

# Mending the World

## An Ecumenical Vision for Healing and Reconciliation

### Prelude

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel used to tell the story that when God, the Holy One, gets up in the morning, God gathers the angels of heaven around and asks this simple question: “Where does my creation need mending today?” And then Rabbi Heschel would continue, “Theology consists of worrying about what God worries about when God gets up in the morning.”

Margaret Atwood writes, “The facts of this world seen clearly are seen through tears; why tell me then there is something wrong with my eyes?”

“As [Jesus] came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, ‘If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!’” (Luke 19)

We hold the conviction that the world is at the centre of God’s concern. In the words of the Psalmist, “The earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it, the world and they who dwell therein.” (24:1) The world is at risk because there are those who, refusing to see through tears, seek dominion and use the instruments of military, economic, political and cultural power to that end. God, who sees clearly through tears, is grieved by the estrangement of God’s children from one another and from the created order. God works, at the beginning of the day as at the end, for the mending of creation.

Life in the “whole inhabited earth” (*oikoumene*) is life in relationship. We are bound up with one another and with the world of nature—not just our kinfolk, or our kind.

We are thus led to speak of “whole world ecumenism,” naming the search for justice for God’s creatures and healing for God’s creation as the church’s first priority, and joining with other persons of good will in the search for justice, wholeness and love.

Our passion for the transformation of the world is rooted in our relationship to God in Jesus Christ. God, who is absolute love, mercy and justice, yearns for mending of creation, calling us to see the world through God’s tears, and to bend ourselves as church to the task of “worrying about what God worries about when God gets up in the morning.”

## Whole World Ecumenism

In authorizing the Interchurch Interfaith Committee to issue the study document *Toward a Renewed Understanding of Ecumenism* in 1992, the 34th General Council gave general approval to certain key concepts, which were later expressed this way:

The world is in serious trouble; the churches should join with peoples of good will to work together for the cause of peace, justice and the healing of God's creation. One person expressed it this way: "The chief ecumenical scandal of our time is not the disunity of the church. Rather it is the institutional preoccupation of the church in the face of the suffering of the world."

This conviction is not centred in the United Church alone, but is shared across denominational lines. The Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, speaking in Washington, DC, in September of 1992, called for a new "Copernican revolution" in which the church adopts a vision that puts "at the centre of God's mission not the splendid life in the church but the equally splendid life in the wilderness of the world."

From its beginnings, The United Church of Canada has demonstrated a sizeable and sustained commitment...to overcome the fragmentation within Christ's Church. While continuing our efforts to strengthen and deepen our ties to other churches, endeavouring to make visible the vision of Christian unity in one Spirit and in common action, we recognize that the precarious time in which we and the world live calls us to broaden our understanding of "ecumenical" commitment and activity. The context in which we live might be called "the wilderness of the world," and the understanding might be called "whole world ecumenism."

Whereas traditional ecumenical activity has been church centred, placing emphasis on the churches as they relate to one another both in matters of faith and service, the broader ecumenism is world-centred, placing emphasis on churches relating to the world beyond themselves, to persons involved in other religious traditions, ideologies, and secular agencies. In this understanding of "whole world ecumenism," the churches are called to make common cause with individuals and institutions of good will who are committed to compassion, peace and justice in the world.

For life to survive, grow and flourish in "the wilderness of the world"—amid the exploding bombs, the fragile atmosphere, the burning rains, the polluted waters, the many illnesses, and the myriad expressions of violence—all people of compassion and wisdom need to work together in the common task of caring for one another and the whole of God's creation.

This report, *Mending the World*, contains the distillation of a decade long conversation with the church on the subject of ecumenism. It includes the responses of literally hundreds of people to the study document. The process has laid bare the strong conviction among church members that God, who loves this world, works for its mending, and calls the church to make this work its first priority.

This conviction is captured in the prayer crafted by Colin Winter, the visionary Anglican bishop who was expelled from Namibia for his opposition to apartheid:

*“Lord,  
remind me when  
I need to know,  
You did not  
ask me to  
defend your Church  
but to lay  
down my life  
for people.”*

A fuller articulation of the meaning and content of this conviction is expressed in the affirmation which follows.

## An Affirmation

We believe

that the Church's passion to be involved in the transformation of the world is grounded in its relationship to God in Jesus Christ<sup>1</sup>

We believe that God calls the Church

to do separately only what it cannot do with others  
to care for itself in order to care for others  
to set basic human needs above institutional enrichment  
to give and not to count the cost<sup>2</sup>

We believe that God calls the Church to help build a culture

of non-violence and respect  
of solidarity and just economic relationships  
of tolerance and truthfulness  
of equal rights and partnership between men and women<sup>3</sup>

We believe that God calls the Church

to profess its faith in ways that honour God's love for all people and creation  
to make decisions that demonstrate an unqualified commitment  
to justice, peace and compassion  
to work in partnership with all who seek the health and well-being  
of the whole creation  
to discern and celebrate God's Spirit in people of other religions<sup>4</sup> and ideologies  
to stand first with the poor<sup>5</sup>

We believe that God calls the Church

to do justice and love kindness  
to show courage in the face of evil  
to seek reformation for itself and society  
to share God's liberating and empowering work  
to trust in God<sup>6</sup>

We believe that God yearns for the healing of all creation, and calls the Church

to share that yearning by joining now with other persons of good will  
in the search for justice, wholeness and love.

