

**PARTICIPATION OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH  
IN NATIONAL COUNCILS OF CHURCHES**

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**I. Participation of the Roman Catholic Church in National  
Councils of Churches: an Historical Survey**

by

**THOMAS MICHEL, S.J.**

*[Despite the importance of and necessity for the participation of the Roman Catholic Church in National Councils of Churches, scepticism on the advisability of it still prevails among a good many of the members of the Roman Catholic Church, Undoubtedly, it is due to their ignorance and apprehension, born out of bias. Through this article Thomas Michel dispels such apprehensions by clearly explaining the history, nature, and utility of such Councils today for their unifying and ecumenical thrust among Christian Churches, vindicating the official position and attitude of the Roman Catholic Church in this respect.]\**

The growth of national and regional Councils of Churches is one of the most dramatic phenomena arising from the ecumenical movement in the past century. In 1900, no National Council of Churches existed anywhere in the world. Today, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, there are at least 103 National Councils of Churches, and located on every continent. Moreover, at the international level, several important regional conferences have been functioning for almost 40 years. At the other end of the spectrum, at the local level in cities, provinces, and states, countless local associations of Churches have been created. Christians reflecting on their faith must see this rapid growth of Councils of Churches as one of the "signs of the times," that is, one of the significant ways that the Holy Spirit is working among Christians to lead them to greater unity, fellowship and service.

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This article intends to examine one aspect of this phenomenon, the participation of the Roman Catholic Church in the National Councils of Churches. Perhaps it would be good at the beginning to state exactly what we are talking about, that is, "to define our terms."

## 1. What is a "National Council of Churches"?

A Council is an association of Churches in a defined geographic area. It is a voluntary association in the sense that a Christian Church does not automatically belong to a Council simply by being located in a certain region. Churches are free to join, and free, if they wish, to disassociate themselves from the Council. Belonging to a Council of Churches does not compromise the distinctive identity and authority of each Church, but is meant to encourage common reflection on matters of faith, to promote co-operative action on matters that touch on Christian unity and ethical issues, and to foster common action in programs of Christian witness and service to the needs of human society. Each member Church remains free to organize itself in its own way and in accord with its distinctive ecclesiology, to follow its own liturgical and devotional practices, and to exclude itself from any statements and programs which it cannot in conscience accept.

It should be noted that a consistent terminology is not employed all over the world. The term "Councils of Churches" implies that only "Churches" can properly be members of the Council. This definition excludes other Christian organizations such as YMCA, YWCA, Bible Societies, and missionary societies, which, since they are not "Churches," cannot be members. For this reason, many associations today prefer to call themselves by the more inclusive term "Christian councils" or "Christian associations, that are not, properly speaking, "Churches." Other Councils of Churches are just that — bodies whose members are Churches, but in which other Christian organizations often can have associate membership or observer status.

Usually, the large international associations prefer to go by the name of Conferences, such as the Christian Conference of Asia, or the All-Africa Conference of Churches. They usually include as members not only Churches but also Councils of Churches and other Christian organizations. Some countries, e.g., Malaysia, have overlapping associations, such as the Malaysian Council of Churches, of which the Catholic Church is not a member, and the broader Christian Federation of Malaysia, which includes both the Catholic Church and many Evangelical Churches.

Councils of Churches are not a "united Church" (such as the Church of South India or the Church of North India), which is the result of a union of previously separated Churches. Nor is a Council of Churches a "Superchurch,"



which can speak in the name of member Churches, or override their decisions. The Councils of Churches exist to serve the member Churches, and through them the world, not to govern or dominate the member Churches.

A final word of introduction should attempt to clear up an understandable confusion caused in English by the use of the term "Council." Modern Councils of Churches must be distinguished from the historical "Ecumenical Councils" and local and regional Councils, which have been held throughout Christian history. The Ecumenical Councils, (seven of which are mutually accepted by the Churches of the East and West; a further fourteen of which are considered by the Roman Catholic Church to have ecumenical authority), and various regional Councils, are authoritative bodies within Churches which understand themselves to be one in matters of doctrine and practice. These Councils are considered by members of their Churches to have a mandate to deliberate on questions of faith and practice and to make binding decisions in matters of doctrine, cult and Church discipline.

The modern Councils of Churches do not have this "authoritative" character, nor a mandate to take decisions binding on their members. Rather, they are understood as spaces created by the Churches themselves for common theological reflection, for consultation and the sharing of insights and experience, and for fostering co-operation on joint planning and projects among Churches, which nevertheless remain divided among themselves. The ambiguity of the term "Council" is peculiar to the English language. In French, for example, an Ecumenical Council is referred to by the term *concile*, and a modern Council of Churches by *conseil*. In German, the first is *Konzil*, and the second, *Rat*.

## 2. Historical Development of National Councils of Churches

The growth of the number of modern Councils of Churches reflects and has accompanied the growth of the Ecumenical Movement. As the Christian Churches variously became conscientized to the scandal of disunity and committed themselves to work for Christian unity, they were led to seek ways to associate themselves with other Churches. In this way, the growth of Councils of Churches came about as a natural response to heightened ecumenical awareness.

The earliest proponents of Church Councils as an instrument to promote Christian unity were the Churches that stemmed from the Protestant Reformation. In 1905, the Protestant Federation of France was formed as the first modern Council of Churches. As a small minority among the Christians of France, Protestants became convinced of the need to work together to preserve religious freedom, to communicate regularly, and "to uphold the rights of the Churches of the Federation."<sup>1</sup> In the same year, a Council

with similar goals was formed in Puerto Rico.

Shortly thereafter, in 1908, the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America was created in the U.S.A. Unlike in France and Puerto Rico, the Protestant Churches in U.S.A. were not an imperiled minority seeking to defend their right to exist and practice their faith. In the United States, Protestants formed the dominant minority and could thus concern themselves with a broad program of promoting "the spiritual life and religious activities of the Churches," and of recommending a joint action on "matters of common interest." By 1910, membership in the Council included 31 denominations, which represented a majority of American Protestants. In 1950, this association was succeeded by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., which replaced the Federal Council and seven other national associations.

While the earliest Councils of Churches consisted exclusively of Protestant Churches, in 1920 the Ecumenical Patriarch laid the theological groundwork for future Orthodox participation. In a famous encyclical letter sent to all Christian Churches, the Patriarch of Constantinople called upon leaders of the Churches to work towards better understanding and cooperation. Taking as a model the newly-formed League of Nations, the Patriarch proposed the creation of a League of the Churches (*koinonia ton ekklesion*).<sup>2</sup> This encyclical marked the beginning of an institutional commitment on the part of the Orthodox Churches to work for unity among Christians through involvement in ecumenical association, and was influential in leading the Orthodox Churches to play an active role in the deliberations which led to the creation in 1948 of the World Council of Churches.<sup>3</sup> Even before the founding of the WCC, four Orthodox Churches in the U.S.A. had become members of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ.

Many of the National Councils of Churches in Asia, Africa and Latin America grew out of the desire to strengthen the identity and independence of missionary-based Churches. A fundamental goal of the Councils in these areas was to co-ordinate the co-operation between mission agencies and the newly-formed local Churches. After 1921, the International Missionary Council played an important role in the formation of National Councils of Churches in these areas.

For example, in India, the National Missionary Council became in 1922 the National Christian Council of India, Burma and Ceylon. The by-laws stipulated that at least half of the church representatives in the Council be nationals. In the same year, a previously existing Federation of Churches in Japan led to the formation of the National Christian Council. In Indonesia, a "missions consulate," created in 1906 to deal with issues affecting relations with the government of the Netherlands Indies, became the fore-



runner of the Indonesian National Council of Churches, which dates from 1950.

Christian Youth movements were an important catalyst for the formation of Councils of Churches, particularly in Asia. Young Christians involved in common projects of Christian witness and service which crossed denominational lines were led by their experience to work for the formation of ecumenical associations. At regional encounters of the World Student Christian Federation between 1907-1921, delegates called for associations to further ecumenical co-operation. At the 1922 meeting of the World Student Christian Federation in Beijing, the young Christians formally proposed the formation of an international Christian conference "in the Far East" to promote co-operation and mutual understanding among the Churches.

In response, the International Missionary Council proposed an East Asian committee, but the Asian Christians opted for a more independent conference in which "representatives of the church can share their experience and concern, join in meditation and prayer, and make common plans for participating more fully in the life of the ecumenical church." This conference became a reality in 1948 and held its first assembly in Bangkok in 1949. The conference eventually led, a decade later, to the formation in 1959 of the East Asia Christian Conference, which held its first assembly in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. In 1973, the name was changed to the more geographically inclusive "Christian Conference of Asia" (CCA). The CCA has continually reviewed its composition over the years in an effort to shape a conference that could respond better to its ecumenical goals. The original 1959 constitution was revised in 1964, 1971, 1973 and, most recently, in 1995.<sup>4</sup>

The CCA now includes more than 120 member Churches and Councils from South, East and Southeast Asia, together with Australia and New Zealand. It is worth noting that some Roman Catholics already participate in the CCA through the membership of the Catholic Church in the National Councils in Taiwan and Australia. Roman Catholic delegates from Australia took active part in the recent CCA General Assembly held in Tomohon, Indonesia, in June, 2000. The scope of CCA concerns has expanded to include a common witness of Christian faith on social issues, such as religious freedom, human rights, the status of women, interreligious dialogue, and theological reflection on cultural and economic globalization.

The history of regional and continental Councils is similar in other parts of the world. The All-Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), created in 1963, has focused on issues of worship and evangelism, the defence of Christian family life in the African context, and indigenization of the

Gospel. The Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) dates from 1966 and has emphasized themes of education, citizenship, and the relation of Gospel to culture. The Caribbean Conference of Churches (CCC) was founded in 1973 and has focused upon "God's action in Christ" in terms of Caribbean culture, experience and needs and on the search for unity and renewal among the Churches. The Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI) was founded in 1982 and emphasizes co-operation among Protestant missions and indigenous churches, with a strong accent on building a social and political system based on justice and brotherhood. The Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), founded in 1974, has promoted understanding and co-operation among member churches, and gives special importance to interreligious relations, particularly to relations with Muslims, who form a large majority in the region. The Conference of European Churches (CEC), founded in 1959, was very active in building and maintaining close contacts between the Churches of Eastern and Western Europe in the years when Europe was politically divided by the "Cold War," and today is seeking to witness to faith in "post-Christian" cultures and in the increasingly pluralist European societies. It is to be noted that in several of these regional Conferences, the Catholic Church is fully represented, such as in the Pacific Council of Churches, the Caribbean Conference of Churches, and the Middle East Council of Churches.

In summary, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw a steady increase in the number of Councils of Churches around the world, from the first two in 1905, to 23 in 1928, and 30 by 1948, when the World Council of Churches was formed. At that time, 9 Councils of Churches were located in Asia, 3 in Africa and the Near East, and 5 in Latin America. Today, in the year 2000, there are 103 National Councils of Churches, as well as regional international conferences and numerous local Councils.

