

Ecumenism in the Service of Evangelism

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By George G. Hunter III
ESJ School of World Mission and Evangelism
Asbury Theological Seminary

This is an important time to reconsider Christian ecumenism, and evangelism, and the relationship between them. This paper reflects upon these issues from some biblical, historical, and contextual perspectives, and encourages the idea that ecumenism and unity should serve the ministry of the churches to pre-Christian populations.

From a biblical perspective, Christian leaders have usually rooted the ecumenical movement in Jesus' prayer recorded in John 17, in which he prayed that his followers "may all be one." According to the Fourth Gospel, Jesus was not praying for our unity as an end in itself only; our unity was also a means to an end: "that the world might believe." When Jesus prayed this prayer, he knew that his time "in the world" would soon end; but his followers were entrusted with the Father's Word and, while they are no longer "of the world," they are sent into the world, for the sake of the world. "As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world" (vs. 18). Jesus is praying not only for those he has sent out, "but for them also who shall believe in me through their word" (vs. 20). The unity of His Community is rooted in, and is to reflect, the unity between the Father and the Son and, as the Father sent the Son, so the Son is sending His People. But the unity he prays for is a means to another end: "that the world may believe that thou has sent me" (vs. 21).

In the decades following Pentecost and the mandate of the Jerusalem Council, the movement expanded across the Mediterranean world by adapting to many different cultural contexts, and in time the Church displayed many differences from one city to another.¹ Despite their significant diversity, and their differences, the churches reflected throughout the New Testament writings maintained a remarkable unity in identity and purpose. This diversity within unity contributed enormously to the movement's reproductivity.

Today, after many centuries of experience and reflection, the rationale for emphasizing unity and cooperation for the sake of mission and evangelization appears to be (at least) twofold. First, where the Church's division would be a "stumbling block" for the receptor population, the church's perceived unity lends plausibility and credibility to the Christian movement's truth claims. (Fortunately for a divided Church,

¹ See Raymond E. Brown, The Churches the Apostles Left Behind (New York: Paulist Press, 1984).

our disunity has NOT been the problem with many populations that our predecessors feared. Stephen Neill reports, for instance, “Less harm was caused by Christian division than might have been expected. Hinduism and Islam are both religions of innumerable—and sometimes mutually excommunicating—sects. They did not expect of Christianity a unity which they did not possess themselves.”² Similarly, in the West today, secular populations are so accustomed to multiple “brands” offering similar products or services, that denominationalism is not usually the problem it “should” be!)

The second rationale for unity relates to mission efficiency (as in avoiding unnecessary duplication) and mission effectiveness. For instance, cooperation between the churches in Bible translation has led to the unprecedented availability of the Scriptures in over a thousand languages; comity agreements, and other cooperative approaches to the deployment of personnel and resources, have sometimes contributed to greater effectiveness.

The modern ecumenical movement was conceived within a vision for faithfulness and effectiveness in mission across cultures, and evangelism within cultures. This vision, to work together “that the world might believe,” shines through the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference and the 1921 founding of the International Missionary Council. Indeed, the early days of the World Council of Churches (and even of the National Council of Churches in the USA) were characterized by strong interest in mission and evangelization, although the IMC’s merger with the World Council was attended by some anxiety on the IMC side.

Subsequent history has often validated that anxiety. One reading of almost a century of ecumenical history would identify, from a missiological perspective, problems like the following “top ten”:

1. The modern ecumenical movement has often promoted denominational mergers much more aggressively than cooperation in mission. They have sometimes succeeded in merging two or more denominations into a more unified Church.
2. The proposals for union usually emphasized merger for the sake of “a greater mission.” But the usual outcome, within ten years or less, is fewer churches, fewer members, and fewer missionaries than the several Churches reported prior to merger, and much less emphasis upon the united church’s “mission.” The decline has usually continued in subsequent decades.
3. The administrators of merged denominations are often driven much more to achieve uniformity in the churches than by an apostolic agenda; they are often more interested in creating a “new” Church than in preserving and interpreting the doctrines, values, traditions, and mission of the predecessor denominations; and they are often experienced as being less competent than the administrators of the predecessor denominations.
4. Implementing and managing denominational unions have, typically, proven to be enormously more difficult than anyone predicted. Perhaps for that reason, mission is deferred until “later,” and the merged denomination’s administration is usually centralized, hierarchical, and widely experienced as controlling. “Headquarters” makes the decisions for what happens locally, often without the data available to local leaders, and often without explanations satisfactory to local leaders.
5. In time, many ecumenical leaders became less interested in mission. When, in the 1970’s, some leaders of non-western churches asked that no more colonial-type missionaries (who insist on imposing Western ways) be sent to their lands, prominent ecumenical leaders called for a “moratorium” on sending missionaries of any kind!

² Stephen Neill, A History of Christian Missions, revised edition (Penguin Books, 1986) 400.

6. In time, many ecumenical leaders became less interested in evangelization, or they maintained that a “ministry of presence” was sufficient.
7. In time, many ecumenical Christian leaders “graduated” from cooperation with other Christian bodies to “dialogue” with leaders of other major religions. “Tolerance” toward other religions moved to the top of their hierarchy of values.
8. In time, many ecumenical leaders were observed to “join” the pan-ecclesiastical culture that their predecessors, and they, had formed; their primary loyalty was now to the ecumenical community; they perceived the world through their socially constructed reality.
9. In time, many ecumenical leaders were observed to campaign for a range of causes—from civil rights, anti-apartheid, economic development, and disaster and hunger relief, to the rights of women and Gays, to the rights of animals and other environmental concerns, and to regard their causes as Christianity’s “main business”—to the *de facto* exclusion of any (recognizable) world mission or evangelization.
10. At least one of those agendas now sometimes drives what is left of the ecumenical movement. Ecumenical leaders within my own denomination appear to be most zealous about cooperation, shared communion, mutually recognized orders, and possible merger with the denominations most receptive to Gay weddings and ordinations.

