



The Ecumenical Movement: **An Historical Overview**

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The modern ecumenical movement has its foundation in mission. It grew out of the International Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 though its origins can be traced back to the 19th century when Christians were coming together in educational contexts: the Sunday School Movement, the Young Men's Christian Association, the Young Women's Christian Association and the Student Christian Movement.

This movement is grounded in the conviction that God's mission in the world, of which the Church is an instrument, is a mission of reconciliation and unity, and that division is a denial of the unity Christians have in Christ and thereby is a hindrance to mission.

To act on that conviction, from the Edinburgh Conference there developed three streams of activity: Mission, Justice and Theology.

The International Missionary Council was formed in 1921, bringing together for study and common action the foreign missionary societies and national Christian councils that existed. Australian churches gave local expression to this missionary stream with the formation of the National Missionary Council in 1926.

In the justice stream, the first Life and Work Conference was held in Stockholm in 1925 and began to address the practical problem of applying Christian principles to social and international life, exploring the responsibility of Christians for the great social concerns of peace and justice. There was the conviction that, while Christians were divided by doctrine, they could be united in service in the world.

Nonetheless, the divisive issues of doctrine were taken up. The first Faith and Order Conference was held in Lausanne in 1927, where it was immediately recognised that in the quest for Christian unity agreement was needed on baptism, eucharist, ministry, and understanding the nature of the Church.

These streams continued to flourish through international conferences, and in 1948 the Life and Work and Faith and Order streams came together in the formation of the World Council of Churches (WCC), and were later joined by the missionary stream in 1961. At its beginning, the WCC had 147 member churches, Anglican, Orthodox and Protestant. Five were Australian churches: Anglican, Churches of Christ, Congregational, Methodist, Presbyterian.

In anticipation of the WCC's establishment, a national ecumenical committee was formed in Australia along with a committee in each state in 1946. In 1960, the national committee became the Australian Council of Churches (ACC), affiliated with the WCC; and in subsequent years the state committees became state councils, each affiliated with the ACC.

The formation of ecumenical councils was repeated in countries around the world, in local areas within countries and in different regions of the world, such as the Pacific, Asia, Europe, Africa.

The quest for unity also found expression in the formation of united churches: for example, the United Church of Canada (1925), the Church of South India (1947), the Church of North India (1961), the United Reformed Church (UK, 1972), and the Uniting Church in Australia (1977).

On the international scene, the WCC has grown to 345 member churches and has a strong working relationship with the Roman Catholic Church. There have been ten Assemblies of the WCC, the seventh, in Canberra in 1991, being a high point in the ecumenical experience of Australian churches. Over the years, the theological work done through multilateral dialogue within the WCC has culminated in the production of two extremely significant convergence documents, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982) and *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013).

The WCC has also given expression to the prophetic voice of the churches, speaking together, in many important ways, such as the 'Programme to Combat Racism' and the WCC's work for a sustainable society and environmental integrity. Since its most recent Assembly, in Busan in 2013, the WCC has continued to invite the churches to be on a "pilgrimage of justice and peace", working together to implement the signs of the Kingdom in the world.

In Australia, the national and state councils continue to serve as the ecumenical instruments of the churches and grew in membership, especially by welcoming many eastern churches. The holding of the seventh WCC Assembly in Canberra in 1991 saw a renewed enthusiasm for the ecumenical endeavour, and this was strengthened even further with the formation of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA), replacing the Australian Council of Churches, in 1994. The NCCA began with thirteen member churches, amongst which was the Roman Catholic Church, joined by the Lutheran Church in 1998, and now consists of nineteen member churches. In 2004, the NCCA member churches endorsed a National Covenanting Document, and this continues to be placed before the churches as a challenge to continue the ecumenical journey to visible unity.

Further Resources

The Ecumenical Movement: A History, to 1948

The Ecumenical Movement: A History, from 1948

Faith and Order: A History

The Ecumenical Movement: Theological Foundations

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