### **3. Catholic Participation in National Councils of Churches**

The Roman Catholic Church came late to the ecumenical movement. This is partially due to an attitude that ecumenism would constitute a compromise with error, partly because Catholics in the early part of the 20th Century were hoping that other Churches would "return" to the "fullness" of Christian faith which was to be found in the Roman Catholic tradition. The turning point came with the 1964 Second Vatican Council "Decree on Ecumenism," often referred to by its Latin title, *Unitatis Redintegratio*. Although the Decree on Ecumenism did not refer explicitly to Councils of Churches, the document laid the theological foundations for Catholic participation in such Councils by recognizing the ecclesial character of other Churches, repeatedly referring to them as "Churches and ecclesial communities." Moreover, the "Decree on Ecumenism" shifts the focus on Christian unity for Catholics from a concern for a return to Rome as the center of



the Church, to "Christ as the source and center of ecclesiastical communion" (*UR*, 20).<sup>5</sup>

At the time of the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church was not a member of any National Council of Churches. However, only 7 years after the Decree on Ecumenism was promulgated in 1971, the Catholic Church had joined the National Council of Churches in 11 countries.<sup>6</sup> The number increased to 19 by 1975,<sup>7</sup> to 33 by 1986, to 41 by 1993, to 58 in 2000 (70, if one includes the Catholic Church in nations of the Middle East Council of Churches).

The first explicit treatment by the Holy See of Roman Catholic participation in National and Regional Councils of Churches came in 1975 in a document issued by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity entitled: *Ecumenical Collaboration at the Regional, National, and Local Levels*,<sup>8</sup> by which time the Catholic Church had already joined the NCC in 19 countries. This document is important for two reasons: 1) it elaborated the principles on which Catholic participation in Councils of Churches is based; and 2) it formed the basis of the position taken in the 1993 *Guidelines*, which often simply restates the 1975 document. For these reasons, it might be worth examining the document in greater detail.

Chapter 5 of the document, entitled "Considerations Concerning Council Membership," takes up the theological motivations for joining in ecumenical association with other Christian Churches, as well as the practical difficulties to be kept in mind. The document holds that "since the Second Vatican Council's recognition of the *ecclesial* character of other Christian communities, the Church has frequently called upon Catholics to co-operate not only with other Christians *as individuals*, but also with other Churches and ecclesial communities as such" (*EC*, 5a).<sup>9</sup> This association with other Churches *as Churches* should not be seen as a purely pragmatic co-operation on matters of social and human concern, but should go beyond that to the more essential form of co-operation in the area of a common Christian witness of faith.

Membership in a Council of Churches implies "recognition of the Council of Churches as an instrument, among others, both for expressing the unity already existing among the Churches, and also of advancing towards a greater unity and a more effective Christian witness" (5b). Catholics, like other Christians, must not see their participation in Councils of Churches as the final goal of ecumenical activity, as though full Christian unity were to be achieved simply by joining a Council of Churches. The document, rather, envisions the Councils as an instrument, but not the unique instrument, which the Churches should employ in their search for unity. This is not to diminish the value of belonging to Councils of Churches, but rather to underline

their importance in the task of seeking the fullness of unity which Christ desired among his disciples. As the document later concludes: "Among the many forms of ecumenical cooperation, Councils of Churches and Christian Councils are not the only form, but they are certainly one of the more important" (*EC*, 6g). They play "an important role in ecumenical relations," and hence are to be taken seriously by all the Churches.

The document seeks to relieve some of the theological disquiet which some Catholics might have about joining a Council of Churches. Joining a Council in which the Catholic Church would find itself on equal footing with other bodies does "not diminish its faith about its uniqueness" (*EC*, 5b). The document cites the well-known statement of the Second Vatican Council that the unique Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church (*LG*, 8), and this uniqueness is not compromised by the Church taking part, on equal footing with other Churches, in a Council at the national or regional level.

The document on *Ecumenical Collaboration* underlines that Councils of Churches are not themselves Churches; nor do they have the responsibility of Churches to engage in conversations leading to full unity. The scope of the Councils of Churches is mainly in the practical realm, rather than in the dogmatic. In saying this, the Holy See does not forbid Councils of Churches to study together questions of "Faith and Order," and the document later notes that "it is normal that Councils should want to discuss and reflect upon the doctrinal bases of the practical project they undertake" (*EC*, 6h). Such discussions, it states, have "a deep importance in stimulating member Churches to a deeper understanding of the demands of unity willed by Christ and to facing deadlocks in a new way" (*EC*, 5c).

Nevertheless, it "is not the task of a Council to take the initiative in promoting formal doctrinal conversations between Churches. These belong to the immediate and bilateral contacts between the Churches." Thus, in joining a Council of Churches, Catholics need not fear that they will be expected to be drawn into technical dogmatic discussions for which they may feel they are not well prepared.

The domain of Councils of Churches is properly speaking that of practical collaboration, giving particular attention to social problems, such as housing, health, relief, etc. (*EC*, 5e, ii). At times, the Councils will feel called to make public statements on matters of common concern in areas of social justice, human development, public welfare, and personal or social morality. These may vary from broad statements of position to specific stands on concrete questions. They might examine a subject and point out its social and ethical ramifications; and they will often identify various approaches to treat problems. Even though such statements reflect the theo-



logical positions of the Churches, they are not to be "considered as official utterances" (*EC*, 5d, i) made in the name of the Churches.

In fact, as the document notes, the problematic nature of issuing joint statements is one that the member Churches of a Council must constantly keep in mind. It has given rise to much debate, tension and hard feelings in a number of Councils, and on rare occasions has led one or another member Church to withdraw from the Council. This does not mean that Councils should never make public statements, but that they should realize that full consensus is very difficult to achieve, and that sincere respect must be granted to minority views (*EC*, 5d, iii). All this is to say that in a Council of Churches the integrity of each member Church must be constantly considered, their individual positions honored, and polarization avoided.

The document points out that joining a Council of Churches is a serious undertaking; and Catholic bishops, if they decide to join an NCC, should not settle for a superficial participation, but should fully involve their local Church. It is not enough simply to send delegates, but Council participation should be integrated into the pastoral life and planning of the Catholic dioceses. For example, when the Catholic Church joins a Council, this must be accompanied by "a constant ecumenical education of Catholics concerning the implications of such participation" (*EC*, 5d).

In its "Pastoral and Practical Reflections for Local Ecumenical Action," in Chapter 6, the Document makes two further important points. Firstly, each Council of Churches is unique and must be designed according to the needs in each nation. Churches should not simply adopt models which were found to be successful elsewhere (*EC*, 6a); but they should, after reflecting together on the needs and challenges of the Churches in their region, create their own unique ecumenical response. The Holy See thus envisions a great deal of freedom for the Churches in each region to form a Council which would accurately reflect the actual ecumenical relationships "on the ground," and would enable the Churches to express their unity in realistic service to society.

Secondly, as valuable as Councils of Churches are as instruments to express the unity which exists among Christians, and to work toward fuller and deeper unity, the creation of new structures can never replace "the collaboration of Christians in prayer, reflection and action, based on common baptism and on a faith which on many essential points is also common" (*EC*, 6c). In other words, if the search for Christian unity is solely focused on structures, procedures and bureaucracy, but omits the essential *communion* that comes from Christians' praying together, reflecting on the Word of God in Scripture together, thinking through social problems together, and actually working together in various aspects of the Churches' life, the unity

which Councils seek to achieve will be minimal, and the renewal which Councils of Churches can bring to the whole Christian community will not be very profound.

The aforementioned 1975 document on ecumenical collaboration was the first official instruction given by the Holy See on the question of Roman Catholic membership in National and Regional Councils of Churches. It noted with satisfaction that the Catholic Church in many countries had decided to join NCCs, or to create new ecumenical associations in which the Catholic Church would take part. It pointed out possible problems that could arise, and how many of the divisive issues could be foreseen and crises avoided. The document mostly seems to want to reassure Catholics throughout the world that joining a Council of Churches can be an important step towards working for Christian unity, expressing the unity which already exists due to our common Baptism, and renewing the Churches in their commitment to serve God in Christ, and in doing so, be of service to a world reconciled to God.

Because of the increasing numbers of countries and regions where the Catholic Church had joined, and was participating in, Councils of Churches, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the World Council of Churches, within the framework of the Joint Working Group, met three times — in 1971, 1986, and 1993 — to reflect on issues connected with Roman Catholic participation in NCCs.

In a message to the 1993 consultation, held in Hong Kong, Cardinal Edward Cassidy, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, stressed a key aspect of the function of National Councils of Churches in the ecumenical search for unity. "National Councils of Churches," he stated, "as servants of unity play an important role in providing opportunities for strengthening the spirit of mutual understanding among member Churches."<sup>10</sup> Here the Cardinal is emphasizing the human dimension, the value of Councils for a personal growth in commitment through common action, to enrich one another by the distinctive elements of Christian life, which their particular traditions have preserved and emphasized, and to rediscover concretely their common faith in God by praying together in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the same year as the Hong Kong consultation, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity issued its definitive guidelines for Christian ecumenism, entitled the *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*. The 1993 Guidelines replaced the temporary *Ecumenical Directory*, which had been called for by the Second Vatican Council, and subsequently published in two parts, in 1967 and 1970. The 1993 *Directory*<sup>11</sup> treats questions of Roman Catholic participation in Councils of Churches in paragraphs 166-171.



Many of the instructions contained in the 1993 *Directory* repeat and amplify those already given in the 1975 document on *Ecumenical Collaboration*, but on some key points the *Directory* goes farther than the earlier document. This is particularly the case in *welcoming*, for the first time, Catholic participation in the Councils. The *EC* document treated the phenomenon of Catholic Churches joining NCCs and RCCs as a fact of life in the ecumenical movement, as an "important instrument" in the search for Christianity. The *Directory* goes beyond this to welcome positively this phenomenon in Church life as something to be desired. The document states: "Since it is desirable for the Catholic Church to find the proper expression for various levels of its relation with other Churches and ecclesial Communities, and since Councils of Churches and Christian Councils are among the more important forms of ecumenical co-operation, the growing contacts which the Catholic Church is having with Councils in many parts of the world are to be welcomed" (*DAP*, 167).

For the first time, the *Directory* clearly distinguishes (*DAP*, 166) between a "Council of Churches" (composed of Churches and responsible to the member Churches), and a "Christian Council" (composed of Churches, as well as of other Christian groups and organizations, such as Bible Societies or YMCAs.) This distinction reflects the general tendency in the years since the 1975 document to form more inclusive Christian Councils whose members would be not only Churches but also other forms of Christian association. This development reflects the recognition that in the effort to build Christian unity, other Christian groups and organizations often play a leading role, and should not be excluded from membership in the Councils, whose aim is to promote that unity.

