



All Nations University Journal of Applied Thought (ANUJAT)
A Multidisciplinary Approach

Volume 7/Number 1

November 2019

Article 3

Vision for a Reconciled Church: Challenges & Prospects in Ecumenical Journey

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Recommended Citation:

Saxena, S.R. (2019). Vision for a Reconciled Church: Challenges & Prospects in Ecumenical Journey. *All Nations University Journal of Applied Thought (ANUJAT)*, 7(1): 28-40. All Nations University Press.

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ABSTRACT

Unity is a basic issue within the Church. We as Christians claim ourselves to be part of the Apostolic Church paradoxically, we who are the members of different denominations have drawn lines depending upon our belief systems. Most of the denominations have become a watertight compartment with other denominations. Churches belonging to different countries and regions have various challenges. Many times, we are not able to address these challenges because of lack of unity among church members. There are various biblical passages which assert on unity among believers but many leaders are not taking seriously because of their attachment with their traditions or because of their interests. On the other hand, various ecumenical forums at national and international levels are able to address the theme of unity to aware the people of the ongoing challenges. Global Christian Forum is one of the biggest ecumenical umbrellas which tries to bring most of the denominations and traditions together in recent times. This paper intends to highlight the theological basis for Christian unity within the churches; secondly, an exploration of various challenges the Church as a body of Christ is facing especially in Asia and Africa; lastly how as a community of faith together we may become an agent of love, unity, and peacemakers in challenges. Let us work together to work for the unity within the Church, witness the life and work of our Lord Jesus Christ, and serve the humanity with the love of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Keywords: *Unity, Ecumenism, Reconciliation, Context and Challenges.*

Introduction

“Let Mutual Love Continue,” the theme of the Third Global Christian Forum¹ gathering held in April 2018 Bogota, Columbia; “Looking towards a Church Fully Reconciled” a course organized by the Anglican Centre at Rome in May 2017 to focus on the bridging the gap between the Anglican and the Roman Catholic churches; “Your Kingdom Come! Our heart’s Cry-Advancing God’s Kingdom Together” the theme for upcoming World Evangelical Alliance General Assembly (WEA) to be held in Jakarta in November 2019 and “Christ’s Love moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity” the theme for the eleventh Assembly of World Council of Churches to be held at Karlsruhe in Germany and many more themes in the pasts and present helps us to understand the sincere role of our Church leaders to witness Christ through these global forums in one spirit and accord. The motif of love, unity, and reconciliation within the parasol of the Kingdom of God can clearly be seen in these ecumenical bodies. Through its rich traditions every denomination (which beliefs in the basic tenets of the Christian faith) has something significant to

¹ Christian World Communions and world Christian organizations, including the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the Pentecostal World Fellowship, the World Evangelical Alliance and the World Council of Churches

contribute to these ecumenical movements. As Christians, our faith journey begins with Christ and ultimately culminates in Him.

Theological Framework for Christian Unity

The theological basis for Christian unity is richly rooted in the Bible. Psalm 133 emphasizes the unity of the believers which anticipates Jesus' prayer in John 17. Jesus prayed that his followers “may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21). Likewise, Paul urged the Ephesians to “keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3-5). Further, in Hebrew 13:1, Paul encourages, ‘Let mutual love continues...’ There are still plenty of verses in the Bible that requires us to live in unity and love as we witness Christ together. Our first question should not be how we may be united together but it should begin with: what unites us? Paul comments it is through Jesus Christ we all are united (Rom 6:5). We should not forget that Paul throughout his ministry worked to maintain the unity of the church in the face of various challenges. Letters to the Corinthian church is one of the best examples.² Our theological framework begins with our affirmation that (a) we are all created by the triune God (b) united in Jesus Christ (c) and is expected to live in perfect unity through the Spirit. According to Andre Birmele, ‘the goal of ecumenism – is the unity of the Church: a unity given in and by God and manifest in the service that the Churches are called to give jointly to the world.’³ It is said that many early ecumenist were pragmatic in their approach and did not elaborated on the theories of unity but believed that friendly encounters are themselves capable of producing lasting results. But later through the ‘model of unity’ corporate merger was emphasized in which two or more bodies become one body. One of the examples is the so-called organic union, a prominent model of the early Faith and Order movement. Many ‘united churches’ are the product of this model where two or more traditions are merged into a single.⁴ As per the unity statement of the WCC Third Assembly, New Delhi, 1961, ‘the love of the Father and the Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit is the source and goal of the unity which the Triune God wills for all men and creation.’⁵ The Church is ecumenical, because, when announcing the gospel to the whole world, it is one and catholic, it is the Church in its fullness given by God.⁶