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1. Santiago de Compostella, WCC, 1995.
  2. St. Ignatius Loyola.
  3. Stanza based upon the Global Ethic, 1993.
  4. Stanza based upon the chapter "Whole World Ecumenism" in the study document *Toward a Renewed Understanding of Ecumenism*, 1994 (phr. 1-3), the Report of the Commission on World Mission, 1996, (phr. 4).
  5. "In his beatitudes, his healings, and his table fellowship with outcasts and sinners, Jesus declares God's special concern for the oppressed. God sides with the poor, not because of their virtue, but because of the suffering; not because of their suffering but because they have been sinned against." (from *Engaging the Powers*, Walter Wink, p. 112).
  6. Stanza based upon Micah 6.8 and the Creed of The United Church of Canada.

# Our Ecumenical Journey

*“We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.”<sup>1</sup>*

The Greek word *oikoumene*, from which we derive the English word *ecumenical* occurs fifteen times in the New Testament, whose writers used it to describe “the whole inhabited earth,” or—more specifically—the Greco-Roman world. By the year 381 C.E.<sup>2</sup> its meaning had been more sharply defined by the Council of Constantinople to refer to that which is accepted as authoritative for the whole Church, and by the 16th century it had ceased to have any meaning other than a narrow ecclesiastical one, referring to councils, creeds, and the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

With the rise of the modern missionary movement it began to be used to denote the whole world-wide Church, although such usage was sporadic up until the first World War and the development of the Faith and Order and Life and Work movements, the precursors of the World Council of Churches.<sup>3</sup>

What we now know as the *ecumenical movement* is widely regarded to have begun with the convening of the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, and with the dawning realization that Christian unity, rather than being an end in itself, was necessary for the sake of mission.

Prior to 1910, however, that realization had found expression in a number of unions, or reunions within the churches of the Reformation, with the rise of movements like the Evangelical Alliance, the World Student Christian Federation and the YMCA, and various calls for prayer for reunion.

The United Church of Canada came into being as a kind of “first fruit” of the modern ecumenical movement. While there were a number of practical considerations—the churches were greatly challenged by the rapid expansion of settlement across the west—the growing recognition of the anomaly of a divided church preaching a reconciling gospel was critical. That, however, was not sufficient to prevent disruption and pain in the period between 1904 and 1925, leading, paradoxically, to division among the Presbyterians and the creation of, or continuation of, the Presbyterian Church in Canada. On June 10, 1925, the establishment of The United Church of Canada became a reality. Though there were only four signatories to the Basis of Union those bodies themselves were the result of previous unions, so that what the participants were able to celebrate was the coming together of some forty distinct bodies, made one through nineteen separate acts of church union.<sup>4</sup>

Some eleven years later the commissioners to the Seventh General Council focused priorities more clearly, declaring their readiness “as opportunity may offer and as God may direct, to seek with other Christian communions, further development of its ideals...We seek” they said, “to become not only a united church but a uniting church.”<sup>5</sup> Thus was set forth what would be a central piece in the church’s ecumenical agenda for the next forty years, and would lead to the union, in 1968, between the Evangelical United Brethren and The United Church of Canada.

Church union negotiations continued in earnest in response to an invitation from the Anglican house of bishops in 1943 and were expanded to include the All-Canada Convention of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in 1969. However, in 1975 the Anglican Church of Canada voted not to proceed with *The Plan of Union*. A decade later, negotiations between the United Church and the Disciples also came to an end. The vision that had inspired two generations, and which had

been given the provisional name of the Church of Christ in Canada, had died. For the first time in more than a century, church union negotiations in Canada had ceased.

Other ecumenical initiatives, however, had in the meantime been undertaken. The United Church was deeply involved in the creation of the Canadian Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches, and participated actively in the life of world confessional families in which it was rooted, including the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the World Methodist Council. It was instrumental in the development of coalitions—Canada’s unique contribution to ecumenical methodology—and through the coalitions had begun actively to address pressing economic, political and social issues.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, explorations of interfaith relations had begun. In 1936 the General Council approved a statement that said, in part, that “the Christian should exhibit toleration, a genuine desire to understand and appreciate, and a willingness to co-operate, where co-operation is possible, with sincere men and women of other faiths.”<sup>7</sup> In 1966 the *Report of the Commission on World Mission* stated that “while maintaining the primacy of Christ, the Church should recognize that God is creatively and redemptively at work in the religious life of all mankind [*sic*].”<sup>8</sup>

In 1977, at the time of the fiftieth anniversary of the Faith and Order movement, Jurgen Moltmann had written that “after fifty years of concerted theological effort we now have to say quite openly to Christians and church authorities that there are no longer any doctrinal differences which justify the division of our churches.”<sup>9</sup>

His comment seemed to be borne out when, five years later, in Lima, Peru, the Faith and Order Commission received the final text of the document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, which exhibited a remarkable convergence of thought. One commentator noted, “that theologians of such widely different traditions should be able to speak so harmoniously about baptism, eucharist and ministry is unprecedented in the modern ecumenical movement.”<sup>10</sup>

That remarkable convergence notwithstanding, we find ourselves today in a time of what Mary Jo Leddy has called “ecumenical eclipse.” The mainline churches of Canada, faced with aging membership and dwindling resources, have responded by turning inward. The United Church of Canada has become increasingly preoccupied with questions of survival. The vision of a church united and uniting in order that it may witness to the purpose of God for wholeness has been lost.

