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THE RELEVANCE OF THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES IN GLOBAL ECUMENISM: AN AFRICAN OVERVIEW

Solomon Makanjuola Mepaiyeda (Ph.D)

Abstract

The effects of Reformation masterminded by Martin Luther in the sixteenth century cannot be underestimated. Apart from different opinions held by the Catholic Church and the Reformers, various denominations emerged within the latter because each one separated from the rest. Such separation and lack of mutual trust and understanding existed for centuries before the "Spirit of Ecumenism" fell on Church leaders.

In the sixteenth century, only four major divisions separate the churches of the Reformation: Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist and Anglican. Soon, however, a number of denominations appeared on the scene, most of them established by adherents convinced of the importance of some particular teachings of scripture.

By the twentieth century, more than two hundred denominations crowded the landscape in the United States alone. In the same century however, a force drew Christians toward co-operation, merger and united action. This force is referred to as "ecumenism". Therefore this paper highlights the contribution of the World Council of Churches to Ecumenism project. It concludes that the reason for the reestablishment of the WCC has not been justified, owing to the prevalence of the wounds created by schism and lack of its impact on grassroots churches.

I. Introduction

Ecumenism is the concern for the realization of greater unity among Christians¹. By extension, the term refers to closer relationship among Christians and persons of other religions. In the 20th century, the historic interest of Christian unity took a new positive dimension as evident in the ecumenical movement leading to such developments as the World Council of Churches and the unity efforts of Vatican Council II.²

Ecumenism started with the Protestants and aimed at healing the wound of antagonism that resulted from the Reformation. Therefore, ecumenical movement is the movement among the Christian Churches for the recovery of their visible and institutional unity. The word “ecumenical” has its root in the Greek word *oikoumene* which means ‘the whole inhabited world’. The word *Oikos* means a house or dwelling, and *Oikoumene* can therefore have the meaning of ‘the civilized world’.³

Historically, at an early development in Christian vocabulary, the word ecumenical was used for the great doctrinal councils of the early Church before it was split by divisions.⁴ The indication was that these councils were those of the whole Church throughout the world or as far as it had spread in then known world. When a council represented something less than whole church it was not dignified with the title ‘ecumenical’.

Thus the meaning of the word is beginning to shift from a concentration on the world to a concentration on the Church. It is therefore synonymous with the other Greek word for the universal Church – ‘Catholic’ – which refers to the church of the whole world. Barry Till affirms that the early manifestation of the ecumenical spirit in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were labeled *eirenical*, from the Greek word *eirene*, meaning peace.⁵

¹ Meagher P, 1978, (Ed.) *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Religion*, Washington D. C.: Corpus Publication, p. 1159.

² Meagher P, 1978, (Ed.) *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Religion*, p. 1160.

³ Wenham, J. 1965, *The Elements of New Testament Greek*, Cambridge: University Press, p. 94

⁴ www.Wikipedia.com

⁵ Barry T, 1972, *The Churches Search for Unity*, Great Britain: Richard Clay Ltd, p. 15

However, it was discovered that they urged peace rather than reunion. That is why, when the reunion movement proper began in the Protestant Churches in the nineteenth century, a new word had to be coined to describe it. This word was 'ecumenical'. The word was first associated with the First International Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 simply because, for the first time in history, Christians were meeting from all over the world,⁶ precisely of a united Church which would evangelize the whole world. Ecumenism stresses Jesus' prayer which was the motto and theme of ecumenical movement: "that they may all be one; even as thou, Father art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be us" (St. John's Gospel Chapter 17 v11).

II. Factors Responsible for the Ecumenical Movement

Many factors have led to the ecumenical drive which includes sociological, theological and non-theological reasons. From the sociological perspective, the Oxford sociologist, Bryan Wilson in his book, *Religion in a secular society*, advanced reason that the ecumenical movement is the reaction of the Churches to secularization in Western society.⁷ By secularization, he means the change in the climate or thought which in the West has led to men's difficulty in accepting Christian beliefs and in seeing the relevance of the Church. The age of reason that came with scientific discovery and explanation of the cosmic structures led to a decrease of the power and influence of the Church.