Bishop Efraim Tendero (Secretary-General, WEA) in his article The Centrality of Christian Unity raises two pertinent questions: “Why we need to work together?” and “How we can work

² T.P. Weber, ‘Ecumenism’ in Walter A. Elwell (eds.) *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1984), 341

³ Andre Birmele, ‘Ecumenism’ in Ian A. Mcfarland (eds.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 157

⁴ R. Saarinen, ‘Ecumenism’ in William A. Dyrness (eds.), *Global Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008) 266.

⁵ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/1961-new-delhi/new-delhi-statement-on-unity>

⁶ André Birmelé, ‘Ecumenism’ in Jean-Yves Lacoste (Eds.) *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology* (New York: Routledge, 2005) 472.

together?’ and then answers them simultaneously.⁷ On the issue of ‘why we need to work together?’ Bishop takes an example of triune God who itself is the demonstration of unity in His very nature. Secondly, the very nature of the church as a body with various members dictates us that we must work together. Our unity is a gift of God. Paul emphasizes our oneness by listing seven aspects of this unity in a single verse, Ephesians 4:4: one body, one Spirit one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. According to Bishop Tendero, “Unity among Christians is both permanent and fragile. On one hand, nothing can break our relationship with other believers...on the other hand we can severely strain that relationship by our behavior.” Due to the scandal in the family, if children break off a relationship with each other does not stop them from being brothers and sisters. Similarly, we Christians face a similar risk of scandal when we are unnecessarily divided.⁸ Such division affects our witness in the world.

Unfortunately, the division has crept into our life-style. Sam Kobia asserts that Jesus Christ founded one church but European and American missionary activities in Africa in the 19th century brought and planted a divided church. This division is now widely spread in subsequent years. In spite of many and varied initiatives towards church unity, the African church scene is characterized by denominationalism and fragmentation.⁹ In India, many brothers and sisters from other faith understand denominations as a replica of the caste system within Christianity. The first Indian Bishop of the Anglican Church Bishop Vedanayagam Azariah was a world-known ecumenical statesman.¹⁰ In 1936, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, an architect of the Indian Constitution, stated that the Hindu Harijans should embrace a religion that would give them equal status with the existing devotees of that religion. Azariah approached him with the hope that Ambedkar might regard Christianity as an acceptable religion. However, he was much shaken when Ambedkar asked him which denomination, he would suggest for his Harijan followers. This determined the Bishop to strengthen his initiative for Church union in South India.¹¹ The vision of the Church Union was not to absorb other Churches by any one Church nor that one tradition shall be imposed upon all; but rather each Church shall bring the true riches of its inheritance into the united Churches. Their main intention was to hold to the fundamental Faith and Order of the Universal Church and at the same time assures freedom of opinion and action in all other matters within the life of the Church as one organic body.¹² Jesus' prayer for unity among believers in John 17:20-23 is the key to bring churches together. The church ought to be the epitome of unity. The prayer of Jesus does not emphasize the merger of different denominations to one but it is a prayer of unity in diversity

⁷ Efraim Tendero ‘The Centrality of Christian Unity’ in Richard Howell (eds.) *Sharing Faith Stories: A Methodological for Promoting Unity* (New Delhi: Caleb Institute of Theology & Masihi Sahitya Sanstha, 2018), 19.

⁸ *Ibid*, 20.

⁹ Sam Kobia, ‘Denominationalism in Africa The Pitfalls of Institutional Ecumenism’ in *Ecumenical Review* Vol. 53/3 (2001), 295.

¹⁰ Carol Graham, ‘The Legacy of V. S. Azariah’ in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (January 1, 1985) 18.

