



God's Unity... Our Journey

*A Bible study and reflections
on the Ecumenical Stance
of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

*The opinions expressed in this document are of the writer
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Louisville, KY

Front and back cover designed by:
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Introduction

We begin with the song “Many Are the Lightbeams”

Many are the light-beams from the one light. Our one light is Jesus.
Many are the light-beams from the one light; we are one in Christ.

Many are the branches of the one tree. Our one tree is Jesus.
Many are the branches of the one tree; we are one in Christ.

Many are the gifts giv’n, love is all one. Love’s the gift of Jesus.
Many are the gifts giv’n, love is all one; we are one in Christ.

Many ways to serve God, the Spirit is one; servant spirit of Jesus.
Many ways to serve God, the Spirit is one; we are one in Christ.

Many are the members, the body is one; members all of Jesus.
Many are the members, the body is one; we are one in Christ.

Thuma Mina: Singing with Our Partner Churches, p.212
Anders Frostenson & David Lewis,
©1995: Norsk Musikkforlag, Oslo.

In essence, this song clearly states the position of the Ecumenical Stance of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): we are one in Christ. We are many, yet one: one light, one tree, one body and one spirit. This is what Jesus prayed for in John 17, “That they may be one.” The Gospel of John calls for those who are one with Jesus to be at one with each other. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the community of believers becomes completely one and together they bear witness to the world the power of this love.

The church as the one body of Christ (Greek *kyriakon*, “thing belonging to the Lord;” also *ekklesia*, Latinized as *ecclesia*, “assembly, council, congregation, or church”) describes the people of God and the place of worship. In the early days of the *ecclesia*, there was one group of disciples Jesus deployed to go spread the good news. As they did through the centuries, we became many.

There are about 2.2 billion Christians around the world, serving God in nearly 33,000 expressions of Christianity. We know they are not all Presbyterians. We call them all a part of the family of faith, each with their own particulars. The Bible and our confessions, ancient and contemporary, express our belief that this one church, the holy catholic church, reaches far beyond the doors we enter every Sunday. Since 1970, according to the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, we have been multiplying at a rate of 270–300 denominations per year. If one were to google “Christianity” one year from this writing, there could be 270 more. Instead of becoming one, we are steadily dividing the body into more and more pieces.

The existence of these pieces is a call to the church to seek the unity and wholeness that God intended for it. As the Scripture bears witness, we are called "... [to make] every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). Ecumenism is the work of the church. It is this work that helps us understand and see that we are more alike than we are different and that our differences exist to build up and not tear down. "... [W]e must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love." (Eph. 4:15-16)

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is committed to this work. This work takes form in the life and ministry of local churches and presbyteries. Congregations worship, work, and witness together. In my presbytery, pastors are participating in ecumenical study groups, church leaders are combining resources to provide more effective ministry to children and youth, and churches are joining forces to build Habitat for Humanity homes and to feed the hungry. Across the country, presbyteries are partnering with partner denominations to start new churches and welcoming their pastors to lead worship. Resources provided include setting up an ecumenical task force and providing Web site links to resources at the Web site of our national offices.

The Department of Ecumenical and Agency Relationships coordinates, on behalf of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the ecumenical responsibilities of the Office of the General Assembly and the Stated Clerk. Its vision and purpose speaks of church unity as both God's real gift and God's effective calling. The source and the shape of the gift are proclaimed in Scripture: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4-6).

We "believe that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is called to seek unity with the whole body of Christ and all the people of God. We renew our commitment that to be Presbyterian is to be ecumenical. We confess our own brokenness in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and pledge to promote the quest for unity and reconciliation throughout our church and in the world."

"... Thus, the one church of Jesus Christ, established by God in the power of the Holy Spirit, is called to break down dividing walls of hostility that separate churches from one another and to build up the fullness of communion that binds churches together in common faith and witness" (<http://www.pcusa.org/ecumenicalrelations/>).

In light of these beliefs, the 218th General Assembly (2008) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approved "The Ecumenical Stance of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)" as a policy statement of the denomination. The Ministry and Formation subcommittee of the General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical Relations (GACER) has set, as its major goal, the dissemination of information about the policy statement to as many people as possible, bringing to life a passion for ecumenism dearly held. They hope to inspire you to understand and embrace ecumenism as an essential part of our Reformed faith.

Now is the time for each of us to begin a conversation on how we will work towards making God's gift and call a reality. This study resource provides a basic definition of ecumenism and is designed to help describe the ecumenical landscape that is familiar. It invites reflection on local ecumenical experiences and seeks to strengthen the life and witness of each participant and congregation in the as they seek to strengthen the unity of the Church.

About the Study

Group Guided

One of the hardest things to do is to find a leader for a class. There are many who would gladly participate, but not lead. Many times the class never happens because you can't find a teacher. So what do you do? Group guided work may be the answer. Group guided work eliminates the strain on one person and help keep each person in the group responsible for its study and work. These lessons are group guided and not leader driven. Participants are asked to prepare by reading background material, help one another to keep on track, and to be on time to help the group begin. Participants benefit greatly if they prepare beforehand by meditating on the Scripture-text, reading the confession, and reading that session's portion of the Ecumenical Stance.

At the end of each session, participants volunteer to gather the needed resources for the next session. Individual groups may covenant with one another to "lead" a particular session. Leaders are asked to keep the group on task, keep track of the time, and gather any needed resources. Sometimes group work is hard. But together it can be done you can do this. Have a pastor or educator available to resource the work of the group or, if you are without leadership, invite another church to partner with you on this journey.

Audience

The study is designed for any group of Christians from a congregation or community. Congregational leaders (elders, pastors, educators, deacons, Bible study leaders, etc) will find it helpful in seeking to open doors into the wider Christian community. The study can also be used in church school, weekday small groups, church ministry studies (evangelism, worship, stewardship, etc.), young adult ministry, or with a presbytery study group.

Lesson Outline

Each session is designed for a period of one to one and a half hours. In each session, participants will review the Biblical and confessional basis for our oneness, and reflect on some portion of the Ecumenical Stance of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) or Ecumenical Stance. The prayers and songs that are included will help enhance the time together, but there is no obligation to use them. Groups may use their own prayers and hymns, or eliminate the singing altogether. The lessons are outlined as follows:

Introduction – we discover the goal of the lesson especially a reflection on the title

Getting Started – we take the time to pray and catch up with each other

Listening to the Word – we hear and listen to the biblical text and the confession
or *Book of Order*

Sharing our Stories – we tell our own stories as it relates to the topic

Reflection for Action – we discover how we will respond to this learning

Going Out – we thank God for the time of sharing, get prepared for the next session

Activities included:

Prayer – opening and closing (use these ecumenical prayers provided or your own)

Scriptural reflection

A confession

Songs and hymns

List of questions for discussion

List of readings for next session

A portion of the Affirmation of the Ecumenical Commitment

A shorter two session module is available through the Presbyterian Leader online resource at <https://www.thepresbyterianleader.com>

The Ecumenical Stance of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) can be downloaded here: www.pcusa.org/ecumenicalrelations

Session I

We Are One

Session Outline

Biblical and Confessional Basis of the Ecumenical Stance

Scripture: Psalm 67; John 17

Confession: Nicene Creed

What is ecumenism and why does it matter?

Discuss unity among Christians in local communities, its challenges and possibilities.
What hinders a fuller expression of Christian unity in local communities?

Discussion centers will focus on the local expression of ecumenism.

Resources Needed

Bible

An Affirmation of Our Ecumenical Commitment (from the Ecumenical Stance)

The Book of Confessions (or copies of Nicene Creed)

Thuma Mina: Singing with Our Partner Churches; International Ecumenical Hymnbook, (1995)
– no longer in print (Or another appropriate hymn)

Introduction

A community Christmas choir; two churches pool resources to feed and clothe the homeless; various denominations share resources to provide vacation Bible school for their congregations and community; a college president invites community religious leaders to breakfast to talk about their cooperative work; Rev. Baptist shares the Word with Ms. Presbyterian and Mr. Methodist. If this sounds familiar to you, as it does for so many congregations, you have been involved in ecumenism. Mostly, Presbyterians do ecumenism without referring to it as such. In our everyday lives and work we cooperate with one another without thinking about our religious affiliations. It usually does not matter where you worship when it comes to the work we do together in the world. This thought is reflected in a recent definition of ecumenism as “A movement promoting worldwide unity among religions through greater cooperation and improved understanding.”

The American Heritage® *Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Edition
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Ecumenism comes from the Greek word, *oikoumené*, which means the inhabited world. It promotes unity, cooperation, and understanding between religious groups and denominations. Basically, ecumenism seeks the visible unity of the church, the bringing together of the people of God. There are two types of ecumenism: Christian ecumenism and interfaith ecumenism. The Christian ecumenical movement promotes unity between religious groups and denominations within Christianity. Interfaith ecumenism (which will not be discussed here) promotes cooperation among diverse faith communities (Protestant, Jewish, Buddhist, etc.). Its aim is toward increased tolerance, better relationships, and cooperation.

The Christian ecumenical movement began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Based on its success, the World Council of Churches was created in 1937 (although it did not officially begin until August 23, 1948). Today the World Council of Churches, whose headquarters is in Geneva Switzerland, represents some 349 churches in more than 100 countries representing over 560 million Christians. The World Council of Churches is a worldwide fellowship of churches seeking unity, a common witness, and Christian service. Since its beginning, many ecumenical organizations have joined the movement. (See lesson two for more information on the World Council of Churches and other organizations.)

As Presbyterians, we have been involved in ecumenism at all levels of the church. The Ecumenical Stance of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), declares that "...the purpose of the ecumenical movement is to help make manifest God's intention for the household of God" (Ecumenical Stance, p. 5). According to John: Jesus prayed "...that they may be one" (Jn. 17:1).

Throughout the years, various denominations have attempted to create unions such as the reunion of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and the Presbyterian Church in United States in 1983. As our history outlines, we have been involved in the ecumenical work of the church for more than a century. Not only has the work been to reunite broken parts of the body, but also to find ways in which we should cooperate with one another to do the work of the Lord.

Do you remember the words of the song "We are the World" by Michael Jackson and Lionel Ritchie? I remember in particular, "There comes a time ... when the world must come together as one ... We are the world ...". It's one of those songs that express why ecumenism matters. There is great truth in saying that we **are** all a part of God's family. It is up to us, as one people, to make a difference in the world, because we are stronger together than we are apart. Think of ecumenism as the open relationship of the children of God to one another. Our ecumenical work celebrates God's gift of humanity and brings us together as one people. It happens in our religious, social, and political life. We worship together, serve God together, and participate in the governing process together. We endeavor to work and live together in the unity of God's spirit, even though we represent the different parts of the body of Christ called the church.