The *Directory* does not recommend one form of association over the other, but wisely leaves that decision to the authorities of the local Church. These authorities, states the *Directory*, "will generally be the Synod of Eastern Catholic Churches, or the Episcopal Conference (except where there is only one diocese in a nation)" (*DAP*, 168). In preparing to take this decision, the Eastern Synods or Episcopal Conferences "should be *in touch with*<sup>12</sup> the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity." The careful phraseology of the *Directory* underlines that the authority for joining Councils rests with the local bishops through their Synod or Episcopal Conference, while, as in all matters affecting the universal Church, the local Churches should always communicate and consult with the Pontifical Council. What is involved is not a matter of "asking permission from Rome," but of acting in communion with the world-wide Catholic Church.

The *Directory* notes the considerations which must accompany the decision to take part in a Council of Churches or Christian Council. An important consideration is the pastoral *advisability* of joining a Council,

which means that local and national socio-political realities must be taken into consideration. Participation in the life of the Council must be compatible with the teaching of the Catholic Church, and must not blur Catholic self-understanding as to its uniqueness and specific identity (*DAP*, 169). In other words, there must be doctrinal clarity, especially in the area of ecclesiology, and ecumenical education provided for Church members. The Catholic Church should not impose its own ecclesiology on other member Churches, but respect their proper ecclesiological self-understanding. At the same time, the Catholic Church expects that its own theology of the nature of the Church will be understood and respected by its partners.

The *Directory* repeats the view of the 1975 document that Councils of Churches and Christian Councils do not contain within or among themselves the beginning of a new Church which could replace the communion that now exists in the Catholic Church. They must not proclaim themselves Churches, "nor claim an authority which would permit them to confer a ministry of Word or Sacrament." In fact, the concern that the Councils of Churches not be regarded as a new superchurch has been a constant preoccupation of member Churches since the first Councils of Churches appeared almost a century ago. The formation of Councils among Churches still divided from one another is but one instrument aimed at Christian unity, and it must be clearly distinguished from the praiseworthy effort to achieve structural and sacramental unity in the creation of united Churches.

The *Directory* notes the kind of considerations of which account must be taken before the Catholic Church should take a decision to join existing NCCs, or to take part in the creation of new associations. Examples of such considerations are the system of representation, voting rights, decision-making processes, manner of making public statements, and the degree of authority attributed to common statements (*DAP*, 169).

Finally, the *Directory* repeats the counsel given in the 1975 document, that joining a Council is a serious responsibility which should not be taken lightly. It implies that responsibilities are not fulfilled simply by becoming members in name. "The Catholic Church should be represented by well-qualified and committed persons," who are sincerely convinced of the importance of actively pursuing Christian unity, and who are clearly aware of the limits to which they can commit the Church without referring to the authorities who appointed them. The *Directory* stresses that the counsels given are not meant to discourage local Churches from joining Councils, but rather to ensure that membership in such Councils will be able to make a "more important and efficacious contribution to the ecumenical movement" (*DAP*, 171).

The continually increasing acceptance and encouragement by the Holy



See for Catholic participation in Councils of Churches since the time of the Second Vatican Council can only be explained as the result of a positive experience in observing the fruits of such ecumenical involvement. Most recently, in the 1995 document on ecumenical formation of Christians entitled *The Ecumenical Dimension in the Formation of Those Engaged in Pastoral Work*, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity lists information about Councils of Churches as one of the "important pastoral and practical matters which should not be omitted from ecumenical formation, especially that of seminarians."<sup>13</sup>

All this preparation set the groundwork for the discussion among Asian bishops at the 1998 Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops, (popularly known as "the Asian Synod"), in which the bishops overwhelmingly voted in favor of a *postulatum* to the Holy Father to encourage, in his post-Synodal exhortation, the episcopal conferences in Asia to enter into a process of consultation with leaders of other Churches to explore new forms of ecumenical association. This recommendation was reflected a year later in the above-mentioned Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, which the Holy Father promulgated in New Delhi, India, on 6 November 1999.<sup>14</sup>

Acting upon the Pope's recommendation in *Ecclesia in Asia*, the bishops representing the Episcopal Conference members of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences, at their Seventh Plenary Assembly held in Sampran, Thailand, in January, 2000, approved the proposal to hold an Asia-wide consultation on questions related to the participation of Bishops' Conferences in Asia in Councils of Churches and other forms of ecumenical association with other Christian Churches.

This consultation, called AMCU III (the third consultation of the Asian Movement for Christian Unity), to be held in January, 2001, is being jointly organized with the Christian Conference of Asia. The consultation will bring together representatives from each Episcopal Conference which is a member of FABC, and representatives of CCA member Churches and leaders of NCCs in Asia.

The matters for discussion are many. There exists in the world a wide variety of ecumenical associations. Each has its own by-laws and its own criteria for membership. There are, as noted above, Councils of Churches with membership limited strictly to "Churches," as well as the broader-based "Christian Councils." In some countries, the Catholic Church has simply joined the existing National Council of Churches, as was done in Taiwan. Elsewhere, the Catholic Church has deliberated with other Churches to create an entirely new association that would accurately reflect ecumenical relations at this time. This is the experience of the Churches in Australia (as is described in David Gill's article in this issue of *Jeevadhara*).<sup>15</sup> In yet

other countries, the Catholic Church, while not joining the National Council of Churches, has entered into full membership in a more inclusive association, as was done in Malaysia by Catholic Church participation in the Christian Federation of Malaysia.

A serious matter for discussion concerns the spiritual values to be gained by joining a Council of Churches, or by creating a new ecumenical association. How can individual Churches benefit by their association with other Churches? What are the specific benefits to be gained by coming to know better other Churches *as Churches*, by praying together regularly, by addressing together the social problems of their countries, by taking common stands and making common statements on ethical issues, and by facing the mutual challenges that the Churches will inevitably pose to each other through an ongoing association? What insights can be gained by the Churches in Asia from the experiences, both positive and negative, of other parts of the world where the Catholic Church has joined Councils of Churches?

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have purposely not addressed questions regarding the mission of Councils of Churches, their theological and spiritual bases, or the sociological factors that underlie the formation of Councils or the decision to join them. These aspects of the question are being competently handled in other articles of this same issue of *Jeevadhara*. I have tried to limit myself to presenting a history of Catholic participation in these Councils.

However, I hope that my personal conviction of the value of participation in Councils of Churches to pursue the Spirit-driven goal of Christian unity has become clear in this presentation. Councils of Churches are not the goal or the last word in the ecumenical search for the full unity among his disciples for which Christ prayed at the Last Supper. They are merely a tool, an instrument, but an important and effective one for following the Spirit's guidance toward full unity. The well-known Canadian theologian, Fr. Tillard, sums up this gracefilled instrumentality of Councils of Churches in an article based on a talk he gave in Hong Kong in 1993:

A Council of Churches makes a "loving dialogue" possible. By breaking the isolation and bringing about knowledge of each other, ecumenical encounter slowly erodes distrust, prejudices and traditional hatreds. While each Church doubtless begins by hoping to impose its own views and confessional ambitions on the others, we find that among the members something gradually comes into being which triumphs over the interests and claims of each group.



It is in learning to love one another, in the knowledge that diversities exist and in respect for them, that we gradually learn the unity that God wants.<sup>16</sup>

Jesuit Curia  
C.P. 6139 Roma-Prati,  
Italy

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "Councils of Churches: Local, National, Regional," *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva: WCC, 1991.
- <sup>2</sup> Ecumenical Patriarchate, "Three Orthodox Contributions to the Common Understanding and Vision Process," *Orthodox Reflections on the Way to Harare*, Geneva: WCC, 1998.
- <sup>3</sup> "The Ecumenical Patriarchate: A brief note on its history and its role in the world today," in *Historical Notes on the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople*, www.patriarchate.org/.
- <sup>4</sup> Christian Conference of Asia, Directory 1996, Hong Kong: 1996, p.5. The amended constitution is published in *The Constitution of the Christian Conference of Asia*, Hong Kong, 1995.
- <sup>5</sup> Second Vatican Council, "Decree on Ecumenism," *The Basic Sixteen Documents: Vatican Council II*, Dublin: 1995, p. 519.
- <sup>6</sup> Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity Information Service, "Consultation on Christian Councils, Geneva, June 28," July 7, 1971: 15/19-20.
- <sup>7</sup> P.C. for Promoting Christian Unity Information Service, "Councils of Churches with Catholic Membership," January 1976: 31/13-15.
- <sup>8</sup> P.C. for Promoting Christian Unity, *Ecumenical Collaboration at the Regional, National and Local Levels* (Vatican City, 1975). Unlike most Vatican documents, this one (henceforth, *EC*) is not published with consecutively numbered paragraphs, but in outline form, with chapters in Roman numerals, followed by subsections a) b) c), subdivided again into headings i) ii) iii).
- <sup>9</sup> The italics are in the originally text.
- <sup>10</sup> Edward Cardinal Cassidy, "Message to Participants at the Third International Consultation on National Councils of Churches (NCCs)," Hong Kong, 10 February 1993, p. 4.
- <sup>11</sup> P.C. for Promoting Christian Unity, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, Vatican City: 1993. Henceforth, *DAP*.
- <sup>12</sup> Italics mine.
- <sup>13</sup> P.C. for Promoting Christian Unity, *The Ecumenical Dimension in the Formation of Those Engaged in Pastoral Work*, Vatican: 1995, par. 29.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ecclesia in Asia*, 30.
- <sup>15</sup> Cf. David Gill, "New Ecumenical Structures: an Australian Experiment," *Jeevadhara*, July, 2000, pp. 368 - 375.
- <sup>16</sup> J.M. Tillard, O.P., "The Mission of the Councils of Churches," *The Ecumenical Review*, 45/3, July, 1993, p. 280.

## II. The Mission of Councils of Churches

by

J.M.R. TILLARD, O.P.

*[The author deals with the "spirituality" of Councils of Churches. He explains the deeply Christian reasons for joining a Council of Churches, and the real spiritual benefits that can accrue. "Councils of Churches have a sacramental basis."]\**

I have been asked to expand in this paper on a presentation I made ten years ago on the nature of united churches.<sup>1</sup> I shall thus focus my reflection on the mission of councils of churches. At a time when the World Council of Churches is trying to rediscover its calling after the unusual Canberra assembly, and when icy winds are blowing on the ecumenical movement, this theme is an important one.<sup>2</sup>

It seems clear to me that the future of the unity of God's church will increasingly be played out in the thick of human life, where the followers of Christ strive to implant the divine gift of reconciliation in the wounded body of humanity. For that is what is at stake. One of the most serious consequences of the Canberra assembly is that, in bringing into the open the conflict between missionary and "missionarized" churches—the old forms of Christianity and the new churches of the South which do not want to break wholly with the old traditional religions of their peoples—it created the impression that the church is an accessory to the rupture which wounds the world, and that it has even made it worse. The mission of councils of churches is specifically to heal this rupture by re-establishing communion—concretely—in those spheres where human beings live out their destiny.