¹¹ S D Ponraj, *Pioneers of the Gospel: The Life and Work of Pioneering Missionaries* (Chennai: Mission Educational Books, 2010) 97-98

¹² The Plan of Church Union, 4th Edn. (Madras, CLS 1965) X cited in Dharendra Kumar Sahu, *The Church of North India: A Historical and Systematic Theological Inquiry into an Ecumenical Ecclesiology* (New York, Peter Lang 1992) 148.

where every member in the body of Christ is honored and treated equally under “universal” church. The Martyrdom of Polycarp refers to “the whole Catholic Church thought-out the inhabited world.” Ignatius of Antioch supplies a Christological basis for this universal extension: “wherever Christ Jesus is there is the Catholic Church (Letters to the Smyrneans 8.2).¹³ In 1722 a small group of Moravian Christians, who lived in what is now the Czech Republic, found refuge from persecution on the estate of a generous German count. Within four years, more than 300 people came. But instead of an ideal community for persecuted refugees, the settlement became filled with discord. Different perspectives on Christianity brought division. What they did next may seem like a small choice, but it launched an incredible revival: They began to focus on what they agreed on rather than on what they disagreed on. The result was unity.¹⁴ We need to strive for the unity of the Church, even in the face of various challenges.

Past & Present Challenges

(a) Theological Deviations

If we look into the history of ecumenism, various ecumenical councils reflect the counter-response of the Church on some issues or challenges related to faith and doctrine. To oppose such challenges councils always came up with creeds/confessions/statements/declarations etc. One of the most prominent examples is of Nicene Creed which is actually the product of two ecumenical councils – one Nicaea (present-day Iznik, Turkey) in AD 325 (resolved the issue of Jesus’ divinity), and one in Constantinople (now Istanbul) in AD 381 (resolved the issue of Jesus’ humanity). These Councils addressed the century-old debate over the nature of the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Nicene Creed is perhaps the most famous and influential creed in the history of the church because it also settled the question of how Christians can worship one God and also claim that this God is three persons.¹⁵ Further, the Council of Ephesus in 431 stated Christ as a unified person while the council of Chalcedon in 451 regarded Jesus as human and divine in one person. Specifically, it rejected confusion or a mixture of two natures in Christ. Here Christ is declared to be one person in two natures.¹⁶ The “Great Schism” of 1054¹⁷; Reformation that led to the establishment of Protestant churches; industrialization, western colonial expansion, and rise of Darwinism in the nineteenth century were some prominent challenges church has faced in the past.

¹³ Geoffrey Wainwright, ‘The Global Structures of Ecumenism’ in Carl E. Braaten & Robert W. Jenson (eds.) *The Ecumenical Future* (Grand Rapids: Michigan, Eerdmans, 2004), 12

¹⁴ <https://odb.org/2019/09/15/unity>

¹⁵ Justin S. Holcomb, *Know the Creeds and Councils* (Grand Rapids: Michigan, Zondervan, 2014) 33

¹⁶ B. L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* 2nd Edn. (Dallas: Texas, Word Pub. 1995) 114.

¹⁷ separation of the Latin-speaking west from the Greek-speaking east.

(b) Reaching the Unreached

Edinburgh 1910 was the beginning of the protestant ecumenical movement. This conference focused on developing strategies of spreading God's mission throughout the world especially in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.¹⁸ It reflected the Protestant paradigms of the mission by introducing new strategies in the changing world order. The need for the indigenized mission was felt where local people be used in engaging local cultural realities. The world was seen into two different parts "Christendom" and "Heathendom," with the former having missionary obligations to the latter.¹⁹ Japan, China, and India came first in the order of missionary priorities, followed by the Dutch East Indies and the Islamic world, with sub-Saharan Africa being seen as of the least importance. Regrettably, only one African was present out of around 1200 delegates who attend the conference. This was seen as a disregard for Africa.²⁰ But the 3rd World Council of Churches Assembly witnessed the emergence of nonwhite voices of Africa, Asia, and Latin America where Human Rights were an issue on the high agenda.²¹

(c) Nationalism of Nazism

In 1934, Confessing Church (Reformed, Lutheran, and unified tradition) brought Barmen declaration against Nazism and, in particular, against the German Christian Movement as part of what was known as the kirchenkampf (church struggle), authored principally by Karl Barth.²² It dealt with the issues raised by a particular situation in the German Church following Hitler's rise to power. This declared that the church could not adjust its ideas in the light of "prevailing ideological and political convictions." It had to remain faithful to its Christian roots, as witnessed in the person of Jesus Christ, and the text of the Bible. Since the war, the 'Theological Declaration of Barmen' has been incorporated into various churches to varying degrees.²³

(d) Second World War

After the Second World War, churches started to develop better relations with each other. The events of the twentieth century such as the Armenian Genocide, holocaust, gave a new impetus for ecumenism. It was against this background that the World Council of Churches was created in 1948. This body initially described itself as "a fellowship of churches which accept our Lord as God and Saviour," The second meeting of the World Council of Churches, held in Toronto

¹⁸ O. L. Snaitang, *A History of Ecumenical Movement: A Introduction* (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI, 2004), 13.

