

# *The* Ecumenical Movement



## *An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*

Edited by Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope

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MICHAEL KINNAMON

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BRIAN E. COPE

WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY  
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN / CAMBRIDGE, U.K.

© 1997 WCC Publications  
World Council of Churches, 150 route de Ferney,  
1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland

First published 1996 jointly with Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.  
2140 Oak Industrial Drive N.E., Grand Rapids, Michigan 49505 /  
P.O. Box 163, Cambridge CB3 9PU U.K.  
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Printed in the United States of America

02 01 00 99 98 97      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Eerdmans ISBN-10: 0-8028-4263-1 / ISBN-13: 978-0-8028-4263-3

Cover design: Edwin Hassink

Illustration: The cover painting is by Aboriginal artist Wenten Rubuntja. It was presented to the World Council of Churches by the Aboriginal and Islander people of Australia at the time of the Council's Canberra assembly in 1991. The painting uses symbols and images taken from Aboriginal culture to express the assembly's theme, "Come, Holy Spirit — Renew the Whole Creation". The three central patterns of concentric circles represent the different cultures of the world which are united through the crucifixion of Jesus Christ (cross) and the gift of the Holy Spirit (dove). The painting's placement on the cover of this anthology is a reminder that ecumenical theology comes in the form of artistic symbols as well as words.

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# General Introduction

The ecumenical movement, as William Temple once put it, “is the great new fact of our era”.

- After centuries of separation and hostility, Christians have begun to recapture “the simple biblical truth that the church as the people of God and the body of Christ must exemplify in this world how God gathers [people] together from the ends of the earth in order to live as a new humanity”. Churches representing over a billion and a half members are now engaged with one another in councils of churches, theological dialogues, various forms of collaborative mission, common prayer, and other expressions of ecumenical life.
- After centuries of missionary activity, the Christian faith now finds itself at home on every continent and in nearly every nation. When a typhoon destroys crops and lives in the Philippines, when Christians in South Africa struggle against racial oppression, other parts of the global church respond with tangible support and concern.
- After centuries of “Christendom” (the identification of Christianity with its surrounding — European — culture), the church in many places has begun to find its prophetic voice, to insist again that it is definitely in the world but not of it. Thanks to generations of ecumenical conversation, many churches now share a vision of the “inhabited earth” (*oikoumene*) as a living household (*oikos*) in which all God’s children who have been beaten down or excluded by the powers of this world find their rightful place.

There is no doubt that when the history of the church in this century is finally written the ecumenical movement will be a central theme.

## **Towards an integrated definition**

The noun “ecumenism” and the adjective “ecumenical” are derived from the Greek word *oikoumene* which is used in the New Testament to mean the Roman empire (e.g., Luke 2:1) or, simply, the whole world (e.g., Matt. 24:14). Gradually, the term came to refer to the whole church, as opposed to that which is divisive, or to the whole faith of the church, as opposed to that which is partial.

It is appropriate, therefore, that the word is now used to designate a modern Christian movement concerned with the unity and renewal of the church and its relationship to God’s reconciling and renewing mission throughout creation. While this movement has its roots in the 19th century (including such developments as the YMCA and the Student Christian Movement), the symbolic beginning of modern ecumenism is the world missionary conference held in Edinburgh in 1910. From that conference flowed streams that carried the movement’s continuing priorities:

- *Common service.* This concern for addressing those things that disrupt human community found early expression in the Life and Work movement whose first world conference was held in Stockholm in 1925. The Life and Work stream has sought to foster interchurch aid, to enable common Christian response to the victims of war, poverty, oppression, and natural disaster, and particularly in recent decades, to call the churches to oppose economic and social injustice, including racism and sexism (see Chapters IV and V of this anthology).
- *Common fellowship.* This concern for church unity found early expression in the Faith and Order movement whose first world conference was held in Lausanne in 1927. Faith and Order efforts have generally been directed at overcoming obstacles to the mutual recognition of members and ministers, at overcoming barriers to shared celebration of the eucharist (the Lord's supper), at helping the churches to express more fully the apostolic faith and to recognize various expressions of that faith in their ecumenical partners, and at discovering ways of making decisions together (see Chapters II and III).
- *Common witness.* This concern for cooperative mission and evangelism found early expression in the International Missionary Council whose first world conference was held in Jerusalem in 1928. It was out of this stream that the question of interfaith relations, so much a part of contemporary ecumenical consciousness, first emerged (see Chapters VI and VII).