### The Servant Church

We must begin by recalling the ecclesiological status of councils of churches. As it happens, there is considerable confusion about this. Of course, everyone accepts that a council of churches is neither a united church, nor even a confederation of churches. The important definitions in the 1950 Toronto statement, which forbids the World Council of Churches to regard itself as a super-church taking decisions on behalf of the member churches, apply.

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By its very nature every council of churches, global or local, is an organization for *diakonia*, for service. Its ecclesial status derives from that. Automatically it is part of the church which "serves" God's plan, the "servant" church.

This is where the problems start. They arise from the fact that for some decades the idea of service (*diakonia*) has been used in ecumenical circles without any effort to give it a genuine ecclesiological basis. Service is seen as a Gospel value which *follows from* the nature of the church, as "the *consequence* of what the church is," as "the *manifestation* of ecclesial existence," as the "supreme *ecclesial activity*." But such ideas of *diakonia* are radically inadequate. In fact, *diakonia* belongs to the very *esse* of the church. It is one of the elements which make the church a *koinonia*, and weave the fabric of its existence.<sup>3</sup> *Diakonia* creates the church before making it visible, and makes the church visible by creating it.

In ecumenical discussions the term "service" often has the meaning which civil organizations attach to it (service to the Third World, service to refugees, etc.), having lost the Christological and ecclesiological meaning given to it by the church fathers and pioneers of the ecumenical movement. That meaning, which comes from Scripture, is theological, and involves not only charity but faith, which is inseparable from charity. This is at the heart of a sound theology of councils of churches and united churches.

In the New Testament *diakonia* appears as that which defines the reality of Jesus Christ, who was sent by the Father to "serve," to minister to his plan of salvation.<sup>4</sup> It is also what defines the apostolic mission: the apostles are those who are sent (*elohim*), in whom is manifest the "service" of the *mysterion*. *Diakonia* is what defines the Christian community presented in the "summaries" in the Acts of the Apostles (2:42-47; 4:32-37; 5:12-16) as wholly bound up in a communion, of which mutual *diakonia*—both spiritually and on the material plane—constitutes one of the essential bonds. Without "service," Jesus Christ is no longer the person whose nature was discerned by the apostolic faith; the apostolic mission is transformed into a vague commission to conduct religious propaganda; and the church of God becomes one religion among others, entirely focussed on the believer's personal intimacy with God. Even the key terms of the Christian faith—*agape*, *koinonia*—lose their meaning, since their definition includes *diakonia* as one of its elements.

This *diakonia* has two objects, one of which is subordinate to the other, and indeed has its source in that very subordination. They are: God and the work of God. I do not say "God and the world" or "God and humanity" or "God and creation" or "God and the others," but "God and the work of God." This reference to God gives Christian *diakonia* its special character

among all the "services" which human solidarity and generosity continue to generate. Here we have a diakonia which consists of Christians sharing in God's activity of coming to the aid of his work of creation in Jesus Christ, and with the power of the Spirit. But this divine activity — and, in its wake, the Christian action which participates in it — aims at the same time at the success of the plan for creation (both in this and in the other world), and the glory of the Father. No one perceived this better than Irenaeus, at the threshold of the patristic period: Jesus Christ is at the center of creation and salvation.

Since the church of God is, in the Spirit, the body of Christ, not only "born of the flesh," but (as the author of the Epistle to Diognetus so well showed) fully incarnate in society till the day of the Lord, it is — *in Christo* — embedded in the diakonia of Christ. It is born out of and in that diakonia. If the church is the "servant" of the work of God, it is so by being universally itself, and — even in this calling as "servant" — by being the work of God, the fruit of the salvation effected in Jesus the Servant. Augustine would say that the church is taken from the rib of Christ dying on the cross, as he acted as the servant of the Father's plan. The church is a new Eve, who is "flesh of his flesh, bone of his bones," his bride and partner for the propagation of the diakonia of the Gospel of God (*euaggelion tou theou*). The supreme grace God has bestowed on the church is to include it in the communion with the servant Christ, and thus associate it eternally with the glorification of the Father in Christ the Lord.

Only in unity can the church truly be that "servant." There are two main reasons for this, closely linked to the two objects of the church's "service": God and the work of God.

1. Clearly, the work of God revolves around what Scripture calls *reconciliation*. This must be understood in the widest sense. It is not simply a matter of bringing together the broken fragments of a humanity, which turns what ought to be an enriching diversity (of races, languages, cultures and functions) into a wall of division, and often hatred. Nor is it enough to add to this task the restoration of harmonious relations between humanity and nature (water, forests, the animal creation, the earth, the air), which, despite the Psalmist's song, is constantly ruined by a misconceived and often deviant social development. The walls have to be broken down and true relations re-established with the cosmos, but by communicating to human beings (and in a way to nature itself) the communion with God which, as the writer of Ephesians has shown us, is connected with the cross.

But, in the presence of God, how can we communicate reconciliation in the name of Christ while we are unreconciled Christians? How can we even be credible prophets of that reconciliation when we show ourselves to



the world as divided and torn, while confessing Christ and his power to unite? The diakonia of the work of God calls for the unity, and thus the reconciliation, of the "servant" community.

2. Moreover, the inmost will of Christ Jesus is that the Father should be glorified *in* and *by* the service of reconciliation. We must be careful not to interpret John 17:20-24 in a purely pragmatic way, as is often done. In the Johannine gospel the Son does not call for the unity of the disciples solely in order to remove every hindrance to the spread of salvation among human beings. He also desires this unity to show the power which the Son has from the Father alone, the Father who has communicated it to him — a power that can achieve what no worldly power can effect, the gathering together of the children of God in unity. Recognition of this "work of God" (cf. John 5:36; 10:36-38) shines out in the glorification of the Father. And serving the glory of the Father is central in the Johannine tradition. The Father shows who he is through the unity of the disciples. Just as much as the diakonia of salvation, this kind of diakonia of glory — serving his glory in this way — calls for unity.

Thus, it is essential to state that ecclesial diakonia cannot be achieved simply by sharing, mutual aid, identifying with poverty and the needs of the poor, striving for human rights, combating all forms of racism, commitment to transforming the world. It cannot even be achieved by the mere "service" of faith and evangelizing mission which are its supreme activities. To all these activities ecclesial diakonia adds a reference to *unity in the "service" of God* as an essential qualifier.

In ecclesial diakonia, unity and the "service" of God are regarded as constitutive elements. They make diakonia what it is precisely, because it belongs to the depths, the very nature, the *esse* of the church of God, which is communion and service, because the church is his possession — because it is the work of God, who has bought it through the blood of the Son (Acts 20:28).

### **Councils of Churches as Servants of Unity**

We are now in a position to evaluate ecclesialogically the mission of councils of churches as "servants" of unity.

The first point to stress is that, although a council is not a united church but a group of churches, in which each keeps its full independence, a church entering a council does so with its whole being. It does not join solely with the aim of mutual aid in this or that church activity or aspect of life lived according to the Gospel. It does so with the purpose of a co-operation that aims both at the total spiritual well-being of the groups concerned, and their

common desire to be genuine "servants" of the work of God in that part of the world where they are set. Thus it seeks, inseparably, the good of fraternal charity among groups of baptized Christians, and solidarity in the exercise of what Charles Foucauld called "universal fellowship," which takes in the whole human family.

Thus, a council of churches goes right to the heart of the dynamic of unity through mutual diakonia, which is itself directed towards unity in the service of God, as we have described it. In other words, by seeking (to an extent which varies according to circumstances) to make diakonia a reality which represents communion—an essential dimension of the church of God—every council of churches is an agent for the healing of division, thus sharing in the work of the Spirit, welding koinonia together once again. It does so in the radiant light of baptism, awaiting the moment when everyone can celebrate the eucharist together.

This point must be pressed home, for it is essential. Councils of churches have a sacramental basis. It would be a very serious mistake to think of them simply as associations founded on mutual good will, or on the recognition of the need for organization or greater efficiency. They are the fruit of the Spirit, who keeps the churches in the initial dynamic of baptism which incorporated them into Christ.

Of course, division means that the body of Christ is wounded. Augustine said that Christ's tunic which the soldiers respected has been torn. The wound will not be healed, nor the tear repaired, till the day when reconciled Christian communities can sit down at the Lord's table and partake of the great banquet of reconciliation. No longer will they find themselves opposed to each other and rivals in daily living.

Nevertheless, to talk about a wound is not to talk about the destruction of the body. Catholic tradition affirms, on the basis of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, that the "character" imprinted by baptism sets the "mark" of Christ, the Head (*kephale*) of the body, on all the baptized. This ineradicable stamp of God's faithfulness remains as the constant means of "welding" each Christian and congregation to the head of the church.<sup>5</sup> The breach of koinonia among Christian communities does violence to this fundamental link each has with Christ, but it does not destroy it. This tie is, as it were, a loom on which the diakonia—(in the exact sense defined above) in which the churches become involved when they form a council—weaves sinews of real "ecclesial" *communion* among them.

The sinews thus woven are of two kinds. Several—which I will only refer to generally, as I have dealt with them at length elsewhere—are, as it were, traceable below the surface in common action and common witness.



But it is important to dwell on two of them because of their more specific relation to the core of Christian revelation — and because they are often forgotten.

1. Despite their divisions, the churches, when united in a council, confess and witness together to the existence of the living God whom Scripture presents to us as indivisibly Creator and Savior. Churches of all confessions are, moreover, unanimous in affirming that faith in this one God can reveal the meaning of human destiny, and thus found it on hope in the midst of a world where the powers of death seem indestructible.

After the unrealistic enthusiasm of some for "progress," we are increasingly coming to understand that our essential mission involves us at this level of *meaning*. Much more, we know that it is in this meaning of the human vocation that the Gospel-concern for the dignity of the person is rooted, and that commitment to the poor, the marginalized, the "un-happy," flows from it. But this meaning refers us to God.

In our societies, councils of churches are the contemporary expression of one of the fundamental *elementa* of the *ecclesia Dei*: to be the "witness to God" and "God's defender," the apostle of the "dignity of the individual who is created in the image and likeness of the living God." I am increasingly convinced that on this point — which we have been tempted to relegate to the secondary level — councils of churches have a specific mission. It is what we may call their "*doxological* communion." Beyond the divisions, they make real the unanimity of all the baptized in the proclamation of their faith in God, the foundation of unity. For it does seem that there is unanimity here. And its object is something fundamental.