¹⁹ Alister E. Mcgrath, *Christian History: An Introduction* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013) 282.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Don M. Aycock, 'John 17 and Jesus' Prayer for Unity' in *Theological Educator* January 1, 1988/137.

²² Ark R. Lindsay, 'Barmen Declaration' in Daniel Patte (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 2010), 99

²³ David E. Roberts, 'Barmen Declaration' in Trevor A. Hart (eds.) *The Dictionary of Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Michigan, Paternoster Press, 2000) 53

in 1950 emphasized, “to bring the churches into contact with one another and to promote discussion of questions of Church unity.”²⁴ Later WCC Assembly took place in other different places including New Delhi, India (1961) and Nairobi, Kenya (1975). WCC's intention was to address the prevailing indifference to the need for ecumenical fellowship and unity, through theological dialogue and spiritual fellowship that may eventually transform and lead the denominations to focus on Christian unity.²⁵ In the 1970s and 1980s, the church faced another challenge where ‘western culture was becoming increasingly secular and hostile to Christian faith’ on the other hand ‘the expansion of Christianity into traditionally Islamic areas of the world together with the growth of significant Islamic groups in the west through immigration.’²⁶ Today the WCC focuses its work in three program areas: Unity, Mission, and Ecumenical Relations, Public Witness and Diakonia, and Ecumenical Formation. All programs share responsibility for strengthening relationships with member churches and ecumenical partners.²⁷

(e) Voice for the Voiceless

It was in the nineteenth century that the Christian mission in Africa gained momentum. Theologians from Africa, Asia, and Latin America needed a forum to discuss Christian theology from their own contextual perspectives, without the dominance of Europe and North American theological positions. This led to the formation of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) at Dar es Salaam in 1976 before the Fifth WCC Assembly could meet. EATWOT, an association of men and women became the strong voice for the voiceless who struggled for the liberation and promoted new models of theology for religious pluralism, social justice, and peace. The EATWOT took the Third World context seriously which addressed the issue of liberation, integrity of creation, poverty, gender co-responsibility, racial and ethnic equality, and interfaith dialogue. Thus Third World theologies offered an alternative voice to the marginalized and exploited people of the planet.²⁸ In 1986 the Belhar Confession condemned apartheid and other forms of forced separation in the church “on the grounds of race and color,” “descent,” or “any other human or social factor,” as issued by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (1986) and by the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa when they joined to form the Uniting Reformed Church (1994).²⁹ The central theme of this Ecumenical council was to promote justice and peace as well as to consider the unity of the Church through Jesus Christ.

²⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian History: An Introduction* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013) 306

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 307.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 307.

²⁷ WCC ‘What we do’ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do>

²⁸ Jesse Ndwiga Kanyua Mugambi, ‘Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT)’ in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 2010), 352

²⁹ N.a. ‘Belhar Confession’ *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 108.

This confession also worked out the integration between the living unity, real reconciliation, and caring justice.³⁰

New Challenges

(a) Multi-Religious Context of South Asia

Religious Nationalism, Religious Intolerance, Lack of Religious Freedom because of socio-political as well as religious structures and an increase in persecution and martyrdom are the important issues needs to be addressed by the Church. With the rise of a new Hindu nationalism in India known as Hindutva, the distinction between Indianness and Hinduness is eroding.³¹ Open Doors now rank India tenth among the countries where Christians face the greatest pressure. Open Doors states, ‘The view of the nationalists is that to be Indian is to be Hindu, so any other faith—including Christianity—is viewed as non-Indian.’³² In Bangladesh, Buddhist and Hindu communities have suffered violent attacks at the hands of Islamic fundamentalism. In Sri Lanka, Buddhist monks lead the charge against evangelical Christians and Muslims and have lobbied for strict anti-conversion laws. In Pakistan, Hindus and Christians, find themselves on the receiving end of violent attacks and false accusations under the country’s blasphemy law.³³ The Christian community at large has played a major role in building the nation in many ways—education, health, science, agricultural technology, civil services, etc.—but it is now often claimed that all our social services are geared only towards conversion.