This is the setting in which the Interchurch Interfaith Committee of the General Council launched, in 1988, what came to be called the Ecumenical Agenda Research Project. The purpose was to rediscover the nature of the ecumenical imperative in a time of “ecumenical winter,” and in the process, to enable The United Church of Canada to set priorities for its life and mission.

That study, carried out over the course of a decade, has brought us to the conclusion that, for now, and for our time,

in the world in which we live, we are faced with urgent moral issues... These issues are part of the life of the members of the Church and forge the way faith is lived out and reflected upon. In facing them the Church will often need to work with other communities of good will, sharing in their expertise and commitment. Christians can frequently be motivated and challenged by the dedication and urgency that others bring to this task.<sup>11</sup>

Ernst Lange had said earlier that

the Christian conscience has to learn to adjust itself to the larger household to which it was from the very beginning “called out” and toward which it was, from the very beginning, directed, namely, to the household of the whole inhabited earth.<sup>12</sup>

It is this understanding that has led us back to the beginning, to an understanding of *oikoumene* as referring to “the whole inhabited earth.” While not departing from our commitment to seek the unity of the body of Christ we are called to set as priority for The United Church of Canada God’s work of earth healing, sharing the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and making common cause with all people of good will, whether they be people of faith or not, for the creation of a world that is just, participatory and sustainable.

Let it be noted with great care that the vision of Christian unity for which we are called to pray, “that they may all be one...so that the world may believe” that God has sent Jesus into the world<sup>13</sup> has not altered. To paraphrase the words of those who gathered for the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order in Santiago de Compostella in 1993, we bring to our engagement with ethical and social matters a particular dimension.

The source of [our] passion for the transformation of the world lies in [our] relation to God in Jesus Christ. [We] believe that God—who is absolute love, mercy and justice—is, by the Holy Spirit, working through [us].<sup>14</sup>

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1. Faber and Faber, *T.S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays*, London, 1969, p. 197.
  2. In a pluralistic world it is considered respectful to replace B.C. and A.D. with B.C.E (before the Common Era) and C.E. (Common Era).
  3. “The Word ‘Ecumenical’—Its History and Use,” W.A. Visser’t Hooft in Rouse and Neill, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948*, S.P.C.K. 1954, p. 735.
  4. Rouse and Neill, *op. cit.*, p. 454.
  5. *R.O.P. 7th General Council, 1936*, p. 168.
  6. Among the coalitions are such bodies as the Task Force on the Churches and Corporate Responsibility, Ecumenical Coalition for Economic Justice, Inter-Church Committee on Human Rights in Latin America, Ten Days for Global Justice, Aboriginal Rights Coalition.
  7. *R.O.P. 7th General Council, 1936*, p. 288.
  8. *R.O.P. 22nd General Council, 1966*, p. 435.
  9. *Lausanne 77: Fifty Years of Faith and Order*, Faith and Order Paper No. 82, p. 39.
  10. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), p. ix.
  11. Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order: Santiago de Compostella Report of Section IV p. 259.
  12. Lange, Ernst, *Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 23, #1, 1978, p. 8.
  13. John 17:21
  14. Compostella, *loc. cit.*

# Theological Foundations

*We are not alone, we live in God's world.  
We believe in God, who has created and is creating...*

The new creed, which has properly been described as a creed in the process of formation, and which has undergone substantial revision and refinement since first adopted by the General Council some twenty-eight years ago, provides us with a beginning. It reminds us that we are not orphaned, that we are residents of a place created and owned by God, who came in Jesus and who works still, through the Spirit, to bend the broken creation back into the unity and wholeness for which it was made. The creed reminds us that we, the Church, have been called into being to participate in this healing work, “to celebrate God’s presence,” “to seek justice and resist evil,” and, in its latest version, “to walk with respect in creation.” The Church’s task is to discern what this means in our time. To this end the Church turns to its formative story for understanding and guidance, as it seeks to be faithful to its past, and responsive to its present.

## Story and Method

While Christians routinely speak of the “story” of Jesus, the phrase in the old children’s hymn, “Tell me the *stories* of Jesus,” captures our situation more accurately. There are, we observe, four gospels in the New Testament, and not just one, and many other testimonies to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus were never included in the canon of scripture. From the Church’s beginnings, a common, pithy, and universally acceptable understanding of Jesus’ life and significance has not existed. While the Church has gathered around titles and creeds, it has resisted attempts to combine everything into a single narrative, preferring instead to struggle with multiple presentations of Jesus, each with its own particular emphases, and to learn from the creative tension among them.