Wilson, though refuted by some scholars like Robert Currie, posited that the decline in the Church of England and elsewhere led to ecumenism.⁸ Another factor in the ecumenical drive and in its persistence has been a purely theological one. It was recognized that theologically speaking, a divided church was a contradiction in terms. According to Archbishop William Temple,⁹ 'I believe in the Holy Catholic Church' which is one of

⁶ Wikipedia, www.wcc.org

⁷ Wilson B in Barry T, 1972, *The Churches' Search for Unity*, p. 21

⁸ Barry T, 1972, *The Churches Search for Unity*, p. 32

⁹ Wilson B in Barry T, 1972, *The Churches' Search for Unity*, p. 32

the *credo* statements, is a contradiction in the face of alarming division or disunity among Christians, which equally has impeded the proclamation of the gospel of Christ.

Lastly, social influences had been taken into account as one of the factors which favoured the rise and persistence of the ecumenical movement. Under this, we have social mobility, whereby families which grew up in villages dominated by one denomination had to move to cities where their denomination is not represented. The next alternative was to give up old traditions and embrace new ones. This phenomenon of social mobility is always a factor for the growth of ecumenical feeling.

From the above highlighted points, one can rightly say that ecumenism is not a search for some scheme upon which all may compromise. It is not non-denominationalism, but it searches for unity in diversity. Hence the principal leaders of the movement hold that the distinctiveness of the different churches should not be disregarded. Instead they seek, through co-operative activity and interfaith dialogue, to develop deeper mutual understanding and to enable each tradition to contribute its distinctive values to the total Christian community.

III. The World Council of Churches

Among the latter ecumenical movements that emerged in the history of the Church is the World Council of Churches (WCC).¹⁰ Others that predated it were the “student and lay movements of the 19th century, the 1910 Edinburgh world missionary conference, and the 1920 encyclical from the Synod of Constantinople which suggested a fellowship of Churches”.¹¹ The WCC can be referred to as an amalgamation of world movements of both the “Faith and Order” and the “Life and Work” Movements. The former is a branch of the World Council of Churches that deals with theological and Sacramental aspects of churches in their search

¹⁰ www.oikomene.org

¹¹ www.oikomene.org

for visible unity, while the latter is a movement that concerns with the social ministries, international affairs and relief services. Hence its impact is felt mostly among refugees, migrants and the poor.¹²

Founded in 1948 in its first Assembly in Amsterdam from August 22 to September 4, the inaugural assembly of the World Council of Churches drew about 140 churches across all denominations of the world except the Catholic Church. The Eastern Orthodox Churches as well as the Catholics began to participate in 1968 at the 4th assembly in Sweden.¹³

The original basis of the World Council of Churches was very simple.

The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of Churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour.¹⁴

This constitutional definition of the World Council was criticized by the Russians contending that it overlooked the Trinitarian basis of Christianity prized by Orthodox Churches. The Russians' challenge therefore led to drafting a new formula by the then General Secretary of the World Council, Vissert Hooft. Accordingly, in 1961 at the New Delhi Assembly, the expanded formula was presented and adopted by all. It reads: "The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of Churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit".¹⁵

Okeke, while commenting on the basis of the World Council which indicated the nature of fellowship and the range of the same which the churches in Council were seeking to establish, pointed out that the World Council of churches is not a super-church in the world:

The World Council of Churches is not and must never become a Supre-Church. It is not the "Una Sancta" of which the Creed Speaks.¹⁶

¹² www.oikomene.org

¹³ www.oikomene.org

¹⁴ Shelley B, 1982, *Church History in Plain Language*, Texas: World Books Publications, p. 461

¹⁵ Shelley B, 1982, *Church History in Plain Language*, p. 461

¹⁶ Okeke H, 1996, *Milestone in Ecumenism*, Enugu: Thin Ltd, p. 75

The implication of this statement therefore is that the World Council of Churches has always seen itself as the servant of the Churches, the tool that the World Council of Churches can use in dialogue and for other Church matters.

There are several factors that facilitated the establishment of the World Council of Churches. The first factor bordered on the emergence of a movement known as Biblical Theology.