(b) Rapid Social Changes

In recent decades, globalization has brought all the countries together. Migration, whether internal or international, has always been one of the forces driving the growth of urbanization and bringing opportunities and challenges to cities, migrants, governments and the Church. The Cape Town Commitment states: ‘People are on the move as never before. Migration is one of the great global realities of our era. It is estimated that 200 million people are living outside their countries of origin.’³⁴ At the same time churches worldwide has an opportunity to show support and solidarity with the world’s millions of people who are forcibly displaced from their hometowns, states, and

³⁰ Jerry Pillay, ‘Ecumenism in Africa: Theological, Contextual, and Institutional Challenges,’ *The Ecumenical Review* 67/4 (December 2015), 636

³¹ C. Rammanohar Reddy, ‘The Idea of India’ Is Failing, *The Hindu*, 19 August 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-idea-of-india-is-failing/article29127579.ece>.

³² David Curry, *World Watch List 2019: The 50 Countries Where It’s Most Dangerous to Follow Jesus*, https://www.opendoorsusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/WWL2019_FullBooklet.pdf

³³ Tehmina Arora, *Restoring the fractured identity landscape of South Asia* in http://evangelicalfocus.com/blogs/3676/Restoring_the_fractured_identity_landscape_of_South_Asia

³⁴ <https://www.lausanne.org/docs/CapeTownCommitment.pdf>

countries.³⁵ Another challenge is the issue of poverty. According to the Minority affairs minister of India, the rate of unemployment among Christian men in rural as well as urban areas is higher than those from other religions across the country. The detailed data was presented in the Lok Sabha.³⁶ The Church is called to see the well-being of its members. The physical, spiritual, emotional, psychological needs are to be taken at every level from children to senior citizens. Urbanization, environmental crises, Human Trafficking, etc. are also the most prominent social issues that the churches need to address together.

(c) Divided churches

We have failed to recognize our brothers and sisters within the body of Christ i.e. there is mutual exclusion. As a consequence, we have also failed to share and receive gifts of mutual love, the richness of each tradition. This led us to division within ourselves where we do not have a united voice or credible witness to society nor does the church engaged robustly to bring the gospel in a cultural context. The Lausanne Rome 2018 Statement on Nominal Christianity has become an eye-opener for every Christian denomination. One-third of the world call themselves 'Christians', but a significant portion of them are missing from our churches. Many others are present but are missing out on the joy of truly knowing and following Christ. How can we make a mission to nominal Christians as a part of the agenda for the global church?³⁷ Unfortunately, the Church is still divided on the issue of homosexuality, gay marriages, faith and evolution, caste, materialism, etc. Archbishop Anil Cuto quotes Pope John Paul II from *Ut Unum Sint* (1995): "The power of God's Spirit gives growth and builds up the Church down the centuries. As the Church turns her gaze to the new millennium, she asks the Spirit for the grace to strengthen her unity and to make it grow towards full communion with other Christians."³⁸

(d) Ecumenism Challenges in Africa

Jerry Pillay mentioned that Ecumenism in Africa is facing challenges from three main aspects, namely church unity, justice, and mission which is arising from Theological, Contextual and Institutional perspectives.

- ❖ The African churches are facing the lack of visible unity within the Church in spite of having common statements, declarations, and agreements. On the other hand, Churches are mushrooming in most parts of Africa, especially the growth of Pentecostalism and the

³⁵'Stand up for Refugee' <http://www.eearefugees.org/>

³⁶ Amrita Madhukalya, 'Unemployment rate among Christian men highest: Govt' in *Hindustan Times*, June 28, 2019/10.

