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Enhancing Ecumenism and the Ecumenical Movement at the Local Level

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The Judeo-Christian faith is ecumenical since the beginning. Judaism affirms that God is the God of the *oikoumene* and God continuously acts in the *oikoumene*.

“I am God, not man, the Holy One in your midst.” (Hosea 11:9)

The ultimate meaning of human existence lies in the realization that God is our personal God.

“I shall live among you, I shall be your God and you will be my people.” (Lev. 26:12, often quoted by Jeremiah 7:23, 30:1, 33)

Judaism also affirms that as God’s chosen, the Israelites had the responsibility to God’s *Oikoumene*.

“It is not enough for you to be my servant, to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back the survivors of Israel; I shall make you a light to all the nations so that my salvation may reach the remotest parts of the earth.” (Is. 49:6)

Jesus basically followed the faith of the Israelites.

“Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete them.” (Mt. 5:17)

In reality, by his teaching and saving acts, as well as by his total sacrificial lifestyle, Jesus gave the Jewish faith a new and definitive meaning. Jesus also called, established, trained and commissioned 12 disciples. The Synoptics all ended with Jesus’ final commission to his disciples (more than the 12), “Go to all nations (Mark), to the whole world (Matthew), to all creation” (Luke).

Indeed Jesus’ disciples turned apostles were extremely faithful to Jesus’ command and followed through this ecumenical venture, bringing the *Kerygma* (Jesus’ death and resurrection) and establishing churches beginning from Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria and finally in the remotest ends of the earth. About 400 years after Jesus, Christian

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churches were established in all of Europe, North Africa, Western Asia and even as far as India. With this rapid expansion, the early church decided to organize. Deacons and later elders and leaders of elders were institutionalized. Besides church order, the early church was also preoccupied with the consolidation of Christian thought. Dogmas and more dogmas were formulated; so-called heresies were quenched. Christianity, or the Christian Church to be exact, had become egoistic and exclusive (instead of altruistic and inclusive).

Then in 325 A. D., after unifying the Roman Empire, Emperor Constantine declared Christianity as the religion of his empire in order to further his *Pax Romana* ambition. Unfortunately the fateful union between church and state reduced the church to merely a human institution controlled by a handful of powerful and authoritative leaders (later labeled as the Princes of the Church). Thus, the Christian church became synonymous with hierarchy or power structures. God was elevated to heaven (so that God would not interfere with them) and lay Christians were demoted to be onlookers with little or no part in church affairs. Thus, ecumenism was greatly distorted. For a thousand years, Medieval Europe dominated by secular and ecclesiastical powers was labeled the Dark Age. During this period, what kept Christianity alive were some Catholic orders and monasteries from both the Latin as well as the Byzantine traditions.

The Renaissance, which began in Italy in the 15th Century, triggered the Reformation of the Church in the 16th century. One of the most important things reformers did was to put God back into the scene, especially the church. "The Sovereignty of God is Absolute," declared John Calvin. Another thing was to promote the importance of the laity through "priesthood of all believers". In order to do that, the Vulgate Bible was translated into modern languages and vernacular languages were used in mass or worship services. In order to increase the participation of Christians, hymn singing was introduced and Bible studies were encouraged. Reformers like Martin Luther redefined the church by its functions, "where the Word is preached and the sacraments rightly administrated, there is the Church." Local churches were given new life and vitality.

The western world encountered radical transformation soon after the 16th century. There was the Age of Enlightenment in the 17th century. It was called the Great Awakening in the U.S.A. Many Christians reacted to this extreme rationalism with personal piety. Then came the political revolutions in the 18th century, notably the American Revolution in 1776 and the French Revolution in 1789. This was to be followed by the Industrial Revolution and the Economic Revolution in the 19th century. In search of natural resources and new markets, the industrialized and powerful nations in the West turned to colonization. Pietistic Christians organized themselves and seized the opportunity to bring the Gospel to the colonized world, mainly in Africa and Asia. The Great Missionary Movement of the 19th century brought forth the modern day Ecumenical Movement of the 20th century. The Edinburgh Conference in 1910, which marked its beginning was supposed to have the missionary societies meet and settle matters about parity in missions and enhance mutual understanding and co-operation. So the modern day Ecumenical Movement began with the concern for church unity. The Second World War changed this tone drastically. After the war, the demand for relief and reconstruction forced churches to work together so that they could respond to the dire needs more effectively. Massive human suffering in a divisive world gave a new impetus to the Ecumenical Movement of the 20th century. It went beyond

the promotion of church unity. It was also concerned about the welfare and the reconciliation of humankind.