The methods by which we sharpen our description and understanding of these portraits vary, and are themselves the subject of constant discussion. Still, Christians seek to respond faithfully to the question: How do we get to Jesus? The options are not simple nor the choices easy. Do we begin by analyzing a specific type of literature (i.e., parables, sayings, pronouncement stories) to get to the heart of his teaching? Do we restrict the analysis to the titles applied to him (i.e., Lord, Rabbi, Son of Humankind, Son of David, Son of God), and the texts in which these titles are found? Do we attempt to identify the historical layers of scripture, assembling and analyzing first those texts, regardless of their type, that are deemed “early,” and thus presumed closest to the man? Do we content ourselves with the emphases of individual gospel writers and their communities? Or do we begin elsewhere, perhaps with a reconstruction of first century Judaism, transposing by analogy onto him many of the religious attitudes and outlooks that were part of the fabric of his place and time?

Depending on the method, several different pictures come into view.<sup>1</sup> They include, but are not limited to, the following:

### *Jesus, prophet of the end time*

Jesus announces that the rule of God is near—that it is, in fact, already breaking in, but not yet encountered in its fullness. His focus is on God’s reign, and the expectations of his time that God would soon manifest that reign fully. There is an emphasis on interim ethics—not on



action that would change the world, but action enabled by God as a witness to what God is doing and about to do.

*Jesus, teacher of law*

People point to the scriptural material that affirms Jesus' connection with the teachings of Judaism ("I came not to condemn the law, but to fulfill it"). In places, he seems to intensify the demands of this teaching (the sermon of the mount), and elsewhere, is portrayed as the educator of people in the moral life (golden rule, love of enemy, forgiveness...)

*Jesus, emissary of wisdom*

The quotations placed in his mouth (i.e., "The wisdom of God said"), or the vantage point of wisdom (i.e., "How often I tried to gather you under my wing as a mother hen her chicks"), or the whole body of wisdom literature that is the primary component of the common source now found within Matthew and Luke, all contribute to a picture of Jesus as an emissary of wisdom, appealing to people to return to wisdom's way.

*Jesus, revolutionary for social change*

The presence of zealots among his followers, the suggestion that some of them were armed with swords, the kingly significance of his royal "ride" into Jerusalem, his altercation with the moneychangers at the temple, and the title placed above his head at crucifixion...are all indicators of a life committed to significant and wholesale change.

*Jesus, revealer of the gift of grace*

His intensification of the law, the "last-chance" warnings of wisdom, the urgency of his call to decision, and the unattainable standard placed upon any and all who would respond to this call, all work together to underline the futility of attempting to save oneself, and to recognize finally, and fully, that life is a gift of God—freely offered, gratefully accepted. The ethical life that proceeds from this understanding does so, not out of fear of God, or a desire to win God's favour, but in gratitude for the life already received. This message of justification by grace is underlined in the stories of his associations, his deeds, and his teachings.

All of these images, as well as their combinations and permutations, emerge within the sphere of Judaism. They have their genesis in scripture, as much as in any later philosophy that would call them out of scripture. They are constructions. And we have always to do with constructions. The constructions are always stories of faith, not history. Even the biographical bits are recorded by post-Easter people, and are included not to provide some presumed "neutral" history of Jesus, but in order that, as John's gospel states, "you may believe."

What is critical for this paper is the observation that ethical implications for mission arise out of each of these constructed portraits, providing priorities for action that direct us toward a whole-world ecumenism. These include the living of God-centred rather than self-centred lives, the priority of right action (whether as sign only, or as transformative action), and care for others.

*We believe in God...  
who has come in Jesus, the Word made Flesh,  
to reconcile and make new...*

## Jesus, representative<sup>2</sup> of humanity

The testimony of Scripture and Church is that Jesus was fully human. In his life and work, he showed himself to be the model of faithfulness, never wavering in his sense of call or his confidence in the reign and presence of God, his commitment to a life of justice and compassion, of healing and hope, demonstrating a faith and ethics Christians hope to emulate.

Christians believe they are called to the kind of living exemplified by Jesus. He responded to people's hurts and hopes through his teachings and actions. He subdued the forces that threatened people in mind or body. He shared with people in want or need of healing. And he illumined the eyes of those blind to God's presence and activity. He was capable of crossing the boundaries that hem life in. The forces that threaten, deprive, and blind, he exposed, cast out, subdued, and overcame.<sup>3</sup> He altered simple table customs in ways that reconfigured the relationships and priorities among rich and poor, women and men. His parables and sayings, through shock and surprise, dismantled people's attitudes and reconstructed them along egalitarian lines.<sup>4</sup> By all accounts, he ate and drank with the best of them, wept and had compassion, showed anger and frustration, was in every way one of us.

Jesus was a Jew whose faith grew out of his heritage—a tradition and people that affirmed the reality of a God who covenants with people, who guides and frees human life through law, and whose spirit empowers human beings to live out this life of righteousness. According to this same heritage, the God who makes covenant with the Jews also built relationship with other peoples, including the Ethiopians, Philistines, and Arameans (Amos 9.7). Christians believe that God calls us out (*ekklesia*) to be a covenantal people in a body whose head is Jesus. The God of our covenant is the same God who established relationship with Israel and other peoples.

The gospels present the Church with a Jesus who teaches about God's reign, God's laws, and God's Spirit.

