Why Presbyterians should be involved in the ecumenical movement

The ecumenical movement is a pilgrimage. As Presbyterians, we are called not to remain stagnant or sit idly by. Our theology will not allow us. I prefer ecumenical movement to ecumenism, because we are always on the move, the move towards communion and justice. It is a pilgrimage towards communion and justice for all.

To be Presbyterian is to be ecumenical. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is rooted in tradition. It is a tradition that has always been open to dialogue and change, going beyond our church walls. The PC(USA) is part of the Reformed family. The Reformed churches believe in the interconnectedness of the Church. We are not alone. We are not alone in our mission, in our preaching, in our teaching, in our living out in the world. This means that not only is God with us always, but that we are called to be interconnected. The Church is one through the Unity of God. This is a great doctrinal statement, but it is also meant to be lived out in the world. This is why I love the Reformed tradition, because we pride ourselves on our confessional history, but we also acknowledge that we are to move forward—together—as a Church Body, writing new confessions and listening for the Spirit. This means we actively work every day to the best of our abilities (even when we fall short) to the glory of God. Even in our depraved state, God’s grace calls us to respond by striving for unity, kin-dom come.

At the heart of the ecumenical movement is that we are called to be One. Through the explanation and areas of emphasis defined above, all the work of the ecumenical movement is done so that all may prosper. There is an attention to the convergence between theological, contextual, and institutional challenges. Recalling our spiritual roots of the ecumenical movement, we acknowledge that we are one in Christ. What does this call us to do? The answer is found in Christ’s own prayer in John 17:21, NRSV: “that they may all be one. As you, [God], 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.”

An important aspect for the ecumenical movement in the 21st century is the change in globalization. Justice issues such as oppression, poverty, lack of land reform, unjust and imbalanced trade relationships, wars and conflicts, health concerns, financial crises, etc., are all tied into the care for God’s creation, both in terms of the human and natural world. When we do things together, not as a power-force coming to change you, but in dialogue and conversation, then we can tackle the issues that plague our world. It is the concentration of power always held by the small minority that impedes the progress of justice and peace in our world. Only when we begin to dialogue and actually work together (dialogue is important, but alongside dialogue action must take place) in partnerships are we best able to overcome issues such as the ones listed above. When we work together then the few can no longer have the power, and the Church can become the aid we are called to be throughout the whole world.

This vision is at the heart of the Accra Confession, which is one of the greatest gifts that the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (now World Communion of Reformed Churches) has given to the ecumenical movement. Its 10th anniversary is being celebrated this year. The Accra Confession names the economic disparities that exist in our world, and is a statement of faith in the midst of economic empire. The Accra Confession says, “We live in a scandalous world that denies God’s call to life for all. The annual income of the richest 1 per cent is equal to that of the poorest 57 per cent, and 24,000 people die each day from poverty and malnutrition.”¹ This is just one of the examples where empire has exploited the lives of others, and ten years later, we have gathered again to discuss the global realities.

As Christians, we are called to live out *koinonia*, *communion*. We live into our full communion with churches, honoring diversity, instead of insisting on like-mindedness while discouraging diversity. We should remember that we live together in one community of faith, honoring our diversity and not ignoring or discouraging it. The ultimate goal through this movement of justice and peace is unity in our diversity. We are called to learn from one another, and work towards a tangible reality through action. At the Eucharist Table, all (baptized believers) are invited. But is this a true reality? While we stand behind the Table on Sunday morning, professing that all may partake, we must remember who is not there, and not able to partake. At the Great Banquet Feast no one is left to the margins. The heart of the church not only rests within the structures that govern us, but outside, in the world, where we are called to go and walk on this pilgrimage of life together, where we witness to Christ in all aspects of our lives, and calling all together, for all are invited to the Great Banquet Feast.

Presbyterians should be involved in the ecumenical movement, because whether you like it or not, you already are part of it. The ecumenical movement strives for unity, not sameness, and in that unity, justice for all is the targeted goal. Connecting with people is crucial for the Church to thrive; and this means joining hands with people across boundaries and comfort zones. It means that we go beyond our church walls.

To be Presbyterian, again, is to be ecumenical. May we continue pushing down boundaries and barriers that separate us from one another, and strive for justice for all. I cannot be comfortable in my Christian faith until this happens. While this may not always be a comfortable proposition, to be Presbyterian, to be Christian, is to be uncomfortable, to get into the messiness of life. Now is the time to get messy, now is the time to be uncomfortable. Now is the time to strive toward unity even when, especially when, it is difficult. May we continue on this messy pilgrimage together.

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