Ecumenism matters because it has the power to heal the world of such things as violence, poverty, hunger, racism and every other "ism" you can name, homelessness, and conflicts. If we relate to one another as Jesus commands that we love one another, focus our attention on what is best for the other and fast from all that hurts, we participate with God in God's act of redemption.

Ecumenism matters because it can transform the human spirit. It helps us to move beyond ourselves and gives us the opportunity to see the world from another's point of view and thus bring us closer to each other. By working in a soup kitchen, building a habitat house, or helping someone study for their GED or ESL, we gain new perspectives and insights that help us view other people with compassion and open us to new ways of thinking.

As Presbyterians, we believe that we belong to one another. Our work together, although challenging at times, brings to light this God given reality. Let's explore it together.

In this session, participants will focus on the definition of ecumenism and why it matters. They will be asked to share personal and communal experiences of ecumenism.

Prepare for the Session

Read the Introduction to the Ecumenical Stance and the section titled: Biblical and Confessional Basis of Our Ecumenical Stance.

Pray for the ecumenical community (congregations, denominations, community organizations.)

Getting Started

Greet one another and catch up as you gather.

Sing or recite the words of the song, "Many Are the Lightbeams" (see Introduction, page 9)

Pray together using this prayer based on John 17 (or one of your own):

Loving God, we gather now as your children. You are known to us in the life and work of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ. Be with us and help us to reflect the one body you created us to be. May we be one as we begin our time of study and reflection. Amen.

Introduce yourselves to each other, sharing how you are part of this community of believers.

Listening to the Word

Read John 17:1-26

Jesus' prayer for unity is based on the oneness of God the Creator to God the Son. To be one with Jesus is to be one with each other. This prayer focuses on the unity of the believers, those who know God and are claimed by God.

Jesus' farewell meal with his disciples began with his declaration of love for his own and a directive for them to love one another.

As the narrative of the last days of Jesus begins in John, Jesus washes the disciples' feet, gives them a new commandment to love one another, promises the gift of the Holy Spirit, and describes the work of the Spirit. This section of the Gospel of John ends with a prayer to God about God's love and care for the disciples. In the prayer he prays for himself, that in him God might be glorified. Then he prays for those who believe, that God will protect and guide them, that they may be one with God and one with each other. Finally, he prays for those who may come to believe because of the disciples' message and that they might be one: "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (Jn. 17:22–23).

Questions for discussion:

What does Jesus' prayer say about unity?

Talk about the definition of ecumenism.

How do you think Jesus would define ecumenism, based on his prayer?

What importance do you give to this work?

Why do you think the unity of the church would have been important to Jesus?

How does Jesus propose this oneness develop? What is unity's purpose?

Review the words of the Nicene Creed. (See *The Book of Confessions* or *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, or you can look online at the PC(USA) Web site, www.pcusa.org/oga for the constitution.)

How does the Nicene Creed affirm this oneness?

Sharing Our Stories

Jesus prayed that the disciples might be one as he was one with God, knowing that he would send them out into the world to share the good news so that others might come to believe, that we may all be one. Name those who make up your Christian community (church, agency, community organization, etc.).

How are you related to these communities in your area?

What are the things that unite you?

What issues/things challenge or hinder this unity?

Reflection for Action

Since we understand Jesus' desire for the unity of the people whom God have given him, what should our response be?

What do you believe is your ecumenical calling?

How do you and your church participate in ecumenism?

Going Out

Recite together this portion of the Affirmation of Our Ecumenical Stance:

We affirm the goal of unity that Jesus described in his high priestly prayer:

We seek to become fully one in Christ, so that the world may believe.

We believe in one God, known to us in three persons, eternally united in the bond of love.

In love we proclaim our faith in the Triune God

and acknowledge one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

(From the Ecumenical Stance of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
adopted by 218th General Assembly (2008).)

Prayer (or use a song if you wish):

God our Heavenly Father, we draw near to you with thankful hearts because of your great love for us. We thank you most of all for the gift of your dear Son, in whom alone we may be one. We are different from one another in race and language, in material things, in gifts, in opportunities, but each of us has a human heart, knowing joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain. We are one in our need of your forgiveness, your strength, your love; make us one in our response to you, that bound by common love, and freed from selfish aims, we may work for the good of all and the advancement of your kingdom.

(Women from Guatemala for the Women's World Day of Prayer,
Prayers Encircling the World An International Anthology, p.121,
1999: Louisville, Kentucky, Westminster John Knox Press.)

Session II

The Spirit of Pentecost

Session Outline

Biblical and Confessional Basis of the Ecumenical Stance

Scripture: Psalm 126; Acts 2:1–13

Confession: Apostles' Creed

Historical Overview of Presbyterian Ecumenical Involvement

Stories of the impact (timeline of local, national, global involvement and shifting trends)

Review of the ecumenical work of the General Assembly over the last decade

Importance of work (the difference it makes at the local level)

Practical stories of what our participation looks like

Describe the work of WCC, WARC, NCC, CUIC

Resources

The Presbyterian Hymnal

The Presbyterian Family Connection – See Attachment A, page 40

Book of Order

Formula of Agreement, resources section of Web site:

<http://www.pcusa.org/ecumenicalrelations>.

A collection of newspapers from the past week or month

Having Gifts that Differ: Profiles of Ecumenical Churches, Peggy L. Shriver

Introduction

I have always been a Presbyterian. According to my mother, she and my father decided to go to a Presbyterian church because they had Sunday school (Grandpa was Baptist and they didn't). A truer fact is that being a Presbyterian is only the place and context in which my family attended worship. The rest of my life has always been ecumenical.

Although there are other branches of the family (on both sides) who are Presbyterian, there are also Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal, Pentecostal, United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, Catholic, and some who claim nothing at all. So whenever we gather, there is a great spirit of Pentecost that flows through us. We share each other's faith as we worship in each other's congregations.

Sundays were always worship focused. I'd start the day at Edisto Presbyterian Church attending eleven o'clock worship, then join my aunt and cousins at the Calvary AME for an afternoon program, and complete the day at the Baptist church down the road for an evening celebration. The same is still true. We share pulpits, choirs, community programs, social issues, children, and families. For the first time, last year I was able to worship with the Edisto church and surrounding communities as they gathered for the Ecumenical Easter Sunrise service on Edisto Beach.

My involvement in ecumenism has extended to participation in Habitat for Humanity, the Salvation Army, the local school, United Way, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and the World Council of Churches. I can still remember a mission experience with the Presbyterian Church of Trinidad and Tobago. Our goal was to develop unity in friendship, support and love between two Presbyterian denominations. The friendships that started more than ten years ago still remain.

Google the word ecumenical and you will find that ecumenism is alive and well all around the world. My search yielded sights such as the Ecumenical Christian Ministries in Kansas in which the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) participates; Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Detroit, Michigan; Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A, one of the most recent ecumenical efforts in our country; the Ecumenical Institute of the World Council of Churches; and the Palestinian Israeli Ecumenical Forum.

Our formal and informal partnerships with other denominations have made it possible for Presbyterians to share ministers and leaders with other denominations. As of the 218th General Assembly in 2008, we are now in closer relationship with the Moravian Church, the Korean Presbyterian Church Abroad, and the Episcopal Church. These partnerships strengthens unions or covenants that local congregations have been involved in for years.

Here is what the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Web site has to say about this ecumenical journey:

“Through the adoption of a **Formula of Agreement**, the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Church of Christ, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, entered into a relationship of full communion. We continually strengthen this relationship and also assist in the orderly exchange of ministers.

Churches Uniting in Christ

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is one of nine denominations that joined to live with one another in unity and partnership. Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC) is a framework, showing the world what we truly are: the one Body of Jesus Christ. Visit the Web site: <http://www.cuicinfo.org>.

Christian Churches Together

Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A. (CCT) is a new forum growing out of a deeply felt need to broaden and expand fellowship, unity, and witness among the diverse expressions of Christian faith today. Visit the Web site: <http://www.christianchurchestogether.org>.

Dialogues

It is our commitment to “engage in bilateral and multilateral dialogues with other churches and traditions in order to remove barriers of misunderstanding and establish common affirmations.” At the present time we are in dialogue with the Episcopal Church, the Moravian Church and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. We also participate in international dialogues through the World Council of Churches and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. The most recent international dialogues include Pentecostal churches, Seventh-day Adventist, Orthodox, and others.

Other organizations and agencies include the World Council of Churches (WCC), the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), and the National Council of Churches (NCCC).

The World Council of Churches (WCC) brings together 349 churches, denominations and church fellowships in more than 110 countries and territories throughout the world, representing over 560 million Christians. The WCC is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For its member churches, the WCC is a unique space: one in which they can reflect, speak, act, worship and work together, challenge and support each other, share and debate with each other.

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) is a fellowship of seventy-five million Reformed Christians in 214 churches in 107 countries. It includes Congregational, Presbyterian, Reformed and United churches. Its historical ties go back to the sixteenth century work of John Calvin, John Knox, and others. Its headquarters is located in Geneva, Switzerland.

A historic merger is set to occur at the June 2010 Uniting General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC). The two bodies will form a new body called the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). For more information visit the Web site <http://www.reformedchurches.org>.

The National Council of Churches was founded in 1950. Its member churches include an array of denominations: Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, Evangelical, historic African American, and Living Peace churches. Its members include forty-five million persons in 100,000 congregations in neighborhoods all around the country.

“Reflecting the rich variety of its members, the NCC believes that genuine unity demands inclusivity and a respect for diversity, and strives to embody this belief in its programs, decision-making and staffing.” Visit the Web site: <http://www.nccusa.org>.

Prepare for the Session

In this session we will talk about our historical and current practices of ecumenism.

Read the Biblical and Confessional Basis of Our Ecumenical Stance, and the Historical Overview of Presbyterian Ecumenical Involvement from the Ecumenical Stance.

Review the Ecumenical Work of the General Assembly over the last decade.

Read Acts 1 and 2. Make special note of any questions you have of the text.

Pray for the ecumenical community

Getting Started

Greetings: make sure you continue offer hospitality to one another as your group gathers (especially to newcomers).

Prayer:

Come, Holy Spirit, come:
Enter our lives.
Free us from all fear.
Give us strength to carry on.
Give us hope and joy sufficient for each day.

Come, Holy Spirit, come:
Give us power to be the church.
Impart your many gifts to our members,
that we may be the body of Christ's presence in the world.
Free us from all fear, and renew our lives together.

Come, Holy Spirit, come.
Bind us close together.
May we rejoice with one another's joys and weep with one another's sorrows.
Bind us together,
not only with the sheep of this fold,
but all of Christ's people
around this city and world.
Forgive the pride, prejudice, and self-righteousness which separate us from
one another.

Come, Holy Spirit, come:
That all may be one in Christ,
source of all true unity,
who is with us today and always,
even to the end of time. Amen.

