

The Ecumenical Movement

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An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices

Second Edition

Edited by Michael Kinnamon



**World Council
of Churches**
Publications

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Introduction

FOR CHRISTIAN CHURCHES AROUND THE WORLD, THE PAST ONE HUNDRED YEARS CAN BE described by the term “ecumenical.” After centuries marked by suspicion, hostility, and separation, Christians have begun to recapture “the simple biblical truth that the church as the people of God and the body of Christ must exemplify in this world how God gathers [people] together from the ends of the earth in order to live as a new humanity” (W. A. Visser ’t Hooft). Churches representing nearly two billion members are now engaged with one another in theological dialogues, councils of churches, various forms of collaborative mission, shared action for justice and peace, common prayer, and other expressions of ecumenical life. Thanks in part to generations of ecumenical conversation, the global church has broken free from patterns of western domination, and many Christians share a vision of the church as a community that bears witness to God’s reconciling love, not only by what it says and does, but by the way its members live with one another.

But in the face of new sources of division, can this ecumenical movement maintain its coherence and momentum? Challenged by a rapidly-changing global landscape, can the movement’s leaders find structures, methods, and priorities that are appropriate for the early years of the twenty-first century? At this critical juncture, this book brings together “texts and voices” that reveal both the profound legacy of the ecumenical movement and the spiritual, theological basis on which it can build to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow.

The noun “ecumenism” and the adjective “ecumenical” are derived from the Greek word *oikoumene*, which is used in the New Testament to mean the Roman Empire (e.g., Luke 2:1) or, simply, the whole inhabited world (e.g., Matthew 24:14). Gradually, the term came to refer to the whole church, as opposed to that which is divisive (hence the title “Ecumenical Patriarch” for the one whom Orthodox Christians regard as first among the leaders of Orthodox Christianity), or to the whole faith of the church, as opposed to that which is partial (hence the frequent reference to the Nicene Creed as the ecumenical confession of faith). It is fitting, therefore, that the word is now used to designate a modern Christian movement concerned with the unity and renewal of the church and its relationship to God’s reconciling and renewing mission throughout creation.

While this movement has its roots in the nineteenth century—through such developments as the YMCA and YWCA, the various Bible societies, and the Student Christian Movement—the symbolic beginning of modern ecumenism was a world missionary conference held in Edinburgh in 1910. (Mission, proclaiming salvation in Christ with a common voice, was the initial driving impulse of the search for unity.) From that conference flowed streams that carried the movement’s continuing priorities:

- I. *common service*, which found early expression in the Life and Work movement whose first world conference was held in Stockholm in 1925 (see, especially, chapter IV in this anthology);
- II. *common fellowship*, which was embodied in the Faith and Order movement whose first world conference was held in Lausanne in 1927 (see, especially, chapters II and III);
- III. *common witness*, which found expression through the International Missionary Council whose first world conference was held in Jerusalem in 1928 (see, especially chapters V and VI).

To these three priorities must be added a fourth (although, in fact, it is indispensable to each of the others): *common renewal*, which found particular expression in various lay-driven movements, including the World Sunday School Association (later the World Council of Christian Education) and in forms of “spiritual ecumenism” (see, especially, chapter VII). All four of these priorities, which continue to set the parameters of the ecumenical agenda, have been structurally integrated in the World Council of Churches (WCC) and in regional, national, and local councils around the world (see, especially, chapter VIII).

A desire to show the full range of the ecumenical agenda is what makes this book unique. Most theological libraries include anthologies dealing with faith and order or mission and evangelism; but, until the first edition of this anthology was published in 1997, no volume had brought together key statements from all four streams of the movement. Unfortunately, the priorities named above are still often seen as competitive rather than complementary! The conviction behind this book, however, is that there exists what may be called an “ecumenical vision” which regards reconciliation of church doctrines and structures, common witness and service in the name of Jesus Christ, and shared ministry for justice and peace as responses to the gospel that help define and complete one another. This vision has, naturally, shifted over the course of the past century in response to changing social and historical circumstances; but as chapter I in particular will demonstrate, this vision retains its essential contours from the beginning of the movement to the present.

