

The Ecumenical Movement

Summary: Members of the Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, and Mormon churches all call themselves Christians—yet they also maintain significantly divergent theologies and practices. Ecumenical movements attempt to bridge those differences, although such efforts remain controversial. The World Council of Churches consists of more than 300 Protestant and Orthodox churches, but the Roman Catholic Church, the largest group of Christians globally, is not a member.

What does it mean to speak of the “church”? Is there one church or are there many? On the face of it, there are hundreds of Christian denominations and thousands of independent Christian churches. A Google search for churches in any given community will reveal the diversity and even the divisions of Christianity. Hundreds of small energetic congregations, with little more than a bulldozer and a building crew, have built new churches. But what is their relationship to other churches in their city, to other churches in the United States, and to other Christians throughout the world? Can a local church be Christian all by itself, or are the churches with all their differences called by Christ to seek one another and to make manifest their unity? These are the questions that are raised by the ecumenical movement.

According to Christian tradition, Saint Paul understood the church to be the “body of Christ.” In a letter to the church at Corinth, Paul writes: “As in one body, there are many members, not all having the same functions, so there are many members of the body of Christ—we are one body, individually members one of another” (I Corinthians 12:12). Within this theological perspective, individual Christian congregations are the “church” not in isolation but only in relationship to the worldwide body of Christ, with all its diversity of members.

The word “ecumenical” comes from the Greek word “*oikoumene*”, meaning “the whole inhabited earth.” The early church held seven ecumenical councils from the 4th to the 7th centuries at which key doctrinal issues, such as the understanding of Christ and the Trinity, were discussed and settled, solidifying for a time the unity of the church. Soon, however, splits and schisms surfaced and became the new reality. In the early 21st century, however, the word “ecumenical” is used once again by Christians to refer to the worldwide church and the movement toward Christian unity that is not so much structural, institutional, or denominational unity as a unity of spirit and faith.

The primary instrument of the ecumenical movement is the World Council of Churches, now including more than 300 Protestant and Orthodox churches from every continent. The Council does not seek to become a “super-church,” but rather a “fellowship of churches,” a forum for exploring and expressing the common faith of the church in witness and in service. Through the WCC, Christians in the United States, for example, are linked in communication, prayer, and action with Christians in South Africa or Sri Lanka. While the Roman Catholic Church is not a member of the WCC, it works actively with the Council through the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and through a long-standing Joint Working Group of the WCC and the Vatican.

There is disagreement among American Christians about the value of Christian ecumenism. Some American Christians, especially those from independent churches, are deeply suspicious of the “one-worldism” they see represented by the ecumenical initiatives. Those who support the movement, however, insist that Christian faith requires dialogue and deepening relationship among the various parts of the Christian family, even where they may disagree with one another.

Within the United States, the ecumenical witness of the churches is expressed in many ways. At the state and local levels, America has a multitude of councils of churches that embody an ecumenical vision of cooperation. At the national level, the National Council of Churches of Christ (NCC) brings a wide range of churches together for mission and education, for ministries of service and relief through Church World Service, for active engagement with the issues of racial, economic, and social justice, and for theological reflection on some of the doctrinal issues that still divide the churches. While it is often identified with theological liberalism, the NCC has sustained a dialogue among a very wide spectrum of Protestant and Orthodox churches—liberal and conservative alike—that have pledged “to manifest ever more fully the unity of the Church.”

The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) provides evangelical churches and individuals a space to bring a strong and conservative biblical and moral voice to bear on today’s issues. While its leadership has long been predominantly white, the NAE is deliberately moving to broaden its membership and leadership to become more ethnically and racially inclusive. Evangelicals also have raised a strong voice on behalf of worldwide or ecumenical Christian concern, especially in response to the persecution of Christians in some parts of the world.

Today, American Christianity is becoming increasingly diverse. Christians from a multitude of ethnic and cultural backgrounds are now part of cities and towns across America; Korean Presbyterians and Tanzanian Lutherans now make their home alongside Irish and Italian Catholics, Russian and Greek Orthodox, Latino Southern Baptists and Pentecostals. Making concrete an ecumenical vision of Christianity that seeks community across the lines of culture, race, and denomination is now a challenge for American Christians not only at the global level, but at the local level as well.