(Ruth C. Duck, *Flames of the Spirit:
Resources for Worship Like Bread for the Journey*,
Ruth C. Duck, ed., ©1985: Pilgrim Press.)

Prayer: (Worship book of WCC 7th Assembly, 1991. P.24)

Spirit of unity, reconcile your people.
Give us the wisdom to hold to what we need to be your church.
Give us the grace to lay down those things that you can do without.
Give us a vision of your breadth and length and height which will change our
smallness of heart and bring us humbly together.
Come, Holy Spirit, renew the whole creation.

If you are a singing group, share "Come Sing, O Church, in Joy!" (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, p. 430)

Make introductions and catch up. Share your first or latest experience in a community of faith of other than the one in which you are most familiar.

Make sure each person has the needed materials.

Listening to the Word

Read Acts 2:1–13.

The Acts of the Apostles tell the story of the history of the early church. The beauty of the Pentecost story is two-fold:

The community was together before the Spirit appeared in the rush of a mighty wind. They were in one place, celebrating the wheat harvest when God’s presence was made known. As the church began its journey to be a witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, it began to take on many forms, but it had its beginning in that one place.

Secondly, notice that their collective voice brought others into their midst. Although they were from every nation, and spoke in different languages, they understood each other. The Spirit was able to translate their language into something others could understand. As disciples, we have learned the power of the Spirit to transform as we encounter each other in our daily lives.

How do you see this happening in your community?

Have you ever had that kind of Pentecost experience?

Consider the diversity of your faith community (race, sex, age, interest, etc.).

How has the Spirit spoke to others through you?

Historical Overview of Presbyterian Ecumenical Involvement!

For more than three hundred years, Presbyterians have been involved in God’s work in the world. In the *Book of Order* (Form of Government), chapter fifteen outlines our ecumenical commitment and relationship with other denominations: “The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) seeks to manifest more visibly the unity of the church of Jesus Christ and will be open to opportunities for conversation, cooperation, and action with other ecclesiastical bodies and secular groups” (G-15.0101).

We continue to keep the lines of communication open with other communities of faith, (including interfaith conversations) because of our belief in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. We endeavor to find ways to live out God’s gift of unity. We fully understand that divisions hurt the body of Christ. So it is important that we do all we can to live in that gift. “Governing bodies are encouraged and permitted to discover and engage in opportunities to minister together in mutual affirmation and admonition with churches with whom the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is in full communion” (*Book of Order*, G-15.0302d).

For more information on how the church is currently participating in God’s work in the world, visit the Web site and review the various resources of the Committee on Ecumenical Relations and our current involvement with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, World Council of Churches, CUIC, and other bodies <http://www.pcusa.org>. At the website you will also find several articles, documents and opportunities to serve in ecumenical groups and delegations.

Sharing our Stories

Look at your timeline. When was your church organized? What has been your ecumenical work since then? For example, First African Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia was organized in 1807. As early as 1827, First African was granted permission by the Presbytery of Philadelphia to employ an ordained Methodist minister as stated supply. When and how has your church participated in the church's work toward unity?

In what areas have you or are you participating (justice issues, disaster relief, public policy, hunger concerns, the homeless, youth and young adults, mission partnerships)?

How far does your ministry extend beyond your local community?

How familiar are you with work of these organizations (WCC, WARC, NCC, etc.)?

Share stories of your experiences in local and global work

Where do you see expressions of unity beyond you – regionally, nationally, internationally?

Reflection for Action

Take a look at your local newspaper, listen to the news, and call your local public school principal.

What are some ways your church can be involved locally?

What are the issues around the world that could use your support?

Who are the possible ecumenical partners in your community?

Talk about unity among Christians in your community, its challenges and possibilities.

Reflect on the many times our churches have been divided. (See attachment A)

What hinders a fuller expression of Christian unity in your (and other) communities?

Going Out

Affirmation of Our Ecumenical Commitment:

Recite together this portion of the Affirmation of Our Ecumenical Commitment from the Ecumenical Stance.

We are called to unity, but not uniformity, as people of God who though many, are members one of another and who, together, constitute the body of Christ on earth.

Prayer (Worship book of WCC 7th Assembly, 1991. P.20)

God you are the giver of life. We pray for the church in the whole world. Sanctify her life, renew her worship, give power to her witnessing, restore her unity.

Give strength to those who are searching together for that kind of obedience that creates unity.

Heal the divisions separating your children one from another, so that they will make fast with bonds of peace, the unity which the Spirit gives. Amen

Session III

A More Excellent Way

Session Outline

Biblical and Confessional Basis of the Ecumenical Stance

Scripture: Psalm 127: 1 Corinthians 12:12–31

Confession: The Heidelberg Catechism, Question 54, 4.054
Second Helvetic Confession, 5.125–.128

Changing Ecumenical Landscape

Resources

Thuma Mina International Ecumenical Hymnbook (esp. p. 9)

An Affirmation of Our Ecumenical Commitment (from the Ecumenical Stance)

Bible

The Book of Confessions

Introduction

In 1993, I participated in my first racial ethnic convocation. For many reasons, it was an event I will never forget. The auditorium was alive with the traditions, dance, and languages of the many cultures present: an African group dancing to the beat of the drums, a Korean choir singing Amazing Grace in their native tongue, Latin American children circling the stage in song and dance, and a Native American dance group blessing the gathering in song and dance. And the colors, there was such movement and joy felt by the community: singing, clapping, and worshipping. Somehow even that festival experience did not translate to a common experience in worship. Worship was, as they say, high church. What happened between nine at night and eight the next morning? We have such a rich history, culture, and traditions we can share with one another. The more excellent way of being before God is the full expression of the one body with many members.

We must acknowledge and accept that the flow of influence has shifted. It now flows from every part of the world to every other part of the world. In years past we interpreted God's commission to go and make disciples, to mean that we were the ones with the story to tell, and that "the other" had not experienced God in their own way. We know that was not the case. More and more our brothers and sisters from the east and south, from all parts of the world, have enriched our experience and knowledge of God. "Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many ... As it is, there are many members, yet one body" (1 Cor. 12:14, 20). The inclusion of new immigrants, direct services, justice coalitions, and people from other Christian traditions creates, in full color, the body of Christ. This fuller expression of the body of Christ is not on the horizon. It is a gift that is among us that shows us a more excellent way to the one church of Jesus Christ.

In this session, we will discover how new partnerships can shape our experiences of the gospel, and the challenge this brings to the church.

Preparing for the Session

Stretch yourself. If your group is homogeneous (all White, African American, Latino, or Asian, etc.) take the first step and invite another member of the body of Christ to join your group. Or check out a few CDs that might help you experience the rich heritage that others can bring to your experience of God.

Read the Biblical and Confession Basis and the Changing Ecumenical Landscape from the Ecumenical Stance.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12–31

Read The Heidelberg Catechism, Question 54, 4.054; and The Second Helvetic Confession, 5.125–.128.

Getting Started

Take time for introductions. This is especially important if you have invited others to join your conversation. As you greet one another and catch up, share what you have noticed about the influence of new immigrants in your community.

Try a new song, “Jesu Tawa Pano” (from Zimbabwe) – it can be sung in English, Spanish, or Shona

Pray:

O God, set your blessing on us
as we begin this day together.
Confirm in us the truth by which we rightly live;
confront us with the truth from which we wrongly turn.
We ask not for what we want,
but for what you know we need,
as we offer this day and ourselves for you and to you,
through Jesus Christ, our Savior.
Amen.

The Lord be with you
AND ALSO WITH YOU.

Listening to the Word

Read 1 Cor. 12:12–31

We are one body with many members. As stated earlier, there are nearly 33,000 expressions of Christianity. Scripture says "... God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose" (1 Corinthians 12:18). This text invites us to think of the church (one body, with many members) as a human body (one body, with different parts). When a part of your body hurts, is missing, or doesn't work properly, you feel it. Each part has its function. A person with an injury or birth defect must adapt, find some way to make up for the loss of a limb, sight, or hearing. So it is with the church. When Jesus sent the disciples to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, they started this multiplication of the body, thus dividing it into many parts. It continues today. Each part is important, equally valued, and created for the common good of the church (v.7).

But no matter how many pieces we create, we are still one body. What would the church miss if all 2.2 billion Christians were Presbyterians?

What would the body of Christ miss?

What is the richness that the diversity brings?

Regarding The Heidelberg Catechism, Question 54, 4.054:

How does this question define the holy catholic church?

Regarding The Second Helvetic Confession, 5.125–.128:

How does this confession describe the "more excellent way"?

Changing Ecumenical Landscape

We read that the "the flow of influence is no longer from north to south or even west to east, but from every part of the world to every other part of the world." (Ecumenical Stance, p. 5). New immigrants broaden and stretch our view of the world. They provide us with fresh eyes with which to see, a fresh way of listening to the world, and a way of walking that enriches the stories of the gospel. This changing landscape is reflected in every area of our lives.

If indeed "... [t]he purpose of the ecumenical movement is to help make manifest God's intention for the household of God" (Ecumenical Stance, p. 5), how can we take advantage of this new landscape to accomplish God's purpose?

(Ecumenical Stance of the
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), p. 5)

Do you see any of this taking place in your church? In your presbytery?

Sharing our Stories

What has been your experience with new immigrants in your community?

What service or justice groups are your ministry partners?

Reflection for Action

What can you do in your community to be more open to this change?

What parts of the body of Christ are missing in your community and what partnerships are needed to make the body more whole?

Going Out

Recite together this portion of the Affirmation of Our Ecumenical Commitment (from the Ecumenical Stance, p. 8):

We come as disciples bearing marks of diverse cultures and traditions,
bringing unique insights, experiences, strengths, and vulnerabilities.

We are eager to learn from one another, to seek formation and transformation,
knowing that each of us stands in need of correction and mutual up building.

Prayer

Session IV

Unity in the Body

Session Outline

Biblical and Confessional Basis of the Ecumenical Stance

Scripture: Psalm 134; 2 Corinthians 5:11–20

Confession: Confession of 1967, 9.34–40

Contours of a New Ecumenical Reality Part II

4. Enlarging the table of ecumenical relationships
5. Covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth
6. Covenanting for peacemaking in a war-torn world

Provide a connection or examples of local, national, and global ecumenical activities in sessions IV through VI.

Introduction

Lately, I've been having conversations with small (active membership under fifty) congregations on what the future life of the church looks like. What I have discovered is that they are in love with the past. Not just stuck in, but in love with. One congregation, for example, just celebrated an anniversary. They put together a quarter-inch thick color brochure for the celebration, which served as worship bulletin and fundraiser. The first eleven pages of this brochure outlined the church's thirty year history. Although this information is interesting and useful, I was looking for something that would help me and the members look forward to the future. There was nothing. They didn't explore their current journey or where they thought God is leading them in the future. We continue to exist in the past and our ministries reflect that reality.