Vehicles of the Ecumenical Movement like the World Council of Churches (WCC) founded in 1948, and the regional, national and local councils founded in the 1950s, played a key role in the promotion of the movement. Indeed these vehicles have done a fabulous job in giving a common witness to God's love and justice over the past half-a-century by serving those in need, especially in relief and development. They have also responded to crucial issues facing humankind in the 20th century, from social justice to peace and from national security and arms race, as well as from ecological issues to endemic diseases. These various vehicles also made significant contributions in promoting mutual understanding between peoples who follow different faiths as well as in promoting women's issues and concerns.

The modern day Ecumenical Movement faced two assaults: secularization and Christian fundamentalism. The 20th century was also marked by cultural revolutions, which consist of scientific, urban and secular revolutions. In short, these revolutions did not only cause the breaking down of human relationships; but they also brought forth human pride and arrogance. Once again God was put aside. Many people impacted by these radical changes became confused. This is especially so with Christians. Being shocked and feeling insecure, many Christians have turned to Christian fundamentalism (it is the same as the Religious Right in the U.S.A.). The various fundamentalist movements may not be well coordinated, but invariably they are aggressive and dominated by a few powerful and authoritative males. These fundamentalists are exclusive and militant, especially towards the people who dare to challenge their beliefs and convictions. They use biblical verses selectively to defend what they believe in. They are not open-minded, not open to change and not open to honest dialogues and cooperation with people who are different from them in lifestyle and belief. In a word, their rigidity is contrary to what the Ecumenical Movement stands for.

Local church pastors and their members are attracted to fundamentalism for another reason. Christian fundamentalists have been highly successful in membership increase and church growth (in numbers). It is mainly because what the leaders of fundamentalist Christians sell is a gospel that is good primarily for the self. Invariably they advocate the well being of the self rather than the common good in the first instance. In other words, they have "privatized" the Christian gospel. Instead of Jesus' gospel of renunciation (c.f. Mk 8:34-36; Mt 16:24-26; Lk 9:23-25), they preach the gospel of receiving and possession.

The rising of Christian fundamentalist movements pose serious threats to the Ecumenical Movement and indeed to the whole Christian church. For what traditional Christianity advocates, first of all, is that God is the God of the *oikoumene* and all the peoples within this household, irrespective of their cultural and economic backgrounds, lifestyles and beliefs. Therefore, it is imperative for all Christians to be tolerant and embracing. Second, as Christians, we affirm Jesus as the Savior of all humankind. Jesus especially showed us the importance of caring for the weak and the young (c.f. Mt 18 and 25). In order to do that, Jesus even sacrificed his life on a cross. As his followers, we must follow the example of Jesus.

The 21st century is the century of globalization. Superficially, it is dominated by the powerful business tycoons and politicians; but deep down, in this process of globalization, more and more people throughout the world are awakened to their rights and responsibilities. This offers us a ray of light. I believe the future of the Ecumenical Movement, and in that regard the Christian church, lies in the hands of the grassroots Christians. But first, they need to be nurtured and retrained. As local churches ought to be the centres of Christian nurture and since most local churches are in doldrums, their radical renewal is called for. This may very well be the second major reformation of the Christian church. It is just as important as the one some 500 years ago.

How do we as CCA undertake this seemingly impossible task of reforming the local churches?

First, all of us have to have our mindset changed. We have to believe that local churches are of utmost importance because this is where basic Christian nurture takes place. Moreover, local churches are rich in human as well as material resources. The Ecumenical Movement, especially vehicles of the Movement, needs their support and participation if we wish to go any further.