Biblical scholars were alleged to be negative and destructive to the Bible. However, this attitude changed after the war. It was replaced with the necessity of taking the thought-word of the Bible seriously and readiness to understand the great themes of biblical teaching. It was a period of great recovery of confidence for the church. Biblical theology though was the original creation of Protestant Scholars which later came to be embraced and cherished by Roman Catholics.

The second factor that had a common influence on the Churches in the ecumenical movement was the revived interest in the early Fathers of the Church. Such a revival of patristic interest was particularly important in the relationship between the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches, because it had the effect of undermining an approach to theological questions which has in the past been based on medieval theology. It is now possible for a Roman Catholic to write an appreciative book about Luther's theological views or for an Anglican to write with sympathy about Newman. Therefore the finding of common ground in various fields of study has had an important ecumenical influence.

Another common ground was the Liturgical Movement. This started among Roman Catholics in Germany before the war, and it aimed at giving lay people a greater part to play in Church services, so that they could become active participants instead of passive observers. Within the Roman Catholics, there was the adoption of the vernacular in the Mass and the radical arrangement of Churches to bring the Priest and his actions nearer to the people. On the other hand, in many Parishes of the Church of England, a similar happening was going on. While following the original and successful example of the Church of South India, many branches of the communion have dropped their sacred-cow attitude to the Prayer Book and have embarked on re-writings of the Communion and of other services. Coupled

with this was the shift of emphasis from the minister to the man-in-the pew. Therefore this movement was a gradual convergence of the churches onto common ground.

The last and most unique factor was the week of prayer for Christian Unity. This was a post-war phenomenon. Although, for some time the churches had been setting aside certain seasons to pray for the unity of the Church, yet the seasons varied and the forms of prayer differed. However with this new trend of “Week of Prayer”, many congregations found themselves praying for unity for the first time which ultimately had spiritual effects on the universal Church.

IV. The Tasks of the World Council of Churches

Among the many roles that the World Council of Churches had played, the following shall be discussed:

Firstly, right from its inception, the Council had been a source of both action and discussion. During the war, the refugee problem led to the establishment of an Ecumenical Refugee Commission in Geneva. Through this, the World Council of Churches financed the work of rescuing thousands of Jews from camps in Southern France after the Laval Government had handed them to the German regime.¹⁷

Similar task organized ecumenically by the World Council of Churches was a chaplaincy service to prisoners of war, which included the distribution of nearly two million Bibles, prayer and hymn books and pamphlets in numerous languages.¹⁸

Secondly, the World Council of Churches brought ecumenical tasks and dialogue many steps nearer their goal. Intensive studies and dialogues were going on in inter-church relations. Barry Till puts it thus:

Its particular service has been to bring the churches out of their isolation, to enable them to meet each other, to discuss common problems, and possibly to formulate common policies and take a corporate action.¹⁹

¹⁷ Barry T, 1972, *The Churches' Search for Unity*, p. 224

¹⁸ Barry T, 1972, *The Churches' Search for Unity* p. 230

¹⁹ Barry T, 1972, *The Churches' Search for Unity*, p. 231

Therefore, by its very establishment, ecumenism was no longer the concern of charismatic, ecumenically-minded individuals, but through the World Council of Churches, the participant churches developed a permanent and well-organised relationship with one another which has resulted in definite growth towards unity.

Thirdly, the Catholic positive attitude towards ecumenical movement and other churches was influenced by the World Council Churches. This was the real reason why people continued to look up to the World Council of Churches as a permanent impulse to reunion, bringing about more accelerated rate of change among the churches on the way to full unity of all Christians. Another role of the World Council of Churches is that it has become a common mouthpiece of world churches to comment on world political affairs during war or other events that affect gravely the well-being of the people.