God is calling us to seek a new vision for the life of the church. We can no longer exist in a vacuum while the world grows up around us. We must endeavor to increase our ministry to the community. That means sharing the work with other churches who are participating in the same call.

Reflect for a moment on what the Ecumenical Stance called varied and diverse nuances in the section on Contours of a New Ecumenical Reality.

- reconciliation in Jesus Christ;
- a spirit of generosity toward others;
- unity and diversity in the Holy Spirit;
- justice in the economy, and for the earth;
- the call of God to mission and evangelism;
- solidarity with the marginalized;
- common memory of a people on a journey;
- hope for the future of the world;
- a gift of God and a task for all human beings.

(Ecumenical Stance, pp. 5-6)

The list is impressive. It may challenge your church's sense of call, but is it even possible to do it all? Would you do it? Joining hands and heart with other churches and agencies makes it possible for even the smallest congregation to be faithful to the gospel. United, we are able to be a more powerful witness of the gospel than we can be alone. "How good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity." (Ps. 133:1).

Are any of these reflected in the work of the church in the twenty-first century? When you look at your church's history, present or future, is it a view from the window looking out or looking in?

How can we shift the focus from ourselves to the church working for God in the world?

Preparing for the Session

Read the following for the Biblical and confessional basis:

Psalm 133; 1 Ephesians 4:1-16

Book of Order, chapter IV, sections 1, 2, and 4

Contours of a New Ecumenical Reality, priorities 1-4 (Ecumenical Stance, p. 6-7)

Getting Started

Prayer:

Eternal God,
 you have called us to be members of one body.
 Join us with those
 who in all times and places have praised your name;
 that, with one heart and mind,
 we may show the unity of your church,
 and bring honor to our Lord and Savior,
 Jesus Christ. Amen.

(*Service for the Lord's Day: Supplemental Liturgical Resource 1*, Prayer 1, p. 29,
 © 1984: Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, used by permission.)

Greet one another and catch up as you answer this question:
What does unity look like to you?

Share in a unison reading of this Prayer of Confession

Ever flowing God, we gather here needing your love now. We have let the dividing walls of ignorance, war, and greed come between us and our sisters and brothers. Like Martha, we have often only concentrated on our own tasks, and then complained when we see others serve you differently. Like Mary, we truly seek to hear your call to us, but find ourselves limited by the expectations our family and friends, and even our churches have for us. Free us, God, so we might rise, reach out and touch the world with your hope and grace. Amen.

(Sandra E. Graham, *Flames of the Spirit*, p.50,
© 1985: Pilgrim Press)

Listening to the Word

Read Ephesians 4:1–16

The theme of this portion of Ephesians is unity in the body of Christ. It gives practical instruction on what it means for the body of Christ to be one. It lists the seven reasons for church unity: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all. All this we have in common. We are only different in the gift that God has given. Even then they are given for the common good.

Questions for Reflection

How does your congregation reflect this unity?

Where is there a need for unity in your community?

How can the ecumenical community practice this unity?

Read chapter IV of the *Book of Order*, entitled The Church and its Unity, sections 1, 2, and 4. (G-4.0101–.0203, 4.0401–.0403).

This reading expresses the belief that the church is both universal and particular. “The Church universal consists of all persons in every nation, together with their children, who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and commit themselves to live in a fellowship under his rule.” (G-4.0101). The church particular is a community of believers “... in a particular place, along with their children who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and who have been gathered for the service of God as set forth in Scriptures, subject to a particular form of church government” (*Book of Order*, G-4.0103).

It describes the unity of the church as a gift of God: “There is one Church. As the Bible speaks of the one body which is the Church living under the one Spirit of God known through Christ, it reminds us that we have one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all. (Ephesians 4:5–6)” (*Book of Order*, G-4.0202)

Contours of the Ecumenical reality – Priorities 1–3

1. *Growing the Ecumenical Vision*

In the face of a growing number of issues in the church and the world, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) must not turn away from its involvement in the ecumenical arena. We must seek to listen closely to what the Holy Spirit is saying to us through the voices of other Christians.

2. *Facing Obstacles to Christian Unity*

We must come to grips with the things that continue to cause divisions among us. How can we more clearly see our unity rather than shining a light on our divisions?

3. *Bridging the Gaps between the Local and the Global, Individual Congregations and the Denomination*

We must acknowledge the relationships that are possible between the church and non religious bodies that provide opportunities to build ecumenical partnerships.

Sharing our Stories

As you reflect on the Ecumenical Stance and the *Book of Order*, describe an activity of your family or church that expresses the unity described in Ephesians.

Reflection for Action

Name some practical ways your church community can reflect this unity. Does anything need to be added or subtracted from your church's routine to make that happen?

Going Out

Sing the Song "They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love"

We are one in the Spirit"
We are one in the Lord
We are one in the Spirit,
We are one in the Lord.
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored.
And they'll know we are Christians by our love,
By our love
Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.

(Peter Scholte, ©1966, included in New Song Youth Songbook, by
Congregational Ministries of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).
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Recite together this portion of the Affirmation of Our Ecumenical Commitment

Our vision of unity in Christ is universal, concerned for the whole of creation, as well as the rights and needs of humanity. We are called to join with others in bold, prophetic witness when confronting the abuse of power and threats to the planet, and in covenants for justice in the economy and the earth.

As Christians, we remain open to the working of God's Spirit among people of other faiths, both in their individual and in their corporate religious lives and are prepared, as we are called by Jesus Christ, to dialogue and cooperate everywhere with people of good will on behalf of justice, peace, and the common good. We pursue the journey of faith with Christ wherever we find ourselves, in whatever company, all in each place.

(Ecumenical Stance, p. 9)

Session V

The Ministry of Reconciliation

Session Outline

Biblical and Confessional Basis of the Ecumenical Stance

Scripture: Psalm 134; 2 Corinthians 5:11–20

Confession: Confession of 1967, 9.34–40

Contours of a New Ecumenical Reality Part II

4. Enlarging the table of ecumenical relationships
5. Covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth
6. Covenanting for peacemaking in a war-torn world

Provide a connection or examples of local, national, and global ecumenical activities in sessions IV through VI.

Resources

Bible

Ecumenical Stance of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

The Book of Confessions

Mission Yearbook for Prayer & Study

Prayers Encircling the World

Introduction

At one time or another all of us, have had a relationship go wrong that we wished we could go back and repair. This story illustrates one of those for me.

When I first met John, he was having some disagreements with his colleagues as well as some health problems. He needed food, his bills, and basic living expenses paid. I tried to do what I could. I listened to his story, donated a few dollars here and there, made referrals, covered a trip to the grocery store, and served as taxi a couple of times. For a while, the relationship was good. Then it all fell apart because I tried to do my work as an educator. There was a conflict between two people, with John in a starring role. We disagreed on the nature of the conflict and his part in it and I quickly found myself in the middle. Because John saw me as the enemy, it prohibited us from focusing on the issues. Avoidance became the tactic of choice for him, and if I would admit it, for me too.

But resolution was on the horizon. Sarah, who had a vested interest in the relationship, decided to organize a time for us to talk with John; to hear each other and clear the air. So, we met and talked it out. I can't say that my relationship with John has been completely repaired, but at least we are able to communicate. Now we can get back to doing the work of God.

Reconciliation is an act of God. In Christ, God was reconciling the world to God self. It is the act of re-establishing a relationship with another; reconnecting with a friend, repairing or resolving a conflict. Jesus did that for us. With his life, he repaired our broken relationship with God and gave us the responsibility to do the same with each other. Guy Nave comments: "For Paul, reconciliation of all humanity to God is the primary goal within this new creation. Reconciliation to God results in a life consistent or congruous with the purpose and will of God. This means that in the new creation self-centeredness and judgment based solely on external appearance no longer exists; instead God's self-sacrificing love for those in need governs all perceptions and actions"

(Nave, Guy, *True to Our Native Land*, 2007: Fortress Press, Minneapolis, p. 316).

Sarah was our ambassador for Christ that day, Christ's ministry of reconciliation at work. My work with the church was not functioning at its best because of this broken relationship. It was clear to me that reconciliation would not be possible if we did not agree to move beyond our own agendas.

Christ calls us to be ambassadors of reconciliation. As Christ brought us back into a right relationship with God, so we are to work toward that with one another.

Reconciliation calls us to recognize and accept the power of God to heal our relationships and our lives.

Preparing for this Session

In this session, we will talk about our need for reconciliation and ways we can work toward it.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:11–20.

The Confession of 1967, 9.34–.40

Contours of the New Ecumenical Reality, priorities 4–6, from the Ecumenical Stance

Getting Started

Greeting and catch up. Share a time when you have been in need of reconciliation.

Read Ps. 134 together.

Prayer:

O God, the giver of life,
we pray for the Church throughout the world:
sanctify its life; renew its worship;
empower its witness; restore its unity.
Remove from your people all pride
and every prejudice that dulls their will for unity.
Strengthen the work of all those who strive to seek
that common obedience that will bind us together.
Heal the divisions which separate your children from one another,
that they may keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

(Prayer used in Ecumenical Centre, Geneva, Switzerland,
on visit of Pope John Paul II, *Prayers Encircling the World*, p. 118,
© 1999 WJK Press, Louisville, Kentucky)

Listening to the Word

Read 2 Corinthians 5:11–20.

If we truly believed what we preach, teach, and hear, the ministry of reconciliation would be a snap. In 2 Corinthians, Paul says that we should “... regard no one from a human point of view” instead we understand that we are a new creation in Christ—the old has passed away. Whatever you were before is gone and forgotten, and so are the things that separated you from God. Therefore, if Christ doesn’t count our sins against us, so we do the same for one another. As ambassadors of God’s reconciling love, we must do all we can to bring each other back into a right relationship with God.

Give an example of someone who is living a reconciled life.

What is the message of reconciliation?

What can you do to share that message of reconciliation?

Read The Confession of 1967, 9.34–40.

What insight does this confession bring to the ministry of reconciliation?

Who is it for?

According to the confession, what role does the church play?

Read the Contours of the New Ecumenical Reality: priorities 4–6, Ecumenical Stance page 7.

4. *Enlarging the Table of Ecumenical Relationships*

Ecumenism means more than one. When we open our arms and widen our reach, and when we continually make room at the table, the more unity is possible.

5. *Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth*

At the ecumenical table, we must do our part to work for justice in the economy and the earth.

6. *Covenanting for Peacemaking in a War-Torn World*

Peacemaking must be a priority of the entire ecumenical community. We must bring healing to all who are wounded by violence.

Sharing our Stories

What in your life, church or community could benefit from this practice of reconciliation?

Share an example for priorities 4–6?

Share an experience of being reconciled with someone.

Reflection for Action

What can we do to help others be reconciled?

With what ministry of the church will you share this information? Why?