2. To "*doxological*" communion — which is an essential element of the communion of grace — we must add communion in the modesty of human aspirations. By this I simply mean to express a conviction running through the whole Christian tradition since the days of the Apostles. Christ's followers have to live happily in this world, but with a happiness which numbers among its sources a sober, moderate, temperate, reverent, and sometimes even ascetic,<sup>6</sup> use of the good things of creation. There is certainly no question of refusing to see in them a gift of God to humanity. That would be to contradict Scripture itself. But we have to understand this gift, and use it in terms of what the Gospel reveals of the calling of human beings. The quest for unlimited wealth and the endeavor to dominate nature — with the satisfaction of our desires as the only criterion — are radically incompatible with the Gospel.

The contemporary environmental crisis restores to the demands of Christian ethics the dimension which goes beyond narrow individual con-

cerns. It puts them right back into the context of the work of God, whose essential place in the calling of the church—to be a steward, a caretaker, not an overlord—we have indicated above. But the different ecclesial confessions—despite the emphases analyzed by Max Weber—continue to share the same fundamental outlook on what the Tradition perceives of the modesty of human aspirations. Human monarchies are to be located at the level of grace. All Christian confessions resist a Promethean interpretation of the calling to be "the image of God." They censure the megalomania of desire. The Beatitudes remain the inspiration for their moral code.

Thus, when a council of churches deliberately seeks to heed this vision of the human calling in its social attitudes, or more broadly in its reminders to the member churches, it is realizing one of the *elementa ecclesiae*, that of communion. For the church of God is a union between the call addressed in Jesus Christ and the response of a community which agrees to proclaim that call. And this includes conversion to what Augustine would call "the model of the Beatitudes."

If the churches once proclaim "with one heart and one soul" the call of God to the kind of humanity in which his work reaches its climax, then an essential bond of the *koinonia* of grace will already be implanted among them. They will then be the source of unity through their *diakonia*.

These two sinews of unity—doxology and modesty—are not the only ones which common action and common witness create. One could also observe that the mutual aid churches give each other in a council displays one of the characteristics of unity highlighted in the "summaries" of the Acts of the Apostles.<sup>7</sup> Or one could describe the unifying power of the common *martyria* of certain councils of churches confronted by regimes that flout human dignity. But for our reflection here, it will be more useful to focus not on the unity that has already been achieved, but on the prophetic preparation for the full canonical communion<sup>8</sup> of the churches, when they refuse to allow themselves a clear conscience in face of the tragic fact of their division.

### **Receiving the Gospel Afresh**

The councils of churches must be seen by their members themselves as a crucible in which, in the grace of the Spirit, God prepares in one place or another the visible and canonical communion of all those communities which are faithful to his Son Jesus Christ. But that requires the churches involved to have a common will to look for much more in their unity than only a support that allows them to be content with a situation that does violence to the Gospel. They have to realize that unless its aim is visible communion in the eucharistic mystery, a council of churches runs the risk of turning into



something similar to de Gaulle's description of the Vichy government: an institution whose sole result is "to make the shame of defeat acceptable"; which, he used to add, is "a new shame" in itself.

In the light of this, the most important role of a council of churches which is firmly resolved to conquer division and not simply to handle it well is, as I see it, to *receive the Gospel afresh*. And that is clearly a spiritual task.

This reception calls for two things. On the one hand, the council must appear to the churches concerned as what it actually is: a focus of awareness reminding us of the impossibility of proclaiming the Gospel of God in all its truth, so long as divisions remain. The Gospel is proclaimed by its fruits, just as much as by the exact meaning of the statements which constitute it, by the truth of life, just as much as by the truth of words. The two are radically inseparable. At the beginning of this reflection I asked how we are to present ourselves, without blushing, as witnesses to the truth of the Gospel of reconciliation, when we are divided in life and faith in the very name of that Gospel? A council must display these two aspects of the truth.

We must go even further. For it is not only the proclamation of the Gospel that finds itself compromised by division. The very reality of life in the Gospel is wounded. Every time a community — even Catholic, Orthodox or Anglican — celebrates the eucharist, that celebration bears the marks of a wound. Christians of other churches — with whom bonds of deep communion exist, and above all, within the council that gathers them together, and which also belong to Christ — are not present. Thus, something does not ring true when the congregation proclaims in faith that it is celebrating the sacrament not only of *their* unity but of *unity*. Let it be said that there must be no concealing or suppressing this wound. On the contrary, its tragic dimension has to be made evident, and the Gospel of reconciliation must be received afresh at this point of burning shame.

This *re-reception* of the Gospel of reconciliation should not be limited to specific events, nor even to the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. It must permeate the whole life of the churches that are members of the council. A difficult task! But if those responsible make it their concern, Christian communities are not closed to the question of unity. They are moving imperceptibly from "Why are we divided?" to "What is to be done if we are to be reconciled?" These two questions are of prime importance.

This is where we see the second requirement which the re-reception of the Gospel of reconciliation imposes on any council of churches. A council's task is to make room in the communities represented in it for a "spiritual space," in which the unity God desires may be received.<sup>9</sup> It is deeply to be

regretted that the great intuition of spiritual ecumenism — of which Fr. Couturier was one of the pioneers — has lost its impact, replaced in the minds of many by a bureaucratic ecumenism in which more room is allocated to files than to contemplation of God's plan. Ecumenism is too rarely seen in its "spiritual" colors.

This "spiritual space" has nothing to do with the exalted enthusiasm of certain movements in which emotion swallows up faith. It is made up primarily of prayer, of intercession. But the purpose of this is not limited to a general petition addressed to God, who by his Spirit can change people's hearts. It also includes — as we await a common eucharist — the practical concerns of congregation. In the days when spiritual ecumenism was taking off, it used to happen that at its Sunday eucharist a Catholic parish would pray for the needs of the neighboring Anglican parish, and vice versa. Or a rather wealthy Anglican parish might give a large sum for building a convent for Catholic contemplative nuns, with nothing in return except concerned prayerful intercession. Alas, that now seems long ago and far away!

But prayer is not the only thing. A council of churches is also one of the privileged instruments for experiencing the "spiritual space" that is our concern here. What I have in mind is, of course, "poverty" in face of the Gospel. At a time when confessionalisms are coming to life again, it is essential to ensure that the churches do not see themselves as groups jealous of their confessional identities, but can recognize in "the other" a word of God which challenges, disturbs, perturbs them, and in the end leads them to ask questions about themselves. Thus each church becomes for the other churches of the council the "reminder," so to speak, of the Gospel dimension which gives that church its character; and in its turn it can see in the other churches features of the Gospel which assist it to become aware of its own limitations and poverty. The council of churches is an instrument of the Spirit to break down the self-sufficiency of the churches.

This is particularly important in the case of churches with a long tradition, which are always tempted to shut themselves up within the awareness — which often bears little relation to the Gospel — of their glorious heritage. The Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church not only need each other, but together need the fraternal diakonia of the other churches in order to recognize realistically the hardenings, changes of emphasis, and excrescences, which their long history has made unavoidable. Councils can evoke a self-examination of this kind.

An emphasis on "spiritual space" as one of the main fruits of councils of churches clearly implies a profound change in the way their identity is understood — which is clearly to be seen in several councils. Many in fact seem to see themselves first and foremost as bureaucratic institutions, like



the World Council in Geneva on a reduced scale.

That is hardly in tune with the nature of the church itself. Even as an institutional reality, the church is never cut off from an explicit and determinative reference to the experience of grace. Its structures are always related to communion in the gift of the Spirit of God. That is the purpose which permeates them. To reduce councils of churches to their bureaucratic structure not only amounts to turning them (so to speak) into cysts on the body of the church, but gradually neutralizes their strictly ecumenical calling, which is always bound up with the Spirit.

That calling consists, as I have said, in displaying the unity that is already present and preparing for full communion. But *koinonia* can only be displayed and prepared for in explicit, experienced recourse to the grace of the Spirit. Words are no longer enough. Without dismissing the role of bureaucracy — which councils of churches clearly need and without which they would soon be going round in circles — they will lose any impact, unless they present themselves to the faithful to a greater extent as charismatic institutions (in the primary sense of the term), explicitly placing themselves in the great charisma of the restoration of the communion of grace. Choking under their structures, the churches are thirsty for the Holy Spirit.

To talk about a "charismatic institution" is by implication to refer to *caritas*, love. Going back to the fine formula which more or less defined the relations between Paul VI and Athenagoras I, we may say that a council of churches makes "loving dialogue" possible. This also links up with the experience to which most of those closely involved in the ecumenical task bear witness. By breaking the isolation and bringing about knowledge of each other, ecumenical encounter slowly erodes distrust, prejudices and traditional hatreds. While each church doubtless begins by hoping to impose its own views and confessional ambitions on the others, we find that among the members something gradually comes into being which triumphs over the interests and claims of each group. Contrary to some ivory-tower thinkers, in the ecumenical field *caritas* is not at the outcome, but at the very heart of what has to be achieved. It is in learning to love one another, in the knowledge that diversities exist and in respect for them, that we gradually learn the unity that God wants.

There is no denying that in the field many walls of suspicion have already been broken down. "The other" is no longer the enemy we shun. Nevertheless, we must be realistic. On the one hand, the churches are increasingly fearful of any serious questioning of their own confessional identity; and this is giving rise to tensions and making new reasons for distrust appear. On the other hand — and this became clear in Canberra — the collapse of the walls built up between the churches has created a climate of

indifference, far more than a genuine Gospel *caritas* among the churches. Declarations of solidarity which are often purely verbal follow aggressive statements which express the real attitudes. And in this sphere councils of churches undoubtedly have a specific mission in the field. Their experience of *caritas*, overcoming their initial fears, cannot remain the prerogative of the delegates alone. It must enter into the churches at every level, in order to transform indifference there at least into interest in the other churches and concern for their fate. Here newsletters are not enough. There has to be a pastoral care of unity.

### Pastoral Care of Unity

I have deliberately avoided this expression "pastoral care of unity" up to this point. What it means in this context can only be understood in the light of further study of the nature of "spiritual space," and a criticism of the excessive bureaucratizing of ecumenical institutions, which conceals and distorts the dynamisms of rediscovered love.

Given where we are at present, if the member churches of councils want faithfully to conserve the Spirit's call to communion, they must look on their presence in these councils as an essential form of their own *cura animarum*, cure of souls. Consequently, councils of churches *themselves* must promote a pastoral care of unity.<sup>10</sup> They can no longer rest content with organizing "tactics for unity" — tidying up inter-church relations.

Without this *common* pastoral care of unity, in fact — and here I can only remind you of a few of its fundamental features — "ordinary members" of the actual congregations "at the base" will never be linked with what is going on "at the top: in the council itself, in the official dialogue commissions, in the meetings of officials at the highest level."<sup>11</sup> Councils of churches must *themselves* be the promoters and guides for this essential pastoral care of unity, not intervening as *councils* in the life of each church, but nevertheless exercising a strong oversight (*episkope*).