³⁷ The Missing 'Christians': A Global Call-**The Lausanne Rome 2018 Statement on Nominal Christianity**' <https://www.lausanne.org/content/statement/missing-christians-global-call>

³⁸ Anil Couto, 'Ecumenical Challenges from a Catholic Perspective' in Richard Howell (eds.) *Sharing Faith Stories: A Methodological for Promoting Unity*, 288.

charismatic movements. However, attempts for Christian unity are still weak. Rise in denominationalism and separation, often encouraging a spirit of competition rather than cooperation and unity. The role and ordination of women, sexuality, worship, are the prominent issues on which the Church is still divided. The traditional churches are under threat because of the increase of new charismatic spirit-led movements.³⁹

- ❖ Africa is still struggling for justice and peace in many areas. Corruption, political turmoil, dictatorship, hunger, poverty, xenophobia, ethnic violence, religious intolerance and violence, the abuse of women and children are some of the ongoing issues. Although churches and ecumenical bodies have addressed these challenges from different forums, the problem still remains the same.⁴⁰
- ❖ The vast growth of Pentecostalism and charismatic churches is noticeable and commendable but the proclamation of the “prosperity gospel” which is attracting the poor and the ambitious has also become the challenge.⁴¹
- ❖ The re-emergence of indigenous spirituality among Africans, both in Africa and in the diaspora are flourishing in recent years in a new form. For example, in Lagos Nigeria, shrines are becoming more attractive among the younger generation and are competing with churches in adherents and positions.⁴² Another challenge is the contemporary prophetic and deliverance ministry in Africa that is becoming obstacles to the progress of Christian discipleship. Despite the growth of Christianity in Africa, the deliverance ministries are not able to bring the African out of the fear of witchcraft and other supernatural powers.⁴³

Journey of Togetherness: Towards Prospects

The second question: “How we can work together?” raised by Bishop Efraim Tendero in his article The Centrality of Christian Unity invites the Churches to come together and work on the areas of agreement. Instead of focusing on what separates us we need to emphasize what unites us.⁴⁴ Apart from challenges, there is also a hope for the church as we journey together. On the issue of global persecution faced by the Christians, the Tirana Consultation in Tirana, Albania was held in 2015. The churches around the world were called to pray, support and be in solidarity with those suffering persecutions because of their faith. It was the first time in the history that four global church bodies (the Catholic Church (Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity), the

³⁹ Jerry Pillay, ‘Ecumenism in Africa: Theological, Contextual, and Institutional Challenges,’ 635-638.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 639-640.

⁴¹ Ibid., 641.

⁴² Kizito Chinedu Nweke and Ikenna Paschal Okpaleke, ‘The Re-emergence of African Spiritualities: Prospects and Challenges’ in *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* Vol. 36/4 October 2019/246

⁴³ Christian Tsekpoe, Contemporary Prophetic and Deliverance Ministry Challenges in Africa in *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* Vol. 36/4 October 2019/281.

⁴⁴ Efraim Tendero ‘The Centrality of Christian Unity’ 21-22.

Pentecostal World Fellowship, WCC, and WEA) under GCF worked together in a common global initiative.⁴⁵

Apart from all struggles, the Church has been increasing in number. The rebirth and growth of Chinese Christianity, in spite of socio-political challenges is one of the best examples. According to recent statistics, tens of millions of Chinese now identify as Christians, and the number has grown rapidly, posing challenges for a government that is officially atheist.⁴⁶ The emergence of new movements in India such as Yeshu Darbar Church in Allahabad, Matridham Ashram in Varanasi, mega-churches in Rajasthan, Hyderabad, etc. and development of United Christian Prayer for India an initiative of NUCF is the great encouragement for the Christianity today.

There are also signs of spiritual renewal engaging holistically to serve society, reaching out to the younger generation, prayer movements, and new music. There are also signs of increasing ecumenical engagement. On Seventeenth April 2009 was a historic day in the ecumenical journey of the Church in India when the three bodies, the Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI), National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) and Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI), signed a memorandum of understanding at the Joint Working Committee meeting at Delhi Bible Institute, New Delhi to form National United Christian Forum (NUCF). This forum is committed to celebrate, enter into dialogue and act together to the glory of the One God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Further, it seeks to broaden and deepen encounters to foster mutual respect, to explore and address together common challenges so that the Church in India is strengthened.⁴⁷ Our contemporary witness must be both Christological in content and Christ-like manner; it should affirm the Lordship of Jesus Christ in both theology and practice.⁴⁸ Dialogue plays a vital role as we move forward together. It enables the members to learn about and to enter into the traditional experiences of the members of other denominations; creating mutual understanding and building friendship within before we extend our hand of friendship to others. Our focus should be on the theme of this paper Let Mutual Love Continue in such a way that we may look forward to accomplishing the goal for the world to be fully reconciled.