One resource for inspiration is the *Mission Yearbook of Prayer & Study*. In it you will find a multitude of projects that might inspire you to bear witness in the world.

Check out the resources from the World Council of Churches (WCC) Web site: www.oikoumenes.org Exp. Materials from the “Decade to Overcome Violence”. The project works to inform and inspire churches’ action and cooperation in overcoming violence and pursuing just peace and reconciliation in their own lives, the lives of their communities, and the world.

Going Out

Recite together this portion of the Affirmation of Our Ecumenical Commitment:

The tasks of Christian witness, service, justice, and peacemaking are addressed by councils, alliances, and national churches, but also in local encounters, congregational interaction, and common prayer across traditional religious boundaries.

Guided on our way by the Holy Spirit, we rejoice in the hope of perfect unity in Christ, a unity not of our making, but a gift designed and revealed by the Maker of us all.

(Ecumenical Stance, P. 9)

Prayer

We give thanks and praise to Almighty God for the work within this world through our Lord Jesus Christ, because even in our divided humanity, separated from each other, we experience now and then the reconciliation which comes from you; our thanks to you and praise can never end.

We ask you to accept us in your Son. Grant us the spirit of unity that takes away whatever comes to divide us. Keep us in union with all your people and make your Church become a sign of unity among all people. We pray all this through Jesus Christ, our lord."

(Janet Nyenda, Uganda, *Prayers Encircling the World*, p. 117,
from Mother's Union, Mary Sumner House, 24 Tufon St., London SW1P3rB,
© 1994, HarperCollins, Marshall Pickering, Martha Stowe (compiler).)

Session VI

A Great Multitude

Session Outline

Biblical and Confessional Basis of the Ecumenical Stance

Scripture: Psalm. 149; Rev. 7:9–17, 19:1–10

Confession: A Brief Statement of Faith, 1–6, 52–80

Contours of a New Ecumenical Reality: Part III

7. Nurturing inter-religious engagements
8. Renewing a commitment to disciplines of Christian spirituality
9. Celebrating gifts we receive and share
10. Revitalizing practices of ecumenical formation

How should these agreements be lived in local communities?

Use this conversation to invite people to share ideas of how to live out agreements.

Provide a connection or examples of local, national, and global ecumenical activities in sessions IV through VI.

Resources

Ecumenical Stance Paper

Bible

Thuma Mina: Singing with Our Partner Churches; International Ecumenical Hymnbook, (1995)

– no longer in print (Or another appropriate hymnal)

The Presbyterian Hymnal

Introduction

I could not imagine being one in a million that day. Instead, I kept my eyes on the television as a million people from all around the world, gathered at the Mall in Washington, D.C. The celebration was not before the Lamb on the throne (let's not miss that one), but it was the Inauguration of President Barack Obama. They gathered with their version of the angels singing "Hallelujah" by shouting "Yes We Can!"

Every time I go at an event such as the Racial Ethnic Convocation, Big Tent, Presbyterian Youth Triennium, or see the raging fans in a football stadium, I imagine the great multitude that John described in Revelation; the perfect gathering of God's people from every nation and tribe singing in one accord on that great "gettin' up morning." There will be no talk of race or class, no discussion on poverty or homelessness, no prayers for the sick and the dying. Instead, the only song sung that day will be "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns."

Let us rejoice and exult and give God glory.

Preparing for the Session

Read Scripture: Psalm 149; Rev. 7:9–17, 19:1–10

Confession: A Brief Statement of Faith, lines 16, 52–80

Ecumenical Stance: Contours of a New Ecumenical Reality, Priorities 7–10

Getting Started

Greet one another. Share an experience of being in a great crowd at a big celebration.

Peace be With You (loosely based on the Iona Community Worship Book, 1988)

Leader: Peace be with you

All: AND ALSO WITH YOU.

Leader: what is this celebration?

ALL: THIS is the celebration OF GOD'S CHILDREN
COMING TOGETHER IN GOD'S HOLY SPACE.

Leader: Where do you come from?

ALL: WE COME FROM MANY PLACES
THAT WE MAY BECOME BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN UNITY.

Leader: For what purpose is your coming?

ALL: THAT WE MAY CELEBRATE AND ENJOY GOD'S PRESENCE,
SEE GOD'S HAND TRANSFORMING THE LIFE OF THE WORLD,
AND SEEK GOD'S GRACE TO BLESS AND DISTURB OUR OWN LIVES.

Prayer

Draw your Church together, O Lord, into one great company of disciples, together following our Lord Jesus Christ into every walk of life, together serving him in his mission to the world, and together witnessing to his love on every continent and island. We ask in his name and for his sake.

(Anglican Church of Canada,
Prayers Encircling the World, p. 120,

© 1999 Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY.)

Read Revelation 7:9–17, 19:1–10

After all is said and done, we come to the beginning and the end. Revelation ends as Genesis begins, "... 'these are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb'" (Rev. 7:14). This unity, interrupted by war, deportation, tribal movement, or persecution, has now been brought full circle. What John is describing is the church that first gathered on the day Pentecost. Those who believed from every corner of the world are gathered to form a united fellowship of those who believe in God. Today, this church reaches beyond the local congregation to include a worldwide church numbering more than 2.2 billion. This great multitude is the big picture of the church that God created. They are all devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to breaking the bread and prayers.

Questions for Discussion

What does the great multitude look like to you?

Today what would you say is the “great ordeal” from which God will bring us?

How is it possible for us to live as the great multitude?

What sort of victory shout do you imagine the “nation” will hear that day?

The Brief Statement of Faith, lines 1–6, 52–80

This statement declares that the Spirit binds all believers together in the one body of Christ, the church. All, not some. So whether we are Presbyterian, Lutheran, Baptist, or Moravian, we are all counted as part of the multitude from every nation, language, and tongue crying: “...Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb” (Rev. 7:10).

Contours of a New Ecumenical Reality, priorities 7–10, from the Ecumenical Stance

7. Nurturing Inter-religious Engagements

We are called to nurture inter-religious relationship at a time in our history when fear is the order of the day. How can we move past the images we see to the truth of our brothers and sisters of other faiths?

8. Renewing a Commitment to Disciplines of Christian Spirituality

We are called to renew our commitment to Christian spirituality to deepen our relationship with God and one another. Our experience will be deepened as we participate in the variety of traditions that make up the body of Christ, the church.

9. Celebrating Gifts We Receive and Share

We are called to share our gifts as we participate in God’s work in the world, and at the same time, to be willing to receive gifts from others.

10. Revitalizing Practices of Ecumenical Formation

We are called to move beyond our church doors to engage in worship and work with the church universal.

Sharing our Stories

What inter-Christian experiences have you had? How can we foster more such practices in our communities?

Where does our commitment begin?

Whose responsibility is it to see that it is pursued?

Share a personal example of priorities 7-10 with one another.

Reflection for Action

Where in the life of your church would you suggest we offer our learnings about ecumenism?

What plans do you have to continue this conversation?

How can we get more involved in ecumenism as a presbytery? As a synod?

Going Out

Share a word of thanks with one another for participating in this study.

Read aloud together the Affirmation of Our Ecumenical Commitment (from the Ecumenical Stance):

We affirm the goal of unity that Jesus described in his high priestly prayer:
We seek to become fully one in Christ, so that the world may believe.

We believe in one God, known to us in three persons,
eternally united in the bond of love.

In love we proclaim our faith in the Triune God
and acknowledge one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

We are called to unity, but not uniformity, as people of God
who, though many, are members one of another
and who, together, constitute the body of Christ on earth.

We come as disciples bearing marks of diverse cultures and traditions,
bringing unique insights, experiences, strengths, and vulnerabilities.
We are eager to learn from one another, to seek formation and transformation,
knowing that each of us stands in need of correction and mutual upbuilding.

We confess that too often we have undertaken alone
projects and ministries that could have been enriched by broader participation,
and we recommit ourselves to the historic Lund principle
that Christians should take united action whenever they find this possible.

Our vision of unity in Christ is universal,
concerned for the whole of creation, as well as the rights and needs of humanity.
We are called to join with others in bold, prophetic witness when confronting the
abuse of power and threats to the planet,
and in covenants for justice in the economy and the earth.

As Christians, we remain open to the working of God's Spirit among people of other
faiths, both in their individual and in their corporate religious lives and are prepared,
as we are called by Jesus Christ, to dialogue and cooperate everywhere with people
of good will on behalf of justice, peace, and the common good. We pursue the
journey of faith with Christ wherever we find ourselves, in whatever company,
all in each place.

The tasks of Christian witness, service, justice, and peacemaking
are addressed by councils, alliances, and national churches,
but also in local encounters, congregational interaction,
and common prayer across traditional religious boundaries.

Guided on our way by the Holy Spirit,
we rejoice in the hope of perfect unity in Christ, a unity not of our making,
but a gift designed and revealed by the Maker of us all.

Extra Resources

The Ecumenical Review

Visit these Web Sites and listen to stories of their ecumenical work:

World Council of Churches: www.oikoumene.org

Churches Uniting in Christ: www.cuicinfo.org

Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A.: www.christianchurchestogether.org

World Communion of Reformed Churches: www.reformedchurches.org

National Council of Churches
of Christ in the U.S.A.: www.nccusa.org

Global Christian Forum: www.globalchristianforum.org

The Global Christian Forum is about bringing into conversation with one another Christians and churches from very different traditions who have little or never talked to each other. It is about building bridges where there are none, overcoming prejudices, creating and nurturing new relationships.

