

Educational Material - Ecumenism

What is ecumenism?

Ecumenism comes from the Greek 'oikoumene', which means 'the whole world'. Ecumenism signifies the work towards cooperation and mutual understanding going on between different Christian churches and denominations. In the Gospel according to John (17:21) Jesus prays, "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me". Ecumenism has two sides: working for the visible unity of the church of Christ on one side, and unity in pluralism on the other.

Nathan Söderblom

Around the turn of the 18th-19th centuries there came up a need for ecumenism as people from different Christian traditions met in the missionary work in the non-Christian parts of the world. Struggle for world peace was another motive for the early ecumenism initiators. Following World War I (1914-1918) people said "No more wars - if every Christian would take their responsibility there would be no more wars!" In 1925 the Swedish archbishop Nathan Söderblom managed to gather church leaders from all over the world to a large ecumenical meeting held in Uppsala and Stockholm. Said Söderblom, S:t Paul (the protestants) came, S:t John (the eastern and orthodox) came, but S:t Peter (the Roman Catholics) was not able to come. The meeting was focused on peace and social involvement. Following World War II (1939-45) the World Council of Churches (WCC) was established. While not formal member of the WCC, the Roman Catholic Church has participated in its work, especially after the second great council in the Vatican 1962-65.

The fourth general assembly of the World Council of Churches was held in Uppsala 1968. This meeting brought up the social commitment and international justice on the agenda, as the churches of the former colonies now together with youth involvement contributed to new awareness of the responsibility of the churches for global survival. This is expressed in the candleholder by the main entrance in the cathedral, "Tree of reconciliation." The Porvoo Communion was established in 1995 and is an agreement between churches that recognize each other mutually. The churches are: the Church of England, the Estonian Evangelical-Lutheran Church, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Iceland, the Church of Ireland, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Lithuania, the Church of Norway, the Scottish Episcopal Church, the Church of Sweden and the Church of Wales. The history, liturgy and identity of these churches bear great resemblances.

Christian Council of Sweden

There is also among Sweden's churches work for unity. In 1986, an ecumenical hymnbook was adopted, where the 325 first hymns are common to as many as 15 different churches and denominations. Since 1992 most of the churches in Sweden are members of the Christian Council of Sweden (Sveriges Kristna Råd, SKR). In the council, four different church families are represented: the Lutheran, the Catholic, the Orthodox and the Free church families.

Also the local context has ecumenical work. Uppsala Cathedral Parish is an active member of the Christian Council of Uppsala (Uppsala Kristna Råd, UKR). The council is aimed at expressing Christian unity in Uppsala and works in several ways. Ecumenical work such as the hospital chaplaincy (Sjukhuskyrkan), ministry to the public schools (Skolkyrkan), social work (Diakonicentrum, Öppen kyrka), social outreach for teenagers (Café Genomfarten) as well as ecumenical services, all express there is unity in the pluralism.

"May we ask the Lord to grant us peace,
that the day will soon come,
when the peoples are unified in love
and when Christ is the Lord;
the day that fulfils all the prayers of the holy"

(Nathan Söderblom at a prayer for peace in Uppsala Cathedral, 1914)