They present a Jesus whose teaching is centred on the kingdom, or reign, of God. We hear him urging his followers to strive first for the kingdom of God and its righteousness (Mt. 6.33), a kingdom that was both present and yet to be fulfilled.

We hear him teaching from Jewish tradition and scripture that the laws of God can be summed up in the two great commandments: love of God (Deut. 6:4-5) and love for neighbour (Lev. 19:18). On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Mt. 22:40). Both laws expand the horizons of Christian concern beyond our own community of faith. In loving God we must love and respect the world God loves, including all its peoples and creatures.

We hear him teaching that the Spirit, like the wind, "blows where it wills" (John 3.8). He says nothing about it blowing only among Christian people. The Spirit goes out to the ends of the earth and may be found even in Sheol (Psalm 139).

For Jesus, God's healing concern was extended to the sparrows, the lilies, the outcast, the oppressed, the sick, the sinful, and the holy people, regardless of race or religion. Jesus spoke of God feeding the widow of Sidon and healing Naaman the Syrian. The breadth of God's caring extends to the whole world (Lk 4:16-19).

For Christians, Jesus is the quintessential, representative human being. We believe that who he was is what we are called to be, and as we respond to the summons, we participate in his passionate

love and service toward both God and humanity. His teaching and example serve as basic foundations for Christian mission and ecumenical commitment. Something of God broke into this world through him, and still does, through those who follow in his way.

## **Jesus, representative of God**

The nature of a representative is to face two ways—to be capable of mediating the concern of one party to the other, and vice versa. While Jesus' humanity serves to instruct, guide and motivate, it is Jesus, representative of God, to whom the Church looks first for hope. The tradition of the church affirms the divinity of Christ. Jesus is not only the proclaimer of the reign of God, or the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, but is, before all things, the One in whom we have faith. He is the one that neither the crowds, nor the soldiers, nor even the grave, could hold. Jesus is the one affirmed as God's child, the one through whom the world has been reconciled to God (II Cor. 5:19).

We believe that in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ none other than God was incarnate, overcoming alienation and bringing about the reconciliation of the world to the divine love and purpose. Out of this reconciliation comes the world's hope for redemption, and its restoration to the order and beauty intended by God. As we await this redemption, we share with all creatures a longing for renewal and fulfillment, confident that God's own Spirit joins us in our sighs and our hopes.

The Church is united in its affirmation that God has reconciled the world. When we ask how this has been done, tradition responds by saying that Jesus died to save us from our sins. Just how his death and subsequent resurrection achieve this is a matter of significant discussion and debate.

The "Christus victor" tradition sees Jesus' suffering as a necessary prelude to triumph over evil. In his victory is the promise and guarantee of our own. Our suffering is to be considered temporary.

The "Satisfaction" tradition argues that Jesus' suffering and death was a payment for our sin, a sacrifice that met the requirements of God's holiness and had the effect of negating the anger of God.

The "Moral" tradition sees Jesus' suffering, not as payment for sin, nor as precursor to victory, but as an expression of the love of God towards humankind. Only such an act of self-sacrifice could soften the hardened hearts of those who had turned their backs on God.

The "Return" tradition sees Jesus, like the prophets, as the teacher of return to the Reigning of God (see the story of the prodigal son), and as the "pioneer and perfecter" (Heb.12:2) of human return to God in the Way of the Cross. Followers of Jesus take up their cross and share in Christ's sufferings, as Christ calls them to do (Matt. 10:38; 16:24, Mk. 8:34, Lk. 9:23; 14:27), being reconciled to God and others as Christ lives in them and they live in Christ.

Each tradition, or "theory of atonement" as it is called, has its strengths and liabilities.<sup>5</sup> The challenge before us is to find how the traditions that move us most, move us also to live out what J.W. Grant has said:

In an interrelated world and an increasingly multicultural nation, it is vital that we should do our utmost to understand and learn from one another. One can go further to speak of a genuine ecumenism based on the unity of the human race that calls for the greatest possible

cooperation among people of good will belonging to all faith communities and none, an ecumenism that demands especially high priority in view of growing threats to the very survival of humanity. Christians who find in Jesus the great agent of reconciliation have all the more reason to commit themselves to this ecumenism.

Christians also differ in their understanding of the degree to which other religious traditions link with God's initiative to reconcile and redeem.

For some Christians, salvation pertains primarily to individual humans, and is appropriated exclusively through faith in Christ. Taking their cue from passages like John 14.6 and Acts 4.12, they believe that only those who make an explicit confession of faith in Jesus Christ will be among the redeemed. From such believers comes great energy for the church's evangelistic mission, since much is at stake in inviting others to believe.

Another perspective holds that God's work of redemption is solely through Jesus Christ, but that God's gracious care for the creation is always mediated through the eternal Word and Wisdom who became incarnate in Jesus. There is one light and everywhere that people live in the light, the eternal Christ is present, even if not named. Thus God's grace and saving power, fully revealed in Jesus Christ, may also be present in other religious traditions, so that redemption also extends to those who know Christ "anonymously."