V. Assessing the Relevance of the World Council of Churches in Ecumenism

No doubt, the World Council of Churches has made unique contribution as per the unity of churches, yet its role has been static rather than dynamic. To the cynical, indeed, the World Council of Churches can all too often look like a body engaged in endless consultations which are hardly ever implemented by the member churches. This is not to say that consultations should be avoided. However, on the consequences of such consultations, doubts are always cast on what they have been able to achieve. It has been discovered that the desired "unity" is still eluding the world churches till today, thereby making the W.C.C.'s assemblies a pastime which one well-known delegate referred to as "the ecumenical honeymoon". The words of Okeke bring the clear picture of this criticism:

Although the launching of the World Council of Churches was a very significant step forward on the road to Christian unity, it is yet far from the goal...²⁰.

²⁰ Okeke H, 1996, *Milestone in Ecumenism*, pp. 74-75

Another weakness of the World Council of Churches is that it is often out of touch with the general thinking of its member churches. Time and time again its studies and recommendations have seemed impracticable and inapplicable to the life of the local church. Church leaders and most clergy pay at least lip-service to the idea of Church unity, and there is a danger that a unity will be aimed at which does not carry as its partner other marks of reform and renewal. On the other hand, it has been admitted that World Council of Churches and its officers have tended to develop a life of their own, somewhat divorced from the member Churches. There has been series of studies, concerns, slogans and panacea all expressed in ecumenical jargon yet with seemingly little reference to the facts of local church life. The division caused by sacramental controversy right from the time of Cyprian is still extant in Africa because the Catholic Church is still unappreciative of the Eucharist celebrated outside her church.

This statement seemed to have been corroborated by Vissert Hooft²¹ when he opined that the great schism or breach among churches has not been healed up till today even though there has been joint consultative meetings. Paul Tillich had also pointed out the paradoxical nature of the Ecumenical Movement when he said “even if a united world church came into existence, new divisions would occur”.²²

However, judging from the contemporary activities of the World Council of Churches, one can assert that it has enabled the churches to come to a common ground on global, moral or ethical issues such as racism, homosexuality and stem-cell research, injustice and violence.

In addition, it looks at the possibility of all Christian denominations celebrating Easter same day.²³ As Christianity started to spread around the world, Christians came to differing results on when to commemorate Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection, due to the different reports in the four Gospels on these events.

²¹ Vissert-Hooft W, 1985, “Word Council of Churches – Roman Catholic Relations, Some Personal Reflections” in *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 37, No 3, pp. 342-344.

²² Tillich P, 1963, *Systematic Theology II*, Chicago: University Press, p. 173.

²³ www.oikomene.org

Attempt to establish a common date for Easter began with the Council of Nicea in AD 325.²⁴ Nowadays the Orthodox Church use the 21st March of the Julian Calendar as the date to calculate the timing of the full moon called the Vernal Equinox. But the Protestant and Catholic Churches base their calculations on the Gregorian Calendar.²⁵

Concretely, the World Council of Churches, through a seminar in Syria in 1997, expressed the hope that by the year 2010 and 2011 when the coincidence of the calendars will produce a common Easter date, Christians all over the world would adopt the exact astronomical reckoning and achieve the purpose of common date for Easter. Unfortunately, this prediction has not come to pass as churches all over the world still observe the festival at different dates.

VI. Recommendations and Conclusion:

The problems of communication gap between the World Council of Churches and member churches, most especially in Africa, can be achieved through de-Westernization and de-centralization from Geneva. If thinking and planning is done more locally and regionally, the W.C.C. will run less danger of being cut off from its grassroots. Moreover, more people will be involved, unlike a situation where the same people have been meeting over and over again and at the end, ecumenical ideas with little or no impact are diffused.

In addition, it must be noted that the ecumenical movement is basically the movement of God's own Spirit among God's people and as such cannot be wholly canalized by any human or ecclesiastical authority that is prevalent today. Ozigbo clearly puts it thus:

Ecumenism 'from the top' cannot heal the deep wounds and achieve the new desired unity of the Churches... as long as the emphasis is not on the grassroots, so long will church leaders regard ecumenism... as premature and inopportune.²⁶

²⁴ Boer, H. (1976) *A Short History of the Early Church*, Ibadan: Daystar Press, p. 114.

²⁵ www.oikomene.org

²⁶ Okeke H, 1996, *Milestone in Ecumenism*, Enugu: Thin Ltd, p. 222.