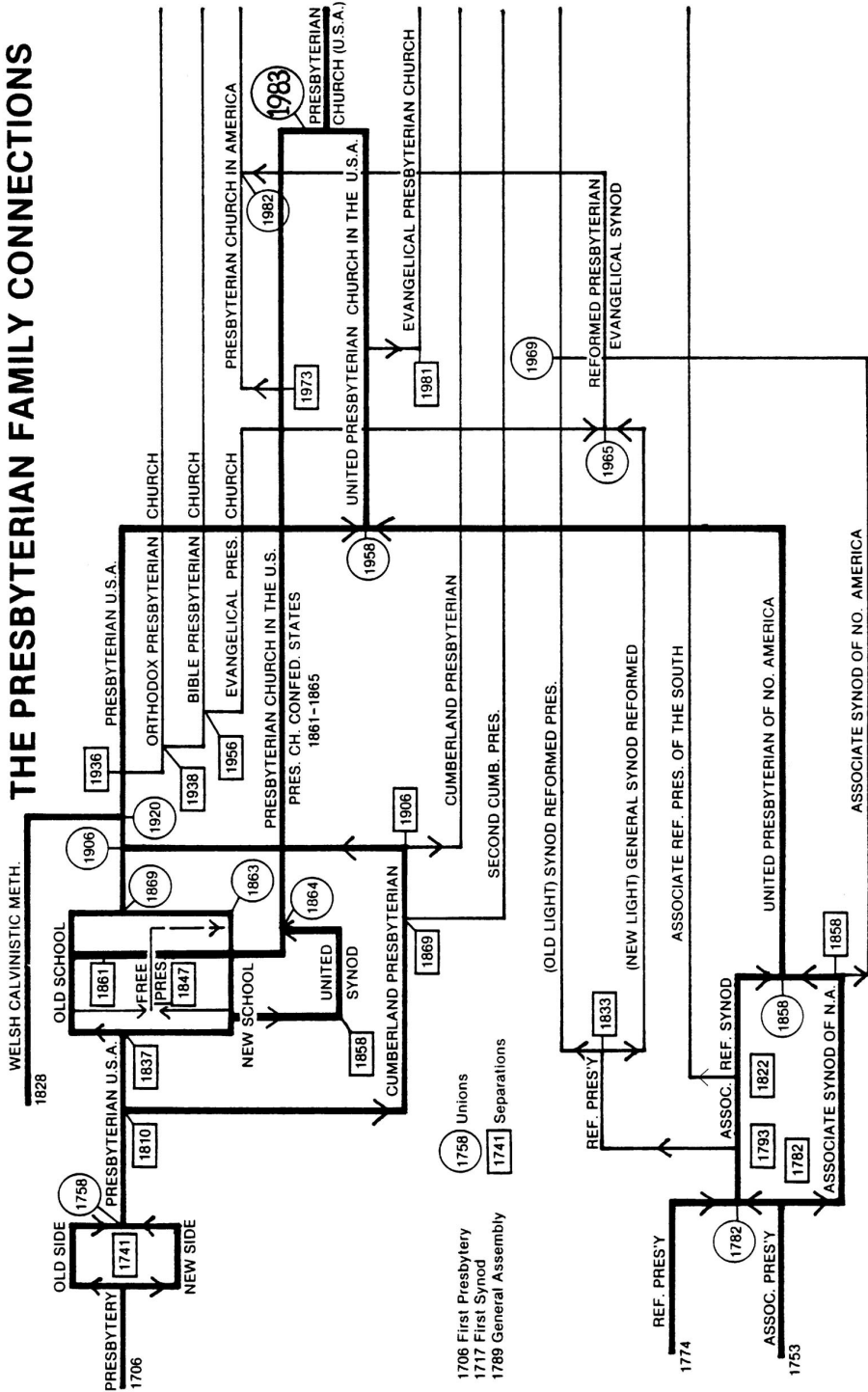
Council of World Mission: www.cwmission.org

CWM is a partnership of churches in mission, sharing resources of people, skills, money, and insight globally to carry our God's mission locally.

United Evangelical Mission: www.vemission.org

An international communion of thirty four churches in Africa, Asia, and Europe (Germany). The United Evangelical Mission member churches support each other through the exchange of personnel and financial assistance. Particular priorities include diaconal work, combating HIV / AIDS, work on the visits of women and children, scholarships, development cooperation, intercultural encounter, and project promotion. Peace and human rights [are] a specific program priority.

THE PRESBYTERIAN FAMILY CONNECTIONS



**The Ecumenical Stance
of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)**



As approved by the
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
218th General Assembly (2008)

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Introduction

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its antecedent churches have been at the forefront of local, regional, national, and global ecumenism for more than a century. Presbyterians have been ready to reflect on, pray for, and organize ecumenical initiatives in the life of the worldwide body of Christ and respond to the initiatives of others. From discussions of organic union to the formation of councils of churches, from common efforts in evangelism and mission to upholding concerns for justice and social service, Presbyterians have been deeply involved in the ecumenical work and witness of the church. The Presbyterian church has put considerable material, spiritual, and personnel resources into the ecumenical movement, working to “listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” and respond in creative ways to our ecumenical calling.

In 1975 and 1981, the Presbyterian Church in the United States and the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America held ecumenical consultations that were important milestones on this ecumenical journey. No such consultation had ever been held in the PC(USA). In 2006, the General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical Relations (GACER) decided it was time to call for a new churchwide consultation on the ecumenical stance of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Giving thoughtful and prayerful attention to new directions in ecumenism, as well as to the historic Presbyterian commitment to conciliar ecumenical organizations, the GACER believed the PC(USA) should go beyond the ecumenical vision statement approved by the 212th General Assembly (2000).

The mandate of the consultation was “to review our ecumenical vision and construct an ecumenical stance and policy to guide the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) staff and elected bodies for the next ten years.” To this end, the consultation of September 27–29, 2007, reviewed the biblical and confessional basis of Presbyterian ecumenical commitment, provided a historical overview of the ecumenical journey, surveyed the changing ecumenical landscape, assessed the PC(USA)’s ecumenical experience in the past decade, and explored the new challenges the church faces in this area. On the basis of the findings of the September 2007 consultation, recommendations were made to the GACER. (The list of participants may be found in Appendix A.) In this way, the consultation sought to renew our church’s commitment to ecumenical engagement in the 21st century and set a framework for its ecumenical endeavors, taking account of the new contextual challenges and opportunities present.

Because the purpose of the consultation was to create policy for the ecumenical stance of the PC(USA)—the relationship of the PC(USA) to other Christian churches—participants did not systematically address interfaith relations or the connection between ecumenical involvement and Christian mission. Yet, these two concerns pressed in upon the conversation repeatedly, since they are significant concerns closely related to ecumenism. There was particular energy in the conversation relating to interfaith relations and a strong sense that this topic will need to be addressed more fully in another forum.

Biblical and Confessional Basis of Our Ecumenical Stance

Many texts in Scripture guide and give shape to the ecumenical stance of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). One key text is John 17, where Jesus prays for the disciples, “that they may all be one. As you, Father, 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” (v. 21). Thus, unity is understood as Christ’s intention for the church, essential to its nature and witness. Another text that has been decisive for the PC(USA)’s self-understanding is 2 Corinthians 5. It declares “... in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself ... and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (v.19). The divine purpose of reconciliation is illumined here, and the church must consider how our ministry of reconciliation is compromised if we are not reconciled among ourselves. In Ephesians 4:3–4, we are enjoined to make “... every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” Paul’s image of the church as the body of Christ well conveys the nature of our unity: Though there are many members, diversities of gifts, and differences of ministry, there is one body. We belong to one another and are members of one another (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12).

The Book of Confessions undergirds the ecumenical work of the PC(USA) in its recurring references to the unity and catholicity of the church. It is a fundamental conviction that, in Jesus Christ, the church is already one. This forms the basis for ecumenical endeavors: to seek to make visible this Christ-given unity.

The confessions, in their reaffirmation of and dependence upon the liturgical traditions and ecumenical councils of the early church, implicitly and explicitly express the unity and catholicity of the church. *The Book of Confessions* begins with two ancient creeds, the Nicene Creed (1.1–3) and the Apostle’s Creed (2.1–3), which implicitly demonstrates this sensibility. Explicitly, too, these historic creeds name unity and catholicity as marks of Christ’s church. We thus understand ourselves to be in continuity with the ancient consensus of these broadly shared confessions, including the underlying Trinitarian theology and Christology that these early confessions proclaimed.

The unity and continuity is not only with apostolic witness in creedal statements, but also with apostolic mission. As the Confession of 1967 affirms,

... This community, the church universal, is entrusted with God’s message of reconciliation and shares God’s labor of healing the enmities which separate [human beings] from God and from each other. Christ has called the church to this mission and given it the gift of the Holy Spirit. The church maintains continuity with the apostles and with Israel by faithful obedience to his call.” (*The Book of Confessions*, 9.31)

Other confessions make explicit reference to Presbyterian convictions about the unity and catholicity of the church. The Second Helvetic Confession, for example, argues that there is “only one church for all times.” Since there is only one God, one Messiah, one Spirit, one salvation, one faith, one covenant, “it necessarily follows that there is only one Church, the Catholic Church. ... We, therefore, call this Church catholic because it is universal, scattered through all parts of the world, and extended unto all times, and is not limited to any times or places. ...” (*The Book of Confessions*, 5.126). This affirmation is accompanied by an explicit rejection of claims that would confine the church to any one group of believers.

A similar pattern can be seen in the Confession of 1967, which claims, “The unity of the church is compatible with a wide variety of forms, but it is hidden and distorted when variant forms are allowed to harden into sectarian divisions, exclusive denominations, and rival factions” (*The Book of Confessions*, 9.34). In this pattern, we see an embrace of difference alongside a rejection of division. For Christians of our tradition, a true church is established wherever the word is rightly preached and heard and the Sacraments rightly administered (*The Book of Confessions: Second Helvetic Confession*, 5.134–.137; Scots Confession, 3.18; Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.143).

Further basis for the PC(USA) ecumenical stance can be found in the confessions where the “communion of saints” is described. A Brief Statement of Faith says, “The Spirit ... binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church” (*The Book of Confessions*, 10.4, Lines 54-57). So, Christians around the world and down the years all belong to one another, for this communion is to be extended “unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus” (*The Book of Confessions*, Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.147). These references deepen and extend the pattern of difference without division and also serve to give a clearer shape to the nature of our unity, reflecting not a static uniformity, but a dynamic communion.

It is clear from these and other references in the confessions that the unity of the church is God’s doing, a gift of God in Jesus Christ. It can neither be created nor destroyed by our efforts. The Heidelberg Catechism asks the question, “What do you believe concerning ‘the Holy Catholic Church’?” The answer: “... that, from the beginning to the end of the world, and from among the whole human race, the Son of God, by his Spirit and his Word, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself, in the unity of the true faith, a congregation chosen for eternal life” (*The Book of Confessions*, 4.054). Our divisions, though they may obscure our unity, cannot destroy it. When we come together at ecumenical tables, we are seeking to make visible what, by the grace of God, is already the case. We are one in Christ.

Historical Overview of Presbyterian Ecumenical Involvement

From the earliest days of European settlement in North America, there has been a dynamic tension between the distinctively Reformed identity claimed by Presbyterians and our confession of “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church” that embraces the larger community of believers and churches. This has played out over the years in varying degrees of emphasis on a Presbyterian “brand” in doctrine and polity, and a simultaneous commitment to unity in Christian ministry and mission.

The first presbyteries and synods were made up of disparate congregations, and subsequent, ecumenical challenges have often arisen within the Presbyterian communion itself. The New Side separated from the Old Side in the 1700s, only to be reunited later in that century. In the 1800s, Old School and New School parted ways, as did the churches of North and South. Some groups developed new ecclesiastical expressions, including the Cumberland Presbyterians and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). At the same time, many Presbyterians struggled against these divisions. American Presbyterians sought reunion among their own denominations, as well as closer relations—from local communities to mission fields—with Congregationalists, Associate and Reformed churches, Calvinistic Methodists, Episcopalians, the Reformed Church, and others. The Presbyterian Reunion of 1983 is the latest in a long line of historical efforts to bring visible unity among Presbyterians through institutional merger.