Still others hold that all authentic religions can mediate salvation. What is essential in faith is the life-transforming encounter by which we turn from life centred in the self to life centred in God. Many kinds of religion are vehicles for this conversion of the heart. In this pluralistic approach, it is possible to think of God entering into a number of covenantal relationships. Just as a parent's love is not exhausted on a first child, but can extend equally but differently to all the children that follow, so too God is able to have a specific covenant with Jews, another with Christians, another with Hindus, and so on.

These three differing understandings—referred to respectively as "exclusive," "inclusive," and "pluralistic"—are marked by strengths and weaknesses. Each can claim warrant for its specific emphasis from the Biblical witness. We seek not to adjudicate among them here, but to acknowledge this multiplicity of views as a significant issue for Christians in the new ecumenical setting. Our confession of Jesus and of his saving significance must now be made in a world that is religiously plural and, in some venues, religiously indifferent. Making faithful Christian witness in such a context will involve coming to personal clarity about these differing outlooks. As we struggle to love God and our neighbour, we do so challenged by our faith and creed to share and live out our truth claims "with respect in creation."

### **Jesus, representative of the whole creation**

To paraphrase the poet: No one is an island.<sup>6</sup> Humanity is like an enormous spider web...says another. If you touch it anywhere, you set the whole thing trembling.<sup>7</sup> The same can be said for the whole creation.

There is, buried in the rich treasure of scripture and Christian theology, an idea and image of how this relatedness has come about. It is not simply that everything that exists here has evolved in a closed environment, and has, consequently, been built with the same basic building blocks of life, and must, therefore, on some level, show signs of kinship. Faith's story says something more. It

says that in addition to the linkages we expect to find developing and existing in a closed system, we also affirm a connection within the creation that has its origin in God.

We read in the book of proverbs that when God set out to create the world, Wisdom was God's consort or agent (Proverb 8). The important role assigned to Wisdom was developed further by authors who wrote between the Testaments (Sirach 24), and emerged in the New Testament. In language and imagery that echoes elements within Greek philosophy, John tells the story of the pre-existent Word: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God..." Behind the English "Word" in the text lies the Greek notion of the underlying structure of things—the principle by which life is ordered. "All things were made through him," John goes on to say, "and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life and the life was the light of humanity." This Wisdom, this Word, is what became visible in Jesus Christ. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth."

The Church speaks, then, both of the humanity and divinity of Christ. It affirms that this Christ is present to, and in, every form of life in the universe. "All things were created in Christ" says the author of Colossians, "and in Christ all things hold together." (Col. 1:17) The One who is the author and sustainer of all that exists is the One who comes to redeem. (The redemptive work of God through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit involves nothing less than the restoration of all things to their intended nature.) This redemptive work does not displace the natural order, but heals and perfects it.

One benefit of the idea of this cosmic Christ (Col. 1:15-20) is that we can no longer imagine the creation as only a handsome backdrop to human history. Creation and humankind share a common story, both of fall and degradation, and of reconciliation and restoration.

One of the criticisms levelled against Western Civilization is that we have put ourselves at the centre of things. We have sought to fulfill our own aspirations and needs without much thought about the impact of our "progress" on the rest of the creation. The present ecological crisis, as well as the shadowy threat of nuclear devastation, are evidence of our foolishness and self-preoccupation.

Eight hundred years ago, a Christian by the name of Hildegard first warned Christendom about the cost of interfering with "the web of the universe": "The earth should not be injured...all of creation God gives to humankind to use. But if this privilege is misused, God's justice permits creation to punish humanity."<sup>8</sup> The tragedies of Chernobyl and Bhopal, of hydrofluorocarbons and oil tanker spills, as well as other expressions of human error, have scarred people and the planet. How much longer this maltreatment can be sustained is anyone's guess. The signs are clear that without a change in behaviour, humankind may not be long for this world.

Lifting up the image of Christ as present in and to all of life may help us re-image and transform our relationship to nature. No doubt there will always be a place for management in that relationship. One cannot imagine, for instance, that we would simply let floodwaters ravage productive fields and human habitations without trying to control them through dikes or dams. But if we see ourselves only in a managerial relationship to nature then not much will change. Francis of Assisi had imagination enough to see himself related to other, non-human creatures as kin: Brother Sun and Sister Moon and Mother Earth. It was Francis who first set up a nativity manger scene. It was Francis who got the woolly lambs and cows and donkeys onto the stage of Christmas. Following his example, we might develop further our relationship to the earth as one of friendship.

Francis did not picture the universe as a mechanism but as a mystery. Others have shared his vision, seeing the world as one permeated with the life of God. Said Mechthild of Magdeburg: “The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw, and knew I saw, all things in God and God in all things.”<sup>9</sup>

For some Christians, then, the cosmic Christ is the source of the coherence and relatedness of life. For them, belief in the pre-existence of this Christ, as the Wisdom and Word of God, is fundamental to understanding and living out the priorities of whole-world ecumenism.

*We believe in God...  
who works in us and others  
by the Spirit...*

## **Mission and the Ecumenical Imperative**

The Church affirms that God is acting to reconcile and make new, to heal and restore, to bend the creation back toward what, according to the ancient story, it was originally created to be. Christians speak of God’s initiative as one that seeks to introduce a new and transfigured creation, and not just an improved one.