Right now, most of the local churches throughout the world are obsessed with physical expansion, which includes the increase of membership, programmes and projects. Little effort is spent for in-depth nurture of their members. Most local churches have become human organizations rather than the churches of God ("Church" comes from "*Kirche*" which comes from the Greek word *kuriakos* or *kuriakon* which means "that which belongs to the Lord"). We can blame the pastors who serve in local churches for not doing their jobs of enabling members to take up the cross and follow Jesus (Mark 8:34). This is an extremely delicate job (c.f. John 21:18). Local church pastors are more eager to please their members, especially their elders. We can also blame the seminaries for failing to produce pastors who can stand firm in the Lord (Phil. 4:1). But we must also ask ourselves and examine whether we have done our part as members of an ecumenical organization?

In renewing local churches, pastors are the key. So the second thing we must do is to step up "the training of trainers", especially of local church pastors and seminary teachers. This training should enable them to resist the temptation of seeking "worldly success", but instead concentrate their energy on nurturing their members with the Judeo-Christian faith which is both historic and catholic, so that each and everyone of their members would become a little Jesus, bearing the *Imago Iesus*.

Third, we have to reprioritize all our work. We must continue to address and respond to emerging and crucial issues. But equally important is the task to bring along as many grassroots Christians and their pastors as we can so that they too may become more ecumenical and aware of bigger issues than merely their own maintenance and therapy issues.

Over the years, CCA has published a large number of important books and reports on vital issues. But from what I can gather, its circulation is very limited. They could hardly reach

local churches. We have to work more closely with national or local councils so they will be willing to help distribute all CCA publications.

We have to continue to organize programmes and initiate projects. But at the same time in all our programmes, we must also intentionally emphasize building Christian communities. We must try our best to enable participants in all our programmes to experience what is a Christian community. In knowing the “what” we can easily get to the “how”. Overall, follow-ups on our programmes are weak. We must try our best to maintain close contact with participants of every programme and encourage them to communicate and share with each other. This is time consuming, but it is worthwhile.

Fourth, since no one is doing much about finding new ways to renew local churches, CCA should be thinking of initiating a few pilot projects, maybe one in each of the constituent areas. What should be the form of a local church?

Primarily, a local church is a worshipping community. Christians gather together to affirm their faith in God. In worship our whole attention is on God (*Te Deum*). God is not a Supreme Being high above. Our God is the God who acts in history. God continuously creates, redeems and sustains and we must reflect God’s actions through our acts of confession, praise and dedication. Therefore, all Christian worship must have a liturgy that reflects God’s activities. *Leitourgia* (*laos* and *ergon*) literally means the work of God’s people. In worship, we try to re-enact God’s work. God’s work is not confined in the sanctuary, but it is in the entire world. Our service to God in the sanctuary must be extended to the whole world. So there should be a send-out at the end of every worship service. This is to remind us that after we gather to worship God in the sanctuary; we must then go back to where we are and continue to serve God and God’s creation.

After the dismissal, we now turn from God to our neighbours whom God loves and cares for. Our neighbours are the poor and the powerless, the oppressed and the afflicted; the people who are exploited and are being discriminated against. If we say we love God, it is imperative that we should also love our neighbours; “For if we do not love them whom we can see, how can we love God whom we cannot see” (I John 4:19). Our neighbours and the unjust social structures must also be our concern. So a local church is also a serving community. In a local church we learn to serve others by Jesus’ example of “*Kenosis*”. This self-emptying or sacrificial service style is the most invigorating, transforming power in the world.

A local church is also a *koinonia*. In it we are being cared for as we learn to care for others. Moreover, a local church is not just a fellowship, but it is a fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not only confront, strengthen and encourage us, it also enables us to communicate and share with each other (c.f. Acts 2). When many local churches engaged in conflict experience burn-out or being lost nowadays, it is because they rely on themselves rather than the Holy Spirit. Every local church needs the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit. So “Come, Holy Spirit, descend upon us” should be our prayer all the time.

Enhancing ecumenism and the ecumenical movement at the local level is probably our toughest, yet not challenging job ahead. The post-exile Palestine governor Zerrubabel was

given the task to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. He believed that “not by his might, nor power, but by God’s Spirit” (Zech. 4:6) was he able to undertake this extremely difficult task. So must we! This was also Jesus’ teaching, “By human resources, it is impossible, but not for God, because for God, everything is possible” (Mark 10:27).