Today, for reasons like these, the World Council of Churches, and some of its regional expressions, have lost the confidence of many leaders of the member denominations, and the “main line” ecumenical movement is widely perceived as a spent force. Mainline ecumenical leaders have fewer and fewer followers; their organizations often hemorrhage red ink. Furthermore, they have not within memory labored for the unity “that the world might believe.”

In these same years, other Christian leaders have quietly reinvented approaches to cooperative ecumenism “that the world might believe.” While these alternative ecumenisms come in several flavors, they have some similar features: They usually function more as “networks” than as organizations; what organization they have is more “flat” than hierarchical. They usually have no interest in a strong central headquarters, or in controlling member churches, much less in imposing uniformity. They are usually more interested in cooperation than in merger. They are always more interested in helping to reach people “that the world might believe” than in getting together as an end in itself. Three cases will sufficiently illustrate this alternative ecumenism.

The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization has modeled a new approach to ecumenism—bringing together church leaders AND “para-church” leaders. Its primary purpose is to advance evangelization through providing intelligence, networking, resources, consulting, and catalytic events. Lausanne’s first “Congress,” in 1974, featured the Earth’s “Unreached Peoples,” i.e. e., the peoples with no indigenous self-propagating church within their ranks. Ralph Winter estimated that, of the approximately 30,000 distinct societies on the earth, approximately 16,750 of these peoples were unreached. This stark fact suggested that the mission-sending era was by no means “over,” so any policy for a “moratorium” on sending missionaries was, presumably, ignorant of the most elementary demographic facts that should inform mission policy. Winter personalized mission’s challenge: “As long as there is no one like me, near me, who will tell me, cross-cultural evangelism is necessary.”

Lausanne '74 catalyzed many mission agencies, church and para-church, to target Unreached People Groups. By 2000 AD, several thousand Peoples were no longer unreached; the Church had been planted in more societies than in any other quarter century in Christianity's history. In the years after 1974, the Lausanne movement held a smaller consultation in Pattaya, Thailand in 1980, a second large Congress in Manila in 1989, and has scheduled a second consultation for 2004—which, Lausanne's web site tells us, "is designed to address the fifteen to twenty most complex world evangelization issues that will face the Church in the next ten years."

In 1975, the "graduates" of a contagious youth ministry joined (then) young Bill Hybels in starting Willow Creek Community Church with an audacious mission statement: "Our mission is to help irreligious people become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ." The seriousness of their mission obliged them to rethink the "paradigm" for "doing church" in a Western urban missionary context. They rooted people in small group life, they deployed laity in a range of ministries, including the ministry of witness, and they developed culturally-relevant "Seeker Services"—for which the church became most noted. Today, the six weekend seeker services, together, involve over 18,000 people; over 7,000 believers attend the "New Community" (believers service) on Wednesday or Thursday nights; over 1,000 people are received each year as new Christians.

By the mid-1980's, as other church leaders wanted instruction in what Willow Creek had learned, the church started hosting teaching conferences for leaders of any and all denominations. In 1992, the church started the Willow Creek Association—to help local churches reach Unchurched people. In 2001, about 65,000 people attended Willow Creek conferences and training events. Today, over 8,000 churches, about half in the USA and about half "international," are members of the Willow Creek Association. (One of Willow Creek's notable successes is Holy Family Roman Catholic Church, also in the northwest quadrant of Chicago, whose web site announces that Holy Family is "an evangelical church in the Roman Catholic tradition." Holy Family, which involves over 10,000 people in a typical weekend, has one priest. Most of the ministry that matters is assigned to laity!) While most of the member churches are denominational churches, WCA's cooperative ecumenism also includes many independent and "nondenominational" churches. Willow Creek Church is, itself, an "independent" church because, when Hybels and his people wanted "a church to reach lost people" in 1975, they could find no denomination in the Chicago area who shared their vision and would partner with them. A quarter-century later, an "independent" church is leading in the new ecumenism—"that the world might believe."

Alcoholics Anonymous represents another expression of the new ecumenism. AA began, in 1935, as Rector Samuel Shoemaker, of Calvary Episcopal Church in New York City, worked with two of his converts to make sense of their recovery, to identify the "steps" they took in their recovery, and to identify ways to reach and liberate other addicts. Early, the movement became clear that addiction is a "disease," for which

some people have a genetic vulnerability (similar to the case of diabetes); the “cure” for the disease of addiction, they discovered, is essentially spiritual and communal. Addicts entered a lifetime of recovery as they joined and met with a recovery community, and “turn[ed] our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him (the “third step”), and “worked the [AA] program” for the rest of their lives. The necessary “twelfth step” in recovery involves an approach to Evangelism: “Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

In time, AA catalyzed the rise of similar movements—like Narcotics Anonymous and Gamblers Anonymous, and far more than twenty million people are thought to be “in recovery” today. Such movements, and the populations they serve, are catalyzing a “new evangelicalism” in many churches—because addicts are obviously “lost,” and they obviously cannot, by themselves, find the Way to the Life they want, and they obviously need God, and God’s power, and a Community of Hope in their lives. Furthermore, as more and more churches across the entire denominational spectrum get into “recovery ministries,” they feel their way into a “new ecumenism”—as they support, help, learn from, and cooperate with each other and with the recovery community, experiencing a greater unity in mission, and more miracles in their midst, than they had once known was possible.