The Church’s responsibility is to align itself with God’s initiatives, not equating our often flawed achievements with what God ultimately wills, but understanding them as a witness to our conviction that “the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof,” and that “the Lord God omnipotent reigneth,” and that this Lord continues to work to reconcile and heal the whole creation.

We turn to the tools of storytelling and social analysis, praise and prayer, to help us discern more specifically what God is doing, and what, as a consequence, we should be doing too. While the particular mix of these tools remains a matter of constant debate within the Christian community, we nevertheless look always to these aids to counsel and guide the Church’s activity.

The Christian life does not restrict itself to ethical concerns and activity only. It involves the mix and integration of the whole person, connecting head, body, and heart in a life that values truth, pursues right action, and participates in matters of beauty, creativity, and joy. However, the ethical component in mission looms large in our time for two reasons:

As humans, we are driven to give priority to ethics because we have an environmental imperative to prevent the deterioration of our planet. We ignore this imperative at our peril.

As people of faith, we are called to give priority to ethics because we have a theological imperative to respect and preserve God’s creation, and to remember that, according to the Biblical story, the consummation of history is God’s work, not ours. To bring about humankind’s, or creation’s, end—either by intention or neglect—is an act of unbelief.

Seeking to align ourselves with God’s restoring work is how we both bear witness to what God is doing and introducing, and how we preserve the creation as the proper theatre for God’s action.

The ecumenical imperative calls us to participate in this work of reconciliation and healing in partnership with any and all who are prepared to work with us. This imperative proceeds out of the conviction that solutions to the challenges posed by ongoing political conflict, racism, poverty, and

environmental degradation, require the assembled resources of a broad partnership among religious communities and secular organizations. No one religious community or group can accomplish the task alone. This imperative also proceeds out of a belief that God has provided the Christian community with sufficient theological motivations to engage in such work and partnership. Commandments, such as “the golden rule,” and convictions, such as our own tradition’s affirmation that “God is creatively and redemptively at work in the religious life of all mankind [sic],” are but two of many theological reasons to move in this direction. More than anything else, we turn to the story of Jesus—the accounts of his life, the impact of the proclamation of his resurrection, and the Church’s reflection on the meaning of both—for the content of what God’s reconciling work is about, and for guidance in regard to our role in it.

*We are called to be the Church:  
to celebrate God’s presence,  
to live with respect in creation,  
to love and serve others,  
to seek justice and resist evil,  
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,  
our judge and our hope...*

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1. Cf. G. Strecker, “The Historical and Theological Problem of the Jesus Question” in the *Toronto Journal of Theology*, 6/2, 1990, 201-223.
2. There are many possible models for Christology. This report uses a representative model. Other theologians who employ representative models include Dorothy Soelle, Douglas John Hall, Schubert Ogden, and Pamela Dickey Young.
3. G. Theissen, *The Miracle Stories of Early Christian Tradition* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1983), p. 117.
4. J.D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* (San Francisco, HarperCollins Publ., 1991), epilogue.
5. Cf. Joanne Carlson Brown, “For God so Loved the World” in *Christology, Patriarchy, and Abuse* (The Pilgrim Press, 1989), 1-30.
6. John Donne, 1572-1631.
7. F. Buechner, “Pontifex” in *The Hungering Dark* (New York, The Scabury Press, 1981), p. 45.
8. M. Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (Harper & Row), p. 144.
9. M. Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (Harper & Row), p. 118.

## Inter-Faith Partnership and Dialogue

A Church which gives priority to seeking the common good in the world, requires guidelines for partnership and dialogue with other caring people. The brief suggestions here are not intended to be complete or comprehensive. It would not be possible to cover all situations. We are on a journey of recognizing and realizing the call of God to join with God's other servants from other communities of faith and commitment.

### Identifying the Concerns and Resources

Beginning with the question "Where does God's world need mending today?" the Church has to assess the existing needs in society, locally and globally, and seek out other groups or individuals who share concern about particular needs. This may mean that Church people will approach organizations already formed for the purpose of addressing certain needs and offer to collaborate in any possible way. Or the Church may organize open forums to discuss particular issues and to see what can be done in collaboration with others.

A useful guideline for public forums is that they be held in "neutral" locations so that anyone may attend without feeling that they are on someone else's "turf." Another guideline is that open meetings should be organized by a committee with as broad a representation as possible from different groups of concerned people.

In 1994, for example, some Mormon representatives approached the United Church Secretary for Interfaith Dialogue with a concern that there be an interfaith festival of the family in Toronto during the International Year of the Family. The Mormons realized that such a festival could not succeed if sponsored by themselves alone, so they began to seek for partners. Eventually a festival was held in the Royal Ontario Museum focusing on all kinds of family issues. Dozens of different religious and non-religious groups participated, including some social agencies and the gay and lesbian Metropolitan Community Church. Participants collaborated on the basis of their common concern for family issues, and each group contributed to the program what they felt their particular group could best offer. There were obviously different values and beliefs about family issues. But participants agreed not to proselytize or "bad mouth" each other—and to stay focused on the positive supports for family life which they could offer for the common good.