Conclusion: Vision of Ecumenism

Koinonia, communion is the essence of the Church. This Koinonia refers to the life of the Holy Trinity, the three persons with love pulsating between them. Let God's love unite our hearts and minds so that we may continue to persevere for unity. The prime purpose of the evil one is to divide us so that we may be drifted from the real issues of lives. The beauty of diversity lies in

⁴⁵ Huibert van Beek & Larry Miller (eds), *Discrimination, Persecution, Martyrdom: Following Christ Together Report of the Global Consultation Tirana, Albania, 2-4 November 2015* (Germany: The Deutsche National bibliothek, 2018) iii.

⁴⁶ Eleanor Albert, 'Christianity in China' [October 11, 2018] in <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/christianity-china>

⁴⁷ 'India: National United Christian Forum – Our Journey Together with Christ' <https://www.worldia.org/news/2503>

⁴⁸ Nicholas J. Wood, *Christian Witness in Multi-Religious World: Reflections on an Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Statement* (A Paper for the Inter-Faculty Seminar of the Faculty of Theology SHUATS Thursday 14 March 2019).

togetherness. 'Let mutual love continue' (Hebrew 13:1) is the basis of our fellowship. St. Paul says in Philippians 3:13b-14a '...But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal...' In the midst of the Challenges, the Church has to move forward forgetting our denominational differences and fulfilling the mission and vision of the 'Universal Church' whose head is our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul says, 'if one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it' (1 Corinth 12:26). Let us look into those areas where we may bring changes through our own contributions.

- ❖ We need a new vision of ecumenism in Africa and Asia we may embrace the ecumenical theological mandate, common mission, and the multiple forms of ecumenical endeavor.
- ❖ We should harp on those areas that unite us rather than starting our initiative on what divides us.
- ❖ We need to come together for the sake of the future of the Church as well as for the survival of humanity and at every level, it is a must that we should pray, learn and work together.
- ❖ We need to commit ourselves to love one another with the love of Christ and develop mutual respect, promoting justice, peace, and unity as we tend to resolve the challenges that affect our Church and humanity at large.
- ❖ We need to give greater consideration to marginalized groups, especially women and children. The exclusion of women from the leadership of the church when they are usually the hard-working majority in a denomination or congregation has to be seriously challenged.
- ❖ As churches are engaged in relating each other, historic churches can enrich younger churches with long-standing tenets of faith and the younger churches may share their contemporary spiritual experiences.
- ❖ We have to affirm the dignity of every person by recognizing that they bear the image of Christ and loving them is not an option but our mandate without any prejudice. The world will know that we are Jesus' disciples if we love one another.
- ❖ We, as a member of the Church, should come forward to organize joint programs with other churches and church-related organizations. The Inter-Faculty seminar between the Faculty of Theology, SHUATS, St. Joseph's Regional Seminary (Catholic Seminary), Allahabad Bible Seminary (Evangelical Seminary) in Allahabad, India is a good initiative where all faculty members and students from different denomination learn through paper presentations, praying and having a meal together.
- ❖ We need to strive for reconciliation within and outside the church by creating a better platform where our voices can be heard. The Anglican Centre at Rome stands as a mark of building relations and understanding between Anglican and Roman Catholic Christians and stands for its reconciling witness to Christian unity. The National United Christian Forum in India may play a vital and better role in uniting the Churches together in the present scenario.

We don't need too many ecumenical bodies but a few that may address some common issues with one voice. It is important to be together in the midst of all challenges. We are looking forward to the Church Fully Reconcile with each other and witness together for the glory of God. I want to close with prayer formulated for the Wittenburg gathering in 2017 that bridged historic divides between Catholics and Protestants.

“Lord Jesus Christ, you prayed: ‘May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me, and I in you. May they be one, so that the world might believe.’ We pray that the body of Christ might be united in you, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Break down what stands between us. Strengthen what unites us. Give victory over what separates us. Fill us with the power of your Spirit, that we might seek ways to unite with each other. Bring about the day when we can praise you together, in the fellowship of all who believe.” Amen.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Kelly Steinhaus, ‘Unite Boston Movement’ in Richard Howell (eds.) *Sharing Faith Stories: A Methodological for Promoting Unity*, 245.

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