscovered, and it got a quite different meaning. Since then, '*oikoumene*' has meant the endeavour for more cooperation of the churches; the start-up of the churches for a more visible unity in the direction to a worldwide church of Jesus Christ. Thus the understanding of '*oikoumene*' as '*terminus technicus*' of the cooperation between the churches became prevalent.³ The *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* describes it as "The organized attempt to bring about the cooperation and unity of all believers in Christ." The final statement of the Consultation of the World Council of Churches on 'Ecumenism in the 21st century' says, "The term 'ecumenical' embraces the quest for visible Christian Unity, which is undertaken in theological study, in common witness in the worldwide task of mission and evangelism as well as in diakonia and the promotion of justice and peace." However, there seems to be no authoritative description of the term, and it is in fact used to characterize a wide range of activities, ideas and organizational arrangements.

Perhaps the best-known definition is that formulated by the WCC Central Committee, meeting at Rolle, in 1951: "It is important to insist that the word (ecumenical) which comes from the Greek word for the whole inhabited earth (*oikoumene*), is properly used to describe everything that relates to the whole task of the whole church to bring the gospel to the whole world."⁴ This sought to expand previous definitions by integrating the concern for church unity and the concern for cooperative mission and evangelism.

More recent descriptions of the goal of the ecumenical movement have sought to take seriously the conviction that the object of God's reconciling purpose is not only the church but the whole of humanity – indeed, the whole creation. Thus, the WCC Vancouver Assembly (1983) spoke of a 'eucharistic vision' which "unites our two profoundest ecumenical concerns: the unity and renewal of the church and the healing and destiny of the human community. Church unity is vital to the health of the church and to the future of the human family... Christ – the life of the world – unites heaven and earth, God and world, spiritual and secular. His body and blood, given to us in the elements of bread and wine, integrate

³ P. Surya Prakash, "Towards Understanding 'Ecumenism' as Mission of the Church" in *Ecumenism: Prospects and Challenges*, Vinod Victor, et. al., eds. (Delhi: ISPCK, 2001), p. xvii.

⁴ "Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the WCC", a Policy Statement adopted by the Central Committee of the WCC and commended to member churches and ecumenical partners for study and action in September, 1997; p. 4.

liturgy and deaconate, proclamation and acts of healing... Our eucharistic vision thus encompasses the whole reality of Christian worship, life and witness.”⁵

The Canberra Assembly (1991) added: “We need desperately a mobilizing portrait of reconciled life that will hold together an absolute commitment to the unity and renewal of the church and an absolute commitment to the reconciliation of God’s world... We need to affirm the vision of an inhabited world (*oikoumene*) based on values which promote life for all.”⁶ However, these two Assembly statements do not go much beyond the affirmation that the various dimensions need to be held together.

More recently, a growing number of voices from the churches, especially in Asia, have spoken of the need for a ‘wider ecumenism’ or ‘macro-ecumenism’ – an understanding which would open the ecumenical movement to the other religious and cultural traditions beyond the Christian community.⁷ In the midst of all these definitions, what kind of ecumenical vision do we have? What kind of unity do we envisage? I will go back to the early ecumenism.

Early Ecumenism

Although we see several biblical texts for the usages of ‘*oikoumene*’, the theological basis for Christian unity is rooted in the NT passages such as where we find Jesus prayed for his followers that ‘they may be one...’ (Jn. 17:21). Likewise, Paul urges the Ephesians to ‘keep the unity...’ (Eph. 4:3-5). Throughout his ministry the apostle worked to maintain the unity of the church in the face of theological deviation (1 & 2 Cor.).

In the post-apostolic church the early fathers tried to maintain this unity despite the distance that separated congregations and the different cultures in which they were located. In his discussion of the *regula fidei*, Ireneaeus claimed that the church, ‘although scattered throughout the whole world, yet as if occupying but one house, carefully preserved, (the faith)... For, although the languages of the world are dissimilar, yet the import of the tradition is one and the same.’⁸ Early Christians considered themselves united by their allegiance to the apostolic gospel as expressed in the apostolic canon and preserved by the apostolic clergy. When heresies and doctrinal disagreements threatened to destroy this catholic (universal) unity, church leaders met in ecumenical councils to settle disputes.

This early ideal was clearly articulated in the Nicene Creed (325): “We believe in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.”⁹ Despite such attempts to maintain ecclesiastical unity, there arose numerous divisions over matters of faith and practice. The early ecumenical councils often failed to prevent schism and heresy. For a variety of reasons, Eastern and

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 5.

⁶ *Ibid*.

⁷ *Ibid*.

⁸ Walter A. Elwell, Ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 364.