Presbyterians were enthusiastic supporters both of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (an interdenominational body) and a succession of Presbyterian Church agencies for global ministries. Combinations of ecumenical alliances in mission, along with Reformed confessionalism, are also to be found in the cases of the Sunday school movement, home missions, relief agencies, and public advocacy.

From the nineteenth century to today, American Presbyterians have been among the founders, leaders, and principal supporters of global and national ecumenical bodies, including the National Council of Churches of Christ (NCCC), the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), and the World Council of Churches (WCC). In partnership with these groups and others, American Presbyterians have played a central role in world mission and evangelism, in pursuit of international peace and justice, in bilateral dialogues with Christian world communions, and other alliances of churches. Partnership with ecumenical bodies also provides churches of various traditions a means toward dialogue from a common Christian perspective with representatives of other religions of the world.

Representation of Presbyterian churches in international, inter-confessional dialogue is organized by the theology department of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. In the last fifteen years, dialogues have included: Adventist–Reformed; African Independent Churches–Reformed; Anglican–Reformed; Catholic–Reformed, with a PC(USA) member; Disciples–Reformed; Lutheran–Reformed, currently co-chaired by a PC(USA) member; Oriental Orthodox–Reformed, with a PC(USA) member; Orthodox–Reformed, with a PC(USA) member; and Pentecostal–Reformed, currently co-chaired by a PC(USA) member. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches is also concerned with fostering unity among members of the Reformed family. As the result of work by WARC and the Reformed Ecumenical Council, a plan has been made to unite the two bodies into the World Communion of Reformed Churches in 2010.

Working with churches of many cultures and nations has sensitized ecumenical bodies to issues of justice and contributed toward their adoption of strong positions on public policy, especially with relation to justice. This was demonstrated in the United States civil rights movement, the call for negotiation and understanding between East and West during the Cold War, the campaign for human rights and liberation in Latin America, the anti-apartheid struggle in southern Africa, and strategies for reconciliation in the Middle East. In 2004, the member churches of WARC at the General Council in Accra covenanted to work together for justice in the economy and creation, and the WCC and the Lutheran World Federation have taken up this challenge. Supporters of such actions believe that through the struggle together to find a path of faithful action in the face of injustice, Christians come to deeper understanding of the gospel and find the courage to witness to their faith. They believe that God requires work toward justice for all the human family and for creation.

Critics have often found this ecumenical approach to be too “political,” a distraction from the church’s work, and have opposed continuing participation in the National and World Councils of Churches. In the 1980s and 1990s, these councils came under intense criticism, leading to lively debate about Presbyterian participation in them. The General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical Relations undertook careful, extensive reviews of the WCC (2003), the NCCC (2004), and WARC (2002), examining their work, their financing, and Presbyterian leadership in them. (Reports of the three reviews can be found in the Minutes of the General Assembly for those years.) The outcome of all three reviews was

a strong expression of support for the PC(USA)'s participation in the ecumenical movement at the national and international levels. The September 2007 consultation strongly affirmed these commitments as a part of the ecumenical stance of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for the future.

Today, Presbyterians continue to work cooperatively with other churches in the councils of the ecumenical movement by means of presbytery and synod partnerships, in local projects involving multiple congregations and agencies, through evangelical associations such as World Vision International and the Lausanne movement, as well as in emerging fellowships such as Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A. and exploratory meetings toward a broadly based Global Christian Forum. These last two fellowships represent a fresh attempt to find a way to gather both those who have traditionally participated in the ecumenical movement and those who have distanced themselves from it.

Central to this discussion is the Lund principle¹ that churches should do together all that is possible in good conscience, affirming the importance of this principle as part of the framework for ecumenical policy in the coming years.

Review of the Ecumenical Work of the General Assembly Over the Last Decade

The past ten years (1997–2007) of ecumenical work under the auspices of the General Assembly have been marked by new opportunities and continuing challenges. These have been a consequence both of changes in the ecumenical landscape and of changes within the PC(USA) and are reflected in our conciliar relationships, our bilateral and multilateral ecclesial relationships, and our partnerships and organizational structures to implement the ecumenical agenda of the PC(USA).

The 209th General Assembly (1997) approved A Formula of Agreement between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ. This was a historic agreement of Full Communion, the result of thirty-five years of dialogue among these churches. The Lutheran-Reformed Coordinating Committee has overseen the implementation of this agreement, and closer collaboration and cooperation have emerged in shared ministries between congregations.

Subsequently, the 211th General Assembly (1999), upon recommendation of the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly and the General Assembly Council, created the General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical Relations (GACER). This new committee replaced the Advisory Committee on Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations and "Special Committees of the General Assembly" with ecumenical mandates.

At the conciliar level, the General Assembly holds membership as an ecclesial body in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the Caribbean and North American Area Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the World Council of Churches, and the National Council of Churches of Christ, all of which have faced organizational and fiscal challenges. Elected representatives from the PC(USA) on these councils and staff members working with them have contributed to a sense of renewal in their mission and financial stability.

In January 2002, the Consultation on Church Union culminated its decades of work by being transformed into Churches Uniting in Christ (CUiC), with the goals of expressing unity in Christ and combating racism together. Through the coordinating council of CUiC and its task forces on ministry, racial justice, and local/ regional work, the PC(USA) has been an active and energetic participant in CUiC.

In the area of bilateral ecclesial relationships, the sixth round of Reformed-Catholic dialogue (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops) concluded in 2001, with a focus on pastoral issues in marriages between members of the Roman Catholic Church and Reformed churches. In response to the papal encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint*, a delegation from the PC(USA) entered into conversation with the Vatican in December 2000 and March 2001. The response of the PC(USA) was presented in the paper, "The Successor to Peter." Several recommendations from this conversation were implemented through the 213th General Assembly (2001).

The seventh round of Reformed-Catholic (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops) dialogue, mandated by the 215th General Assembly (2003), began meeting that same year. This dialogue also includes the Christian Reformed Church in North America, the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ. The dialogue was charged to work on developing a means for the mutual recognition of baptism and to explore issues related to the Eucharist. Pending recommendations by GACER, the proposal for mutual recognition of baptism will come to the 218th General Assembly (2008). The bilateral dialogue will then begin to explore issues related to the Eucharist.

The Moravian-Reformed dialogue was mandated by the 212th General Assembly (2000). The dialogue began in April 2002 with the following goals: (1) to reach an understanding of each tradition's ministry of oversight; (2) to explore areas of cooperative work in global, national, and local settings so that our congregations may have greater knowledge of each other and our cooperative work; and (3) to seek common agreements that could lead to establishing Full Communion between the Moravian Church and one or all of the Reformed churches. Pending approval by the GACER, a recommendation that the PC(USA) enter a Covenant Relationship will go to the 218th General Assembly (2008) for action.

The Episcopal-Presbyterian bilateral dialogue was mandated by the 212th General Assembly (2000). The focus of the dialogue is the reconciliation of ministries between the two churches. This bilateral dialogue has worked closely with the Ministry Task Force of Churches Uniting in Christ. While unable to achieve full reconciliation of ministries, it is anticipated that we will be able to enter into a mutual recognition of our ministries within the next two years.

The Joint Committee on Presbyterian Cooperation Between the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Korean Presbyterian Church in America was mandated by the 204th General Assembly (1992). It was charged to foster greater unity of witness between our two churches and to explore the possibility of eventual union between the two denominations. Pending recommendations by the GACER, a proposal to enter Covenant Relationship will come to the 218th General Assembly (2008).

The Joint Cooperative Committee with the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church was mandated by the 212th General Assembly (2000) and was charged to enter church-to-church conversations searching for means to strengthen their mutual relationships. The work of this cooperative committee culminated in holding concurrent General Assemblies to commemorate the 300th anniversary of Presbyterian witness in the United States in 2006.

Throughout all its work, the General Assembly staff seeks to work ecumenically with counterparts in other denominations, ecumenical councils, and project-specific task groups that involve ecumenical partners. Significant areas of ecumenical cooperation are seen in the areas of disaster relief and development, national and international public witness and advocacy, national and international hunger concerns, theological engagement, youth and young-adult ministries, communications, and international mission partnerships. These partnerships are not only significant for shaping the mission of the PC(USA), but also for bringing PC(USA) resources and insight to the work of our ecumenical partners. A key component has been the understanding that we “do mission in partnership.”

The Changing Ecumenical Landscape

To commit to an ecumenical vision in this time and place involves a study of the changing ecumenical landscape. It is well known that a demographic shift in the global church from the north to the south has reshaped the dynamics of the ecumenical movement in a number of ways. Most importantly, the flow of influence is no longer from north to south or even west to east, but from every part of the world to every other part of the world. This has meant that ecumenical conversation partners are shaped geographically as well as denominationally.

In this regard, contextualized realities have become as important as confessional considerations; thus, the PC(USA) needs to include new and different partners to address the needs of today. One such group is that of churches made up of new immigrants bringing their languages and traditions from home, churches that are now a part of the PC(USA) context. New immigrants bring different understandings of the church and the world, shaped by the cultures of the places they have left. Their visions and understandings can infuse and enrich our own and help the PC(USA) to see the world in ways not seen previously. A second group of partners is that of service and justice coalitions that are not denominationally circumscribed. Groups such as Habitat for Humanity, Bread for the World, and the Heifer Project respond to human suffering through emergency relief and development programs to help heal a divided world. Many Presbyterian congregations support these organizations. A third group of communities responding to a wounded world is that of people of other faiths and religious traditions. In a world where fear of the ‘other’ exacerbates violence and suffering, working in partnership with those whom we often call “other” is of central importance. We are called to join with all those willing to work for the healing of the whole earth and the whole human family.

The purpose of the ecumenical movement is to help make manifest God's intention for the household of God. In the past, churches have often limited that vision to a unified Church that would help bring about a unified world or even unify the world within it. The ecumenical vision that is part of God's vision is actually much larger. John 10:10b describes the vision as God's desire that the inhabitants of the household of God "may have life, and have it abundantly." This is a vision of justice and peace that allows space for all of God's creation to live life in its fullness. God is continually active in bringing loving wholeness to creation, where all can live in peace. God is especially attentive to those who have been excluded from abundant life and calls the church to cooperate in this process.