This second edition includes several dozen new texts, many of them produced since the first edition was sent to the printer in the mid-1990s. Of course, classic documents from the movement’s earlier decades have been retained, but many short excerpts have been removed in favor of fewer, but fuller, texts—which means that the new edition is not simply an expansion of the previous one. It is my hope that these changes will make the anthology not only more up-to-date but more useful in seminary classrooms and workshops, and as a reference tool for persons engaged in ecumenical research and ministry.

Several editorial decisions help explain the selections that follow:

1. The anthology includes not only official reports from conferences and dialogues, but also statements by individual leaders who communicate the passion and vitality of the ecumenical vision. “Our minds are nourished,” wrote the early ecumenical leader, Adolf Keller, “not mainly by visible minutes, resolutions embodying compromises, statutes, resounding proclamations, busy committees, or the files of an ecumenical bureaucracy, but by the invisible sources of the ecumenical spirit.... Therefore we must seek to hear

prophetic voices also, to discover the hidden forces of inspiration and of unofficial wisdom, to trace out the spiritual dynamic which follows its own channels and is not always manifested in ecclesiastical ideas, resolutions, and programs.” Chapters I and IX, in particular, lift up such “prophetic voices.”

2. I have attempted to include seminal, widely-influential texts—statements which helped push the movement to new levels of commitment and purpose, define ecumenical thinking on a particular topic, or represent significant convergence on disputed issues. The selections include a number of reports and speeches from the early decades of the twentieth century (materials not easily accessible), but the great majority of the texts date from the past forty years, primarily because of their relevance for contemporary readers.
3. The desire to choose widely-influential documents means that most selections come from international assemblies, consultations, and dialogues. Many of the selections were produced at or for events sponsored by the WCC, sometimes called the “privileged instrument” of ecumenism; but this is by no means intended simply as an anthology of WCC materials. Extensive anthologies exist, however, of the reports from church-to-church dialogues. Thus, only a sampling of the most influential of these dialogues is included in this anthology.
4. Obviously, the literature from a global movement of the churches is vast! In order to be comprehensive, and yet keep this volume to a manageable size and cost, some texts that are easily accessible through the internet have not been included in this anthology.

One obvious difficulty for a volume of this sort is that the experience of ecumenical gatherings is generally far richer than the reports they produce! In the words of the WCC’s first general secretary, Willem Visser ’t Hooft, “An ecumenical document which represents the outcome of a spiritual struggle cannot have quite the same significance for those who have not shared in that struggle as it has for those who have participated in its creation.” At the heart of the ecumenical movement is a meeting of life with life across barriers that have often prevented such encounters. I can only hope that the exhilaration of such meetings can be glimpsed on the pages of this anthology, and that readers who are not involved will be motivated to participate.

* * *

My own background touches on these different streams of the ecumenical movement. I have served on the staff of the WCC’s Faith and Order Commission, chaired the Justice and Advocacy Commission of the National Council of Churches (USA) before becoming that council’s general secretary, and been a participant/consultant at international conferences of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism. Perhaps more importantly, I have taught ecumenical and interfaith studies at various seminaries in the United States and India and taken part in numerous local and regional expressions of ecumenism.

This book would not have been possible without the contributions of four persons: Rev. Brian E. Cope, who was co-editor of the earlier (1997) edition; Dr. Antonios Kireopoulos, my former colleague at the National Council of Churches, who contributed significantly to the initial stage of this edition, including the suggestion that it include a chapter on future directions; my wife, Mardine Davis, who took scanned, often garbled, material and formatted it for subsequent editing (a laborious task!); and Michael West, publisher at the WCC, who kept faith with this project over several years. The book is dedicated to the students in my courses on ecumenism over the past three decades, many of whom have given outstanding leadership to the ecumenical movement.

Michael Kinnamon