⁹ *Ibid*.

Western Churches excommunicated each other in 1054, driving a wedge down the centre of Christendom. The Western Church was split by the Protestant reformation of the 16th century, which in turn opened the door to a rapid and extensive proliferation of denominations and sects. Many Christians have not been satisfied with this state of affairs and have worked to at least restore some measure of cooperation between the various Churches, if not bring a more visible unity. Hence, the modern ecumenical movement.

Affirming our ecumenical vision

I highlighted the early ecumenism with the aim to affirm that Christian unity is related to the unity of the Triune God. As mentioned earlier, Jesus prayed for the unity of his followers, just as he and his Father are one. Likewise, we too as Christians have the vocation to be one. We have the duty to make evident that Christianity is a unity in which the many form a unique whole. In this, as the early fathers affirmed, the unity of the Church is not necessarily a uniformity but unity in diversity. In India we reflect that unity in diversity in many ways. We are diverse in many ways – cultures, creed, language, ideology, etc. But there is one thing common – our unity in Jesus Christ. So is the Christian unity at the wider level. Our belonging together is based on the unity of the work of God the Father through the Son and the Holy Spirit. Accordingly the affirmation of our ecumenical vision is an invitation to all involved to go beyond the present boundaries, to interact with each other and with society. ‘It is a call to bear witness to unity by making an optimum use of the abilities, history, experience, commitment and spiritual tradition of everyone involved. This includes submission to one another and the search to understand the will of the Lord in a spirit of repentance and reconciliation.’¹⁰ The oneness of the Churches does not imply that there is a single structure or a single centre among the many different expressions of faith and practice. It refers rather fundamentally to its orientation towards a common calling. To be ecumenical means to be committed to the oneness to which God calls the world in the saving gift of Jesus Christ. It also means to recognize the brokenness of the Church in history and the call of God, especially in this century, to heal this disunity of Christ’s people. In striving in this ministry, we must seek to manifest the unity that God wills for the church in a future that is open to God’s guidance. The unity of the Church, as it is proclaimed in the scriptures, is a gift and goal of God in Christ Jesus. Ecumenism is the joyous experience of the unity of Christ’s people and the serious task of expressing that unity visibly and structurally, as far as possible, to advance the proclamation of the Gospel for the blessing of humankind.

I would like to adopt here part of the Final Statement of the WCC Consultation on Ecumenism in the 21st century, which envisaged ecumenism as a ‘special space’:

- where more and more Christians are involved in the work of Christian unity, and the fellowship among the churches is strengthened;
- where open and ecumenically-minded culture is fostered in the everyday lives of the people in their own contexts and where ecumenical formation is a central focus at all levels of church life, from the local to the global;

¹⁰ World Council of Churches, *Report of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC, August 2002*; quoted in the WCC Final Statement from the Consultation on Ecumenism in the 21st Century, held at Chavannes-de-Bogis, Switzerland, 30 November to 3 December 2004, p. 1.

- where spirituality is the basis of the life of Christians together and where, as individuals, churches and organizations, Christians can pray together and can encourage each other to discern God's will for their lives;
- where all, including the marginalized and excluded, are welcomed into inclusive and loving communities;
- where relationships, built on mutual trust, are strengthened between all parts of the ecumenical family;
- where each Christian can be supported in practicing responsible stewardship and where Churches and Christian organizations can be mutually accountable to each other;
- where diversity of cultures and traditions is recognized as a source of creativity;
- where hospitality is manifest towards those of different faiths and where dialogue is encouraged;
- where young people are encouraged to join in and to lead;
- where women's visions of being church are shared;
- where the ministry of healing is carried out in shared actions;
- where the healing of memories leads to reconciliation;
- where, together, we are enabled to be prophetic in confronting the injustices and violence of the world and to take risks in our commitment to justice and peace when Christ calls us to do so.

'We recognize that there are still many issues that divide us which need to be overcome. But we still hope that the Holy Spirit leads us to the end that one day we can celebrate the Eucharist together as the sign of our unity.'¹¹

Perhaps, in our affirmation of our ecumenical vision, we can agree with Lewis S. Mudge when he said, "An ecumenical age has been brewing for a century at least. The missionary enterprise has flowed into the struggle for decolonialization and social justice. Visions of the possibility of theological reflection beyond confessional barriers have turned into accomplished fact. Surely this is an epoch in which the ecumenical idea should once again come into its own. In place of the *oikoumene* of a declining Roman Empire, we live in the emerging *aikoumene* of an interdependent global civilization."¹²

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¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

¹² Lewis S. Mudge, *An Ecumenical Vision For the Year 2000*, accessed at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1254>

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