The Holy Spirit, the Advocate whom Jesus promised, invites us to this kind of work. Dialogue with churches of the Pentecostal movement is essential here, as well as attending to the often- surprising movements of the Spirit in our churches and ecumenical bodies. The discernment of God's vision for the household of God is a gift of the Spirit, since we understand the household of God to cut across all human lines. Biblically speaking, Pentecost was a unique moment when the Holy Spirit acted in an amazing way, enabling the church to communicate across differences. At Pentecost, seekers from every nation were present, communicating with each other through the Spirit in their own languages. Living with this gift of the Spirit in our present moment in history encourages us to hear the voices of people long silenced. Enabled to read the signs of the time, the church becomes empowered by the Spirit to champion a theology of life by amplifying voices that contend with life-denying forces. In this way, the church may become a "blessing to the nations" and offer hope for healing, reconciliation, and justice in the earth and the economy.

Contours of a New Ecumenical Reality

Ecumenism in the 21st century holds varied and diverse nuances for Presbyterians:

- reconciliation in Jesus Christ;
- a spirit of generosity toward others;
- unity and diversity in the Holy Spirit;
- justice in the economy, and for the earth;
- the call of God to mission and evangelism;
- solidarity with the marginalized;
- common memory of a people on a journey;
- hope for the future of the world;
- a gift of God and a task for all human beings.

At the same time, many Presbyterians are confused about the meaning of ecumenism and question how it relates to their own lived realities in congregations and whether it has relevance to a post-modern church and world. There has been an erosion of understanding of some traditional ecumenical activities and loyalty to them. Nonetheless, lively ecumenical activity is taking place in many forms throughout the denomination at the national, regional, and local levels.

Opportunities and challenges clearly present themselves in the landscape of this new ecumenical reality. Membership loss, institutional downsizing, and financial decline in mainline churches have resulted in an atmosphere of crisis in ecumenical structures and their member-denominations. Flourishing post-denominational mega-churches, theological affinity groups, and para-church organizations pose both opportunities and challenges to our traditional ways of being and acting and to our ecumenical vision. Some churches that have previously hesitated to enter into ecumenical conversation are now finding their way to a newly shaped table.

Our faith in the grace of Jesus Christ is with us, “so we do not lose heart” (2 Cor. 4:16). In the face of these challenges and opportunities, God is calling us, in this moment, to reaffirm our commitment to the unity of the Church—of all Christian people—which is God’s gift in Christ. Essential to that calling is an attitude of humility and openness in all of our ecumenical relationships.

While we affirm our commitment to the unity of the Christian church, the ecumenical challenge for today moves beyond that initial vision to the healing and wholeness of the world. This broader goal of Christian ecumenism requires us to ask how we can be partners with others in building the human community that God intended from the very beginning. Where is there convergence between the Christian household and the larger household of God?

In exploring the contours of this new ecumenical reality, there are ten priorities that such a commitment presents:

1. *Growing the Ecumenical Vision*

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) must renew its foundational ecumenical identity through recommitment to the search for the visible unity of Christ’s church in its many forms. Presbyterian identity is diminished when the church turns inward, away from an embrace of the whole church and the whole inhabited earth. Recovery of the church’s ecumenical vision must begin with confession and repentance—of our internal divisions, our expectation of a privileged position in ecumenical affairs, our imagined self-sufficiency, our presumption of cultural hegemony, and our neglect of ecumenical relationships.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is called to listen anew to what the Spirit is saying to all the churches, and to listen to what Christians from other churches are saying to us. The church’s sustained quest for concord in essential things—faith, sacraments, mission, and ministry—will lead it to new and renewed relationships within the one holy catholic and apostolic church.

2. *Facing Obstacles to Christian Unity*

Distinct traditions, communions, and denominations live in various degrees of estrangement from one another. In addition to the significant historical, theological, and ecclesiastical barriers that continue to separate churches from one another, there is an awareness of the ways in which race, gender, class, culture, wealth, and power reinforce divisions in the church and obscure it, impairing witness to the gospel and weakening common mission.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is called to recognize the full range of obstacles to Christian unity, and to commit itself to breaking down all dividing walls in both church and world.

3. *Bridging the Gaps Between the Local and the Global, Individual Congregations and the Denomination*

The terms “ecumenical” and “ecumenism” are not restricted to councils of churches or to national and international relationships among denominations. Many congregations are engaged ecumenically in common worship, study, and dialogue, and in partnerships for witness, service, and mission. Theological and structural links between local and broader ecumenism are often weak, however. Contacts among local, regional, and global relationships are often neglected.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is called to new ecumenical awareness that deepens relationships among congregational, denominational, and conciliar ecumenism. Each must be enriched by the others, leading the whole church to deeper communion in Christ.

4. *Enlarging the Table of Ecumenical Relationships*

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) cannot be ecumenical by itself. We are linked to many others as we work for the unity of the body of Christ. The church is called to maintain valued relationships with long-standing partners in ecumenical councils, full communion accords, and other ecclesial agreements. At the same time, we are called to move beyond the limitations of the past to find our place at the ecumenical table. The table belongs to God, and must not be restricted by imagined privileges. All are invited guests of our one Lord, the Lord provides the space for all who are willing to come, and the Lord continues to invite all who are not yet willing.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is called to discover deeper forms of ecumenical commitment to the integrity of the gospel, embracing new partners whose different theologies, traditions, and structures can enrich our theology, traditions, and structures. All of our ecumenical relationships are for healing divisions and seeking reconciliation in the church and the world.

5. *Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth*

The unity of the church is not an end in itself, but an element in the reconciliation of the whole created order. The pursuit of God’s justice is a response to the gospel that embraces the whole world, and that seeks God’s abundant life for all people. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is committed to working with other churches, listening to the voices of brothers and sisters who call for human freedom, social justice, and the healing of the planet entrusted to human care. As Presbyterians hear and engage in the work of freedom and justice, we are transformed.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is called to sustained study and serious engagement with the Accra Confession of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, “Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth” as approved by the 217th General Assembly (2006) (Minutes, 2006, Part I, p. 575).

6. *Covenanting for Peacemaking in a War-Torn World*

God’s intention for the world is shalom—peace and justice for all creation—yet the world is wounded by violence and broken by war. Forces of brutality and aggression are at work in all aspects of human life, even within the church. Christ came to break down dividing walls of hostility and establish God’s new way of reconciliation in the world. All who follow Christ are called to live as peacemakers in a world that lacks the deep reality of God’s concord and unity.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is called to renew its commitment to peacemaking within families and communities, in the church, and among societies and nations. As we live in unity with brothers and sisters around the world, working ecumenically to overcome violence, we both embody and proclaim fullness of the Lord’s peace.

7. *Nurturing Interreligious Engagements*

Commitment to peacemaking and to justice in the economy, for the earth and in the social order, is more than a Christian concern. God is at work in the whole world, within and beyond the bounds of the church. God’s household is larger than the church, and all God’s people are integral to each other’s wholeness and the healing of the world.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is called to forge interreligious relationships with all who yearn and work for the healing of our wounded world, grounding interreligious engagements in our ecumenical commitments and practices.

8. *Renewing a Commitment to Disciplines of Christian Spirituality*

Jesus prayed that all may be one, so that the world may believe that the Lord was sent by the God who loves the world (cf. John 17:1–26). The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is called to pray with Jesus, deepening our relationship to the One who gathers us. Through the ecumenical movement, American Presbyterians have been enriched by the worship practices of other Reformed Christians and other Christian traditions, capturing our imaginations and giving voice to our yearnings.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is called to renew its commitment to disciplines of Christian spiritual formation, especially worship, regular reading of Scripture, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. As we join with other Christians in praying with Jesus, we can better discern God’s will, join God’s mission, and nurture our life together.

9. *Celebrating Gifts We Receive and Share*

The church’s engagements in ecumenical councils, its bilateral dialogues with other churches, its developing relationships with nontraditional partners, and its encounters with churches in the global community have brought gifts that enrich our understanding of Christian faith and life. We have also offered Reformed gifts such as commitment to scriptural authority and confessional integrity; the bond of grace and gratitude; the shared ministry of deacons, elders, and ministers; confessional declaration of the inclusion of women and men in all ministries of the church; and the indissoluble bond between faith and life, theology and ethics.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is called to receive gratefully the gifts God gives through others, and to share generously with others the gifts God has entrusted to us.

10. *Revitalizing Practices of Ecumenical Formation*

Ecumenical commitment and engagement was once central to Presbyterian identity. In the present time, when many Christians move easily from one denomination to another,

confessional identity is ambiguous and the need for ecumenical dialogue is dimly recognized. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) must revitalize practices of ecumenical formation so that a new generation, with all its diversity, can embrace a vision of Christian unity.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is called to encourage commitment to the unity of Christ's church through a range of educational, experiential, and missional opportunities. Study materials for children, youth, and adults; seminary engagement with ecumenical documents; national and international ecumenical encounters; and regular worship with congregations of ecumenical partners are some of the ecumenical formation possibilities that must become regular features of Presbyterian life.

An Affirmation of Our Ecumenical Commitment

*We affirm the goal of unity that Jesus described in his high priestly prayer:
We seek to become fully one in Christ, so that the world may believe.*

*We believe in one God, known to us in three persons,
eternally united in the bond of love.
In love we proclaim our faith in the Triune God
and acknowledge one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.*

*We are called to unity, but not uniformity, as people of God
who, though many, are members one of another
and who, together, constitute the body of Christ on earth.*

*We come as disciples bearing marks of diverse cultures and traditions,
bringing unique insights, experiences, strengths, and vulnerabilities.
We are eager to learn from one another, to seek formation and transformation,
knowing that each of us stands in need of correction and mutual upbuilding.*

*We confess that too often we have undertaken alone
projects and ministries that could have been enriched by broader participation
and we recommit ourselves to the historic Lund principle
that Christians should take united action whenever they find this possible.*

*Our vision of unity in Christ is universal,
concerned for the whole of creation, as well as the rights and needs of humanity.
We are called to join with others in bold, prophetic witness when confronting the abuse of power
and threats to the planet, and in covenants for justice in the economy and the earth.*

*As Christians, we remain open to the working of God's Spirit among people of other faiths, both in
their individual and in their corporate religious lives and are prepared, as we are called by Jesus
Christ, to dialogue and cooperate everywhere with people of good will on behalf of justice, peace,
and the common good. We pursue the journey of faith with Christ wherever we find ourselves, in
whatever company each place.*

*The tasks of Christian witness, service, justice, and peacemaking
are addressed by councils, alliances, and national churches,
but also in local encounters, congregational interaction,
and common prayer across traditional religious boundaries.*

*Guided on our way by the Holy Spirit,
we rejoice in the hope of perfect unity in Christ, a unity not of our making,
but a gift designed and revealed by the Maker of us all.*

Appendix A

Participants in the Consultation on the Ecumenical Stance of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

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Endnote

1. The third world conference on Faith and Order in Lund, Sweden (1952) issued this challenge, "should not our churches ask themselves whether they are showing sufficient eagerness to enter into conversation with other churches, and whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?" This principle has been adapted in many forms as the Lund Principle and often is formulated as "we should do together all things except those in which deep differences of conscience demand that we do separately."

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