First among the laws of such a common pastoral care of unity is an imperative made all the more necessary by the current recrudescence of confessionalisms. In the light of the re-reception of the Gospel, we must learn in all "poverty" to get beyond divisive confessional differences, though without drifting into a vague and specious unanimity for the sake of unanimity. In other words, church members must be taught to see a Gospel value in the doctrinal features of the "other" church, even if it is possible at the same time to show why one's own tradition is uncomfortable with how that value is interpreted in the "other" church.



Clearly, there is no question here of a pastoral care which offers a voluntarist way of achieving communion: uniting because we would like to at any price, even if it means being casual about doctrinal foundations. On the contrary, we are seeking to base unity on the communion of faith, which makes a common re-reception of the Gospel possible. To that end, every effort is made to bring out the substantial points of agreement, from which the points of divergence can be discussed and re-evaluated. Instead of approaching the "other" church head on, in terms of where it is different and what breaks communion with it, we approach it from the positive standpoint of what we have in common, and what, despite everything, sustains a communion of grace, which is often very profound.<sup>12</sup> We then discover that what unites us carries the day over what divides us. The experience of councils of churches is clearly ideal material for such a discovery. It is, in fact, their daily bread.

This discovery, with the accompanying well-known tension between inclusion and exclusion — "inside-ness" and "outside-ness" — must lead us to praise the faithfulness of God.

By definition, of course, a council of churches *includes* all the churches which are members. That is not where the problem lies. But all churches, not just those with a long tradition, have certain standards. They exclude from their communion anyone who does not accept their "confession of faith" (Westminster, La Rochelle, Augsburg), their distinctive ritual (*believers'* baptism), their dogma (Roman primacy), their structure (the episcopate). Since each is tempted to consider itself (whatever it says) at least as the community that is most faithful to what Christ desired, this confessional exclusiveness will inevitably (in its own eyes) cause some uncertainty regarding the inclusion of those it excludes in the "church of God according to the Gospel."

Unlike the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, which reserve to themselves the character of churches, Protestants will generally agree that all communities of baptized persons have a right to be called a church. Even so, the churches of those "excluded" from their confession are (to borrow an expression from an English theologian's description of Anglican comprehensiveness) accepted more out of evangelical fair play than theological conviction.

The council of churches is the ecclesial body which is capable of guiding Christians to a lucid review of these traditional views of ecclesial inclusion and exclusion. Because a council of churches is not a united church — i.e., the outcome of a decision for canonical communion — but an association of churches retaining their full identity, it enables us to check how in terms of the life of grace the frontiers between churches are open and pen-

ettable. This or that Anglican congregation with an evangelical tradition feels closer—in its prayer, view of mission and approach to the faith—to its neighboring Roman Catholic congregation, with which it is not in canonical communion. This or that Catholic prayer group would rather turn to a Methodist minister with whom it is not in canonical communion to lead its meetings than to the Catholic priest appointed for the purpose by the bishop. This or that group of Orthodox academics even goes so far as to ask a "Uniate" priest, with whom they are not in communion, to help them in their understanding of the faith, rather than ask for that help from an Orthodox priest. The communion of grace and canonical communion overlap less and less. On the level of grace, Augustine's realistic observation is being confirmed more and more: there are those who are inside but are from outside, and there are those who are outside but are from inside.<sup>13</sup>

Here we have a phenomenon which is significant for unity. If unity is a work of the grace of the Spirit, the porosity of frontiers and the communion this prompts can hardly be foreign to the plan of Providence. In that indispensable *common* pastoral care for unity it would seem to be the responsibility of the councils of churches to highlight the fundamental difference between a communion of grace and canonical communion. First and foremost, a council of churches has the responsibility of showing at the highest level that a canonical communion which does not blossom into a communion of grace would be vain, because marred in its nature from the start.

One of the functions of the council of churches, therefore, consists in broadening the celebrated Lund Principle. It is not enough to *do everything together* that we can do together. We must also *be everything together* that we can be together—always provided that we do not pretend there really is canonical communion, and that we do not act "as if" it already existed.

This leads us to the final law on common pastoral care for unity, which it is appropriate to explicate a little. It is the law of "cautious wisdom." We may state it thus: "What matters is that the canonical communion at which the council of churches is aiming should be effected *in the proper way* so that it will be genuine, not so that it may be *implemented quickly*."

One could say much about this law of "cautious wisdom." Clearly, if the communion of grace did not exist, this law would result in an ecumenical desert, and its outcome would be total discouragement, or even despair. The various phases of BEM, the drama of Orthodox-Roman Catholic relations, the history of the "reception" of ARCIC, the atmosphere at the Canberra assembly show us that canonical unity is not for tomorrow. The churches are no longer ready—or are not ready—to take the decisive step, of what-



ever kind it may be, which would unite them in a single communion, celebrating a single eucharist, after which their members would truly be one body in everyday life, mission and worship. But we have seen that the communion of grace sustained by the Spirit of God is deep and wide.

There is no ecumenical desert. Councils of churches can build their common pastoral care for unity on the foundation of the communion of grace, preparing for canonical communion, or even resigning themselves to some kind of "flexible federation of churches," resting content with "accepting each other just as they are." Besides, is it really courageous to agree to act as if canonical communion had already been attained? I am among those who have never been convinced by certain practices of intercommunion; this whole study shows why. The visible unity of Christians is at the core of God's plan. Even if from the start, it has constantly seemed like a difficult program which challenges hope, it would be cowardice to abandon it. Who knows whether God is not looking for this patience from the churches as a sign of their faith? If councils of churches are careful to foster that patience, and do not allow it to become simply waiting in idleness, then they will really be "servants" of the church of God for the glory of the Father and the success of his work. That is their greatness and their need.

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I was asked to present a theological reflection on the mission of councils of churches, as this is required to take shape in today's context. I hope that these few reflections will be of service, if only to elicit reactions. It was at least necessary, however, to make a call for reform and for that purpose to examine the intuition of those who have been pursuing ecumenism for the last three decades. The regional or national councils of churches must fully claim the place that is properly theirs. The future of communion depends in large measure on them. Today they must renew the ties with their sacramental basis and their "pastoral" calling. They must move from the bureaucratic phase to the charismatic.

#### FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> J.M.R. Tillard, "An Ecclesiological Assessment of United Churches," in *United Churches and the Christian World Communions*, Faith and Order paper 118, Geneva, WCC, 1983, pp. 57-67.
- <sup>2</sup> See my short article in *The Tablet*, 1992, pp. 1194-97.
- <sup>3</sup> This is clear in the New Testament from the "summaries" in Acts, the Johannine vision of the bond between Jesus and "disciples," Paul's rulings on the collection for the poor in Jerusalem, and Luke's view of the ministry.

- <sup>4</sup> Thus Luke 22:26 (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45). This is at the core of the theology of the "Servant" (*doulos, pais*) which is undoubtedly one of the earliest christologies. See J.M.D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and Jude*, London, 1969, pp. 30, 75, 126.
- <sup>5</sup> See Augustine, *De Baptismo* I, 4, 5. Augustine speaks of an imprinted sign (III, 19, 25).
- <sup>6</sup> Each of these adjectives corresponds to one of the emphases in traditional paraenesis.
- <sup>7</sup> These "summaries" communicate an ideal and idealized description of the community that comes into existence at Pentecost.
- <sup>8</sup> On canonical communion see J.M.R. Tillard, "Reception-Communion," in *One in Christ*, XXVIII, 1992.
- <sup>9</sup> Here the word "reception" has the strong sense which current ecclesiological enquiry has restored to it.
- <sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note that the new code of canon law in the Roman Catholic Church calls on all bishops to make ecumenism one of their tasks (thus canons 755 §1, 825 §2. 844 §1-5).
- <sup>11</sup> The way BEM, for example, or the final report of *ARCIC*, were communicated to the parishes should be looked at closely with this in mind.
- <sup>12</sup> This was the method of *ARCIC-I*, which *ARCIC-II* took up again.
- <sup>13</sup> *Sermo* 354, *PL* 38, 1564.

### III. A Model. The Roman Catholic Church of Australia and the National Council of Churches of Australia

#### PART I: AN HISTORIC STEP FOR THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Roman Catholic Church is to become a founding member of the National Council of Churches in Australia. This new national ecumenical body will come into existence in 1994 and will succeed the present Australian Council of Churches.

This step has been in the planning for four years. In 1988 the Australian Council of Churches invited non-member churches to consider a more comprehensive national body. The Roman Catholic Church took up the invitation. A Working Party was formed in 1989. It has now produced a Charter and Constitution of the new body.

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, meeting in Sydney on 17 July, voted "*that this Conference of Bishops agrees that the Catholic Church be a foundation member of the National Council of Churches in Australia.*" The Catholic Church comprises the 28 archdioceses and dioceses of the Latin rite, the Military Ordinariate and the Maronite, Melchite and Ukrainian dioceses of the Eastern rite.

The objectives of the new body include:

- encouraging member churches to develop their existing relationships;
- enabling member churches to give prophetic leadership to each other and the community;



- addressing moral issues; and
- acting in solidarity with Aboriginal and Islander people.

The new body will promote relationship with similar bodies in Asia and the Pacific and with people of other living faiths.

Bishop Bede Heather, Chairman of the Bishops Committee for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, said in regard to the new body, "*It is not the final step before reunion. But it will bring us into the right relationship with other churches that seek with us the unity willed by Christ. We shall have the chance to meet regularly as brothers and sisters in Christ.*"

Final plans have still to be announced for the inauguration of the new body which will take place in 1994, at or after Pentecost, and probably in Canberra.

**18 July 1993**

## **PART II: NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES IN AUSTRALIA**

### **Charter**

#### **An Extraordinary Moment**

1. We are aware of living at an extraordinary moment in the life of the Church. It is 44 years since the foundation of the World Council of Churches, 46 years since the inauguration of the Australian Council of Churches and 30 years since the beginning of the Second Vatican Council. These years have seen ever increasing co-operation between Christian churches and communities internationally as well as between the Roman Catholic Church in Australia, the Lutheran Church of Australia, the Australian Council of Churches and its member churches.
2. Our churches have been learning to pray together, to read the Bible together, to act together in response to human need and injustice, to reflect together on the faith that holds us, to share with each other from the riches of our spiritual traditions. Specific examples of such co-operation are the regular meetings of national heads of churches, joint theological education, support for the aspirations of Aboriginal people, and FORCE TEN. We should not underestimate these seemingly small developments or fail to see the significant improvement in relations between the churches in Australia which has come about through them.
3. These developments have brought the Lutheran Church of Australia, the Catholic Church and the churches which make up the Australian Council of Churches to a point where we recognise the value of a more

comprehensive national body of Christian churches and communities. This body can enhance the life of the churches and thus proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ more effectively to the Australian community. This Charter is presented in the hope that it will convey a vision, and suggest a way forward for such an undertaking.