To these three priorities must be added a fourth (though, in fact, it is indispensable to each of the others): *common renewal*. Ecumenism is badly misunderstood if equated with attitudes of democratic tolerance or reduced to matters of interchurch cooperation. The ecumenical movement has not simply insisted that Christians learn to get along, but that their churches must be renewed, transformed — in large part, by receiving the gifts which others bring in the one body of Christ. This concern has found particular expression in various lay-driven movements, including the World Sunday School Association (later the World Council of Christian Education), and in forms of “spiritual ecumenism” including the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (see Chapters VIII and X).

It is important to bear in mind in this connection the fundamental distinction between “ecumenical” and “international”. The term “international” necessarily accepts the division of mankind into separate nations as a natural if not a final state of affairs. The term “ecumenical” refers to the expression within history of the given unity of the church. The one starts from the fact of division and the other from the fact of unity in Christ. The thought and action of the church are international in so far as the church must operate in a world in which the historical Christian bodies share with the rest of mankind the division into national and racial groups. They are ecumenical in so far as they attempt to realize the *una sancta*, the fellowship of Christians who acknowledge the one Lord.

*The Oxford Conference: Official Report*, ed. J.H. Oldham,  
Chicago, Willett, Clark & Co., 1937, pp.152-53



Most theological libraries include anthologies dealing with faith and order or mission and evangelism; but, until now, no anthology has attempted to bring together key statements from the ecumenical movement as a whole. Despite the fact that the priorities listed above are now officially joined in the World Council of Churches (WCC), they are often still seen as more competitive than complementary. The conviction behind this book, however, is that there exists what may be called an “ecumenical vision” which powerfully integrates unity, service, mission and renewal. Indeed, these terms help to define one another. The search for unity, for example, can end up bolstering old forms of domination unless constantly coupled with a passion for renewal and a commitment to justice; but a key measure of efforts for Christian renewal is whether they contribute to the creation of community across former lines of division. This vision has, naturally, shifted over the course of the century in response to changing circumstances; but as Chapter I in particular will show, the vision retains its essential contours from Nathan Söderblom and Germanos of Thyateira to Philip Potter and Pauline Webb.

### An historical overview

There is not space in this brief introduction to cover the history of 20th-century ecumenism (readers of this anthology may wish to consult histories listed in the bibliography). We do want to hint at some of its development, however, by suggesting that the ecumenical movement can be divided into three periods.

- The first period runs from the Edinburgh mission conference in 1910 to the inaugural assembly of the WCC in Amsterdam in 1948, from the time when the ecumenical movement depended on the visionary drive of charismatic individuals (e.g., Mott, Germanos, Söderblom and Temple) to the moment when it became, at least in principle, a movement of the churches. This era is dominated by several obvious historical events: the final years of colonial expansion (a major concern of the Edinburgh conference was to keep mission agencies from fighting over souls in the mission fields of Africa and Asia), the first world war (which was, in effect, a “Christian civil war”), the German church struggle of the 1930s (which underscored the importance of the church and its integrity), and the second world war (when, as the theme for the Amsterdam assembly put it, “humanity’s disorder” seemed to obscure “God’s design”). *The central motif of these years, as we see it, is this: the rediscovery of the church, the whole church, as an essential component of the gospel.*
- The second period runs from the Amsterdam assembly (1948) to the World Council’s fourth assembly twenty years later in Uppsala. This period is marked by the cold war, but also by the end of colonialism and the rise of self-consciousness on the part of newly-independent nations and their churches. *Its central motif: the rediscovery of the church as in and for the world.* If the first period in the ecumenical movement asked “What is the church?”, then the second asked “What is the church for?” And, for many ecumenically-oriented Christians, the answer had increasingly to do with participation in the brewing revolutions of the era — which altered the ecu-