4. The ecumenical movement in Australia, as elsewhere, has diversified greatly. We have seen the phenomenon of the reunion of churches. There has been a dramatic growth in co-operation between the churches. At the same time, we recognise that ecumenism has in some places generated suspicion and been found unacceptable as a way of following Jesus Christ. Our hope is that the formation of the National Council of Churches in Australia will be a further step forward in the increasing co-operation among the Christian churches within Australia. The National Council will not endeavour to paper over the many differences which keep us apart as churches and communities and may continue to keep us apart for some time to come. However, such a national ecumenical body will recognise in principle that we are called to a fullness of unity with Christ and with one another which we do not now enjoy.

### **The Vision**

5. Conscious of the unfolding mystery of God, we endeavour to deepen our co-operation to give glory to God. We recognise how that glory is served by our yearning and striving for God's gift of unity of the Church through Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit. It is absolutely clear to us that such a motive must be the source of all our efforts and the goal which ultimately we all seek. Whatever is affirmed or proposed here is intended honestly as a way appropriate to us all at this time in Australia to affirm God's glory.
6. In practice, the call to the churches to co-operate more closely over this period in history has been associated invariably with a striving for fidelity to Jesus Christ, which in turn has caused us to seek continuing renewal. We recognise this as ultimately the gift of the Holy Spirit. This will include the renewal not only of individuals but of the churches themselves, in their worship, in patterns for their spiritual life which are shared and nourished in their communities and in the structures to which they adhere.

### **From Co-operation to Commitment**

7. We envisage the principal characteristics of the National Council of Churches in Australia will be to:



- \* be genuinely representative of the churches and Christian communities that belong to it, both in the sense that those present will speak for their churches, and in the sense that they will be a balanced blend of the church's membership;
- \* search out the wisdom of God for our time through a dialogue of faith under the Gospel, research and prayer;
- \* provide an environment where member churches and communities will encourage and learn from one another so that, by observing the Gospel as lived by others, each will be inspired to grow and become more faithful in its understanding and in its practice;
- \* conduct its affairs in prayer and the obedience of faith, seeking always to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit;
- \* foster a consciousness of belonging to the world-wide family of the Christian churches, and offer the possibility of responding to their calls;
- \* encourage member churches and communities to witness to and serve the world in word and deed;
- \* listen to and stand with the indigenous people of this land;
- \* be sensitive to minorities in our society as well as in our churches and communities, and respond to their concerns;
- \* embody and encourage the richness of cultural inclusiveness;
- \* strive to be a model to the churches and to the world of justice and reconciliation, Christian solidarity and discipleship based on fidelity to God;
- \* encourage Christian churches and communities jointly to address issues in contemporary Australia.

## **Background**

8. The Australian Council of Churches [ACC] resolved at its General Meeting in 1988 to approach non-member churches with a view to forming a more representative national ecumenical body. This body, as well as being more representative, would better serve the Gospel in Australia at this time. Positive responses to this approach came from the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) and from the Lutheran Church

of Australia (LCA).

9. A Working Party was appointed, charged with bringing forward a proposal for the churches' consideration. It comprised —

*ACC Representatives*

The Rt Revd Richard Appleby  
(Co-Convenor)  
Archbishop Gibran  
Sabine Erika  
The Revd David Gill  
The Revd Gregor Henderson

*ACBC Representatives*

The Most Revd Bede Heather  
(Co-Convenor)  
Sister Lenore Sharry  
The Revd Peter Cross  
The Revd Peter Kenny  
Mr David Shinnick

*LCA Representative*

The Revd Dr Lance Steicke

10. Two interim reports were published ("*Beyond Co-Operation To Commitment*", March 1990; "*Towards a New National Ecumenical Body A Proposal*", May 1991). Both evoked comments which proved helpful as the Working Party clarified its thinking and elaborated this Charter.
11. The Working Party met nine times over a total of eleven full days between 1989 and 1992. On each occasion we enjoyed the hospitality of The Centre, Randwick. We record here our thanks to the Director and staff. They were occasions of work, prayer and friendship when we made some progress in mutual understanding and growth together which, we hope, are the foretaste of what the **National Council of Churches in Australia** promises to Christians of the member churches when it is established. Needless to say, we are available with what gifts we have to help bring this undertaking to a successful conclusion if asked to do so by the churches.

## Conclusion

12. This Charter is intended to express the vision that inspires the National Council of Churches in Australia as it comes into existence. It will be governed by the attached Constitution and given tangible expression by the proposed structure.

The Rt Revd Richard Appleby

The Most Revd Bede Heather

1 October 1992



## PART III: NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES IN AUSTRALIA

### **Constitution** (1 October 1992)

#### **1. Name**

- 1.01 The name of this organisation shall be the "National Council of Churches in Australia" [hereinafter referred to as "NCCA"].

#### **2. Basis**

- 2.01 The NCCA gathers together in pilgrimage those churches and Christian communities which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and commit themselves:

- [i] to deepen their relationship with each other in order to express more visibly the unity willed by Christ for his Church, and
- [ii] to work together towards the fulfilment of their mission of common witness, proclamation and service.

to the glory of the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

#### **3. The Church, The Churches and the NCCA**

- 3.01 The NCCA is not a church. Rather, by bringing its member churches into a living contact with each other it desires to give expression to the significant bonds which already exist between them: what they share with each other as Christians because of their union with God in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit [often called communion or koinonia]. It recognises that each member church brings to the NCCA its own understanding of the nature of the Church.
- 3.02 No member church is being asked to forsake or compromise its own ecclesiology. However, the NCCA provides a framework within which member churches are encouraged to enter into dialogue, at all levels, about the understanding of "Church" which each church holds.
- 3.03 While some member churches may not be able to recognise each other as churches in the full and true sense, they nevertheless acknowledge in each other important elements of both doctrine and practice that belong to the Church which Christ founded. It is

hoped that through further dialogue the member churches will broaden their knowledge of each other, extend their recognition of each other, find ways of giving greater expression to what they hold in common, and move towards a more visible expression of the unity Christ has given to his Church.

#### **4. Objectives**

4.01 The objectives of the NCCA are:

- (a) to encourage and enable the member churches to develop their existing relationships by
  - i] raising awareness among their people of Christ's gift of unity and of his call to express that unity through prayer, dialogue and shared engagement in mission; and
  - ii] coming to know each other better in all respects, including the areas of spirituality, liturgy, theology, history, sociology and culture;
- (b) to encourage and enable the member churches in the light of the Gospel to give prophetic leadership to each other and the community by
  - i] developing a deeper understanding of evangelism/evangelisation in Australia's cultural context;
  - ii] addressing moral issues;
  - iii] speaking out on behalf of oppressed people;
  - iv] acting in solidarity with Aboriginal and Islander people; and
  - v] responding to human need and acting on issues of justice, peace and creation;
- (c) to promote relationships
  - i] with non-member churches, state ecumenical bodies within Australia, regional and national ecumenical bodies in Asia and the Pacific, and the World Council of Churches; and
  - ii] with people of other living faiths; and
- (d) to undertake joint initiatives as determined from time to time by the National Forum at the request of member churches.

#### **5. Membership**

5.01 Membership is open to those churches and Christian communities which accept the Basis, have a spread of groups in at least two



Australian States/Territories, and have their own national organisation and ecclesial identity. Election to membership shall be by resolution passed by a majority of not less than three quarters of the members present and voting at a meeting of the National Forum following consultation with all member churches.

5.02 A church or Christian community which does not have credal statements within its tradition and therefore finds it difficult to subscribe formally to what appears to it to be a written credal statement in the Basis may apply for and be elected to membership provided that the church or Christian community demonstrates by its life and conduct that it upholds the spirit of the Basis.

5.03 A member church may resign from membership by giving not less than three [3] calendar months written notice of resignation to the General Secretary. The notice will take effect at the expiry of the period of notice unless it is withdrawn in the meantime.

## **6. Structure**

6.01 The NCCA is part of a nationwide ecumenical movement of prayer, reflection and growth in association with local efforts, regional collaboration, state ecumenical bodies, meetings of heads of churches and inter-church dialogues. Its structure is designed to reflect this nationwide partnership.

6.02 The components of this structure are:

- \* General Church Consultations
- \* the National Forum
- \* the Executive of the NCCA
- \* Specific Consultations
- \* Commissions, Working Groups and Networks
- \* staff of the NCCA

## **7. General Church Consultations**

7.01 From time to time the NCCA will convene General Church Consultations which bring together a broad range of ecumenically involved people, on either a national or regional basis, to enable the member churches to celebrate and to share their life and witness, and when appropriate, to make comment and recommendations to the NCCA, and to listen to and act on the insights offered by the NCCA.

## **8. The National Forum**

8.01 The National Forum is the general meeting of representatives of member churches of the NCCA together with representatives of state ecumenical bodies. The National Forum's responsibility is to enable member churches to establish and review the overall policies and programmes of the NCCA.

8.02 The membership of the National Forum will comprise:

- (a) national heads of member churches
- (b) representatives appointed by member churches
- (c) one representative appointed by each state ecumenical body
- (d) the President and General Secretary and Treasurer in any case where the office holder is not otherwise a member.

Each member shall have the right to attend and vote at a meeting of the National Forum.

8.03 The Executive shall from time to time determine for the purpose of Clause 8.02 (b) the number of representatives which each member church may appoint to attend a meeting of the National Forum, provided that each member church shall be entitled to appoint not less than two representatives. In making its determination, the Executive shall have regards to numerical strength and parish units of the member church and such other criteria as the Executive may consider relevant.

8.04 If the national head of a member church is unable to attend a meeting or part of a meeting of the National Forum, the national head may appoint an alternate to attend and vote on behalf of the national head at the meeting of the National Forum or that part of the meeting as the case may be.

8.05 The membership of the National Forum will not exceed one hundred unless the Executive shall determine otherwise.

## **9. Meetings of the National Forum**

- 9.01 (a) The National Forum shall hold an ordinary meeting at least once every two years for the first four [4] years after the first meeting of the National Forum and thereafter at least once every three [3] years on such date[s] and at such place as the National Forum [or the Executive] may determine.
- (b) The National Forum may hold special meetings at such other times and for such purposes as the National Forum determines.
- (c) The Executive may whenever it thinks fit convene a special



meeting of the National Forum.

- (d) The Executive shall on the requisition in writing of not less than one third of the member churches convene a special meeting of the National Forum.
- (e) Not less than 3 months notice of a meeting of the National Forum shall be given to the member churches.

9.03 In addition to any other business which may be transacted at a meeting of the National Forum the business of the ordinary meeting shall be:

- (a) to receive from the Executive reports upon the activities of the NCCA since the last ordinary meeting;
- (b) to receive and consider financial statements;
- (c) to elect not more than six [6] members of the Executive whose nominations for election have been endorsed by their member churches; and
- (d) to determine policy.

9.03 At a meeting of the National Forum:

- (a) the President shall preside; or
- (b) if the President is absent, unable or unwilling to act, the members present at a meeting of the National Forum may choose another member of the Executive to preside at the meeting.

9.04 The General Secretary of the NCCA will be the executive officer of the National Forum.

- 9.05 (a) No business shall be transacted at any meeting of the National Forum unless a quorum of members is present at the time when the meeting proceeds to business nor shall a meeting proceed if the chairperson determines by a count that a quorum is not present.
- (b) A quorum shall consist of not less than one-half of the membership of the National Forum, present in person or by alternate appointed pursuant to Clause 8.04.

9.06 Subject to this Constitution, questions arising at a meeting of the National Forum shall be decided by a majority of votes of those present and voting.

9.07 The Executive may invite appropriate people who are not members of the National Forum to attend a meeting of the National Forum. Such persons may be given the right to speak but not to

vote. Categories of persons who will be invited include:  
observers from non-member churches, and one executive staff  
person from each state ecumenical body.

## 10. The Executive

- 10.01 (a) The Executive will be responsible for implementing the policies of the NCCA, monitoring its work, and making policy recommendations to the National Forum.
- (b) The Executive will act on behalf of the NCCA between meetings of the National Forum in respect of any of the responsibilities of the NCCA and may determine policy which is not inconsistent with policy determined or directions given by the National Forum and act on any matter which does not require a resolution to be passed by more than a simple majority of those present and voting at a meeting of the National Forum.
- 10.02 The Executive will consist of :
- (a) the national heads of the member churches;
- (b) one other person appointed by each member church;
- (c) not more than six [6] members elected by the National Forum pursuant to Clause 9.02 [c];
- (d) the General Secretary of the NCCA [ex officio]; and
- (e) the President in any case where the person elected as President is not otherwise a member of the Executive.
- 10.03 A national head of a member church who is unable to attend a meeting of the Executive may appoint an alternate to attend and vote on his/her behalf at the meeting.
- 10.04 In the event of a casual vacancy occurring in the elected membership of the Executive, the Executive may fill the vacancy.
- 10.05 At a meeting of the Executive
- (a) the President shall preside, or
- (b) if the President is absent, unable or unwilling to act, such one of the remaining members of the Executive as may be chosen by the members present, shall preside.
- 10.06 Subject to this Constitution the Executive may meet and adjourn or otherwise regulate its meetings as it thinks fit.
- 10.07 The Executive shall meet not less frequently than three [3] times in each calendar year.



- 10.08 The President may at any time, and the General Secretary shall on the requisition of not less than ten [10] members of the Executive, convene a meeting of the Executive.
- 10.09 Questions arising at a meeting of the Executive shall be decided by a majority of votes of members present and voting.
- 10.10 A quorum shall consist of not less than one-half of the members.
- 10.11 (a) The Executive may decide to meet by telephone conference or in such other manner as it shall think fit.  
(b) The Executive may make decisions in other manner than by attendance of members at a meeting.
- 10.12 The Executive may appoint committees and delegate to Commissions and committees such matters as will facilitate the business of the NCCA.

## **11. Office Bearers**

- 11.01 The office bearers of the NCCA shall be:  
(a) the President  
(b) the General Secretary  
(c) the Treasurer
- 11.02 The President of the NCCA will be elected by the Executive for a term not exceeding three[3] years and will be eligible for re-election.
- 11.03 The Treasurer shall be appointed by the Executive and will hold office until the conclusion of the first meeting of the Executive following the next ordinary meeting of the National Forum after the Treasurer's appointment.

## **12. Specific Consultations**

- 12.01 Specific Consultations may be convened to enable the member churches to listen to one another and plan action, separately or jointly, on specific issues or on general areas of responsibility of the NCCA.
- 12.02 Specific Consultations will be convened on a regional or national basis by the National Forum or the Executive as and when required.

- 12.03 Specific Consultations will report to the Executive unless the convening body otherwise determines.

### **13. Commissions**

- 13.01 The National Forum may establish Commissions to conduct on-going programmes of the NCCA.
- 13.02 The National Forum may constitute whatever Commissions it deems necessary to assist it to carry out the objectives of the NCCA.
- 13.03 The mandate, size and membership of Commissions will be determined by the National Forum.
- 13.04 Members of Commissions will be appointed by the National Forum on the nomination of member churches. The Executive may fill casual vacancies.
- 13.05 Commissions will be responsible to the National Forum through the Executive of the NCCA.

### **14. Working Groups**

- 14.01 The Executive may establish Working Groups to undertake specific short-term tasks.
- 14.02 The Executive may constitute whatever Working Groups it deems necessary to assist it in carrying out the objectives of the NCCA.
- 14.03 Working Groups will be responsible to the Executive through the General Secretary.

### **15. Networks**

- 15.01 The National Forum or the Executive may develop Networks of people with common responsibilities within member churches to foster particular concerns.
- 15.02 The National Forum or the Executive may establish whatever Networks are deemed desirable to further the objectives of the NCCA.



## **16. Staff**

- 16.01 The staff of NCCA will be headed by a General Secretary who will have ex officio membership of the National Forum, the Executive, Commissions, Working Groups, Networks and Committees.
- 16.02 The General Secretary will be appointed by the National Forum and be accountable to it.
- 16.03 Other executive staff will be appointed by the Executive in consultation with the General Secretary and will be accountable to the Executive through the General Secretary.

## **17. Public Statements**

- 17.01 In furthering its objectives, the NCCA will seek to resource member churches to help them, together or separately, speak publicly on significant issues facing the community.
- 17.02 In order that the voice of the churches may have a greater impact on issues of public importance, member churches may authorise the NCCA to make public statements on their behalf. Where a majority of member churches agree but unanimity is not reached, the names of member churches supporting the statement should be attached and the NCCA may offer its facilities to issue the statement on their behalf.
- 17.03 Publishing such statements may not be held to imply that the NCCA has, or can have, any authority over the member churches.
- 17.04 The NCCA will be advised by such Commissions, Committees and Working Groups as it may establish, and at times that advice may take the form of recommendations regarding public statements. While Commissions, Committees and Working Groups may not themselves make public statements without the authority of the Executive, they may in the course of their work publish research, educational and promotional material.

## **18. Relationships With National Heads of Churches**

- 18.01 The NCCA will maintain a close liaison with the national heads of churches group through periodic consultations, and through the General Secretary.

## **19. Relationships With State Ecumenical Bodies**

- 19.01 In this constituion the expression "state ecumenical body" refers to those bodies, whether corporate or unincorporated, which the NCCA, through the National Forum or its Executive, recognises from time to time as state ecumenical bodies. Recognition may be withdrawn at any time.
- 19.02 While recognising that state ecumenical bodies are autonomous, the NCCA invites their participation in the NCCA through the appointment of voting representatives to the National Forum.

## **20. The Nature of Representation**

- 20.01 Representatives of member churches on NCCA bodies will have a dual responsibility — to the church and to the NCCA. Within the NCCA they are responsible for representing the views of their church and for contributing to the life and work of the NCCA, and within their church they have a responsibility to represent the life and work of the NCCA.

## **21. Finance**

- 21.01 The member churches will have responsibility for ensuring that normal running costs of the NCCA are adequately funded.
- 21.02 Each member church shall make financial contributions to the NCCA according to guidelines approved by the Executive.
- 21.03 The NCCA may obtain and raise funds by donations, bequests and sale of publications and in such other manner as the Executive may from time to time determine.
- 21.04 The Executive may authorise the borrowing of funds for the purposes of the NCCA.
- 21.05 All money received by the NCCA shall be deposited as soon as practicable to the credit of the NCCA in a bank or building society or with such other financial institutions as may from time to time be approved by the Executive.
- 21.06 All cheques, drafts, bills of exchange, promissory notes and other negotiable instruments shall be signed by any two members of the Executive or employees of the NCCA being members or employees authorised to do so by the Executive.



- 21.07 The NCCA shall have power to establish trust funds.
- 21.08 The General Secretary shall have power to authorise accounts to be established and operated with any bank, building society or other financial institution approved by the Executive for the purposes of any Commission or any activity of or associated with the NCCA.
- 21.09 A financial report shall be prepared for presentation to each meeting of the Executive and the annual financial statements duly audited shall be presented annually either to the Executive or to an ordinary meeting of the National Forum.
- 21.10 The Executive shall supervise the investment of the funds of the NCCA and may make grants, donations, loans, arrange conferences and consultations, employ or engage persons for specific projects or activities and do all other things within or outside Australia which it may consider in accordance with the objectives of the NCCA and the policies from time to time determined by the National Forum.
- 21.11 The Executive shall appoint the auditor[s] of the NCCA. The auditor shall not be a member of the Executive nor of any Commission, Committee, Working Group or other body whose accounts are to be audited. An auditor may be appointed to audit the accounts of a particular body or bodies within or related to the NCCA.

## **22. Corporate Entity**

- 22.01 The Executive shall have power from time to time to incorporate, secure and maintain a corporate entity or, where it thinks fit, more than one such entity, for the purposes of the NCCA.
- 22.02 Whenever the Executive considers it desirable
- (a) property funds and investments shall be held in the name of the corporate entity;
  - (b) activities shall be conducted on behalf of the NCCA by the corporate entity;
  - (c) the corporate entity shall employ persons or enter into contracts on behalf of the NCCA; and
  - (d) the corporate entity shall undertake any trusts which the NCCA desires it to undertake.
- 22.03 For this purpose the Executive shall have power to adopt or approve the memorandum and articles of association or the ob-

jectives, constitution and rules of the association and to appoint members and if appropriate, the governing body of the corporate entity from time to time and to give such directions to the corporate entity or its governing body as the Executive may consider appropriate from time to time.

### **23. Amendments**

- 23.01 This Constitution may be amended at a meeting of the National Forum by a resolution passed by a majority of not less than two-thirds [2/3] of the members present and voting.
- 23.02 Notice of a proposed amendments shall be given to the General Secretary not less than three[3] weeks before the date of the meeting and shall be proposed by not less than three [3] member churches.
- 23.03 An amendment to the Basis or Objectives shall nor take effect unless and until it is approved or ratified by all member churches.

### **24. Dissolution**

- 24.01 The NCCA shall be dissolved in the event that the number of member churches is less than four [4] or upon a resolution of a meeting of the National Forum passed by a majority of not less than two-thirds [2/3] of the members present and voting at a special meeting convened to consider the question provided that the resolution is approved or ratified by not less than two-thirds [2/3] of the member churches.
- 24.02 Upon dissolution, all surplus property remaining after payment of all expenses and satisfaction of all liabilities shall be transferred, paid or distributed in such manner as may be determined by a resolution passed at a special meeting of the National Forum or at a meeting of the members of the last preceding meeting of the National Forum which in either case is convened to consider the dissolution and/or the manner of distribution.

### **25. Compliance with Applicable Laws**

- 25.01 The NCCA shall comply with the requirements of taxation law and laws relating to charities insofar as they are applicable.

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