Partnership is a key concept in whole world ecumenism. It implies mutuality and collaboration. An example can be seen in the Healthy Community Network in which some churches have participated. This network brings together any community group or agency that may wish to serve the goal of making their local community healthier. The participants assess the needs which can be identified in the community and then assess their own abilities to address some of the needs. Shaughnessy Heights United Church in Vancouver joined in a partnership with Picasso's Café, a restaurant that trains "at risk" young people. The same Church has partnerships which focus on local needs, global needs and the needs of the inner city. Many United Churches have taken similar initiatives without any formal network creating the incentives or suggesting strategies.



## Sharing Faith as Well as Work

It is the work of the Church and other religious communities to share faith and to see the glory of God in all the Earth. If this is done in interfaith dialogue, then one of the essential guidelines is to have due respect for others in the dialogue.

A “Paths of Respect Consultation” was held at the Jessie Saulteaux Centre in November 1995. Representatives of seven faith traditions met from Thursday evening to Sunday afternoon. They formed a circle of twenty-one people of Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist, and Aboriginal faiths. In the Sacred Circle a “Talking Symbol” was used, in this case, a feather or a small rock. As the symbol was passed around the circle each person in turn was invited to speak as all others listened. As they moved through successive rounds they found their conversations deepening. A deeper wisdom began to materialize in the midst of their conversations. Love, which seeks the well-being of others, needs wisdom in order to achieve real well-being. Wisdom is not an individual possession. It is found in the encounter with others. All voices are, therefore, to be valued and all participants are equal.

The non-aboriginal participants in the Paths of Respect Consultation found the Talking Circle to be dramatically different than anything they had ever experienced. It was particularly difficult to make the shift from conversation as debate to respectful and careful listening. The passing of the Talking Symbol gives the invitation to speak from the heart for as long as one wishes to speak. One participant, a Sikh, who was not used to talking at length in any circumstances, spoke for an extended period of time about his own deep search for acceptance. Later in the Consultation he shared how this gathering was one of the most meaningful times in his life in which he felt he had been truly listened to and accepted. By contrast, in many meetings and programs many people feel excluded and voiceless.

The Aboriginal Talking Circle is perhaps the best model we have for conversation grounded in respect and mutual understanding. The equality of all voices, the encouragement to speak from the heart about what we know to be true in our lives, the commitment to listen deeply for wisdom in every contribution, the willingness to spend time, all are qualities of what should be part of an ideal conversation. The Talking Circle provides a metaphor and a model for the values that ground dialogue, and by extension, partnership.

Both dialogue and partnership require faithful witness to one’s own beliefs, as well as listening to the faithful witness of others. This faithfulness may well lead to an agreement to disagree about certain things. It can also lead to agreement about beliefs or goals or methods. Ecumenism, whether among churches, or among other groups of people, does not assume or require unanimity. Rather, it seeks to do or affirm together what can be done or affirmed together and to do separately and affirm separately what cannot be done or affirmed together (The Lund Principle).

Partnerships or dialogue require humility which is capable of learning from others. If God is indeed the God of the whole world, then whole world ecumenism requires doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God (Micah 6:8). God may well be encountered in the wisdom and loving spirit of the others. Christians have to be prepared to grow and, possibly, to change their minds about some things in the process of dialogue and partnership.

Working together and dialogue with others may lead to joint liturgical or ceremonial occasions. The United Church on Salt Spring Island has joined in ecological Earth Day Celebrations for a

number of years. Joint planning and involvement of all participants have been key factors in making such celebrations possible.

Peterborough Presbytery invited the minister of the Buddhist Church<sup>1</sup> in Toronto to share with the presbytery meeting some of the beliefs and practices of the Buddhist congregation. The Buddhist minister asked if he could demonstrate some of the liturgical chants or prayers characteristically used in his church. He was given permission and did so. Some of the presbytery members experienced the meditative spirit of the Buddhist liturgy. Others felt it was inappropriate for such liturgy to take place in a Christian sanctuary which was dedicated to the glory of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ. This incident illustrates the necessity of clarifying theological issues before sharing worship experiences of, or with, other religious communities.

## **To Love and to Seek Justice Above All**

St. Augustine has often been quoted as saying “love and do what you will.”<sup>2</sup> This is good advice for Christians who collaborate and dialogue with people of other religions or no religion. If we meet the standards of love in ecumenism we will not be far from the will of God.

Another author writes that “justice is the form in which and through which love performs its work.”<sup>3</sup> This may require “walking in the others’ shoes” in order to experience the injustice which they suffer. Injustice can be seen in prayer when we stand before God in solidarity with our neighbours.

Practicing justice in partnerships or dialogues requires following the Golden Rule. One of the subtle infractions of the Golden Rule is to insist on using our own terms of belief or understanding to define the other’s beliefs or ideas, rather than allowing them to define themselves in their own terms. As Christians, we certainly do not like being accused of polytheism because we affirm the doctrine of the Trinity. Similarly, other religious folk do not like it when inaccurate terms are used to describe their beliefs. They must be allowed to define their own beliefs.

Interfaith etiquette is an important aspect of both loving and seeking justice with people of other faith communities. There are good handbooks available on how to relate to people of various religions without inadvertently offending their special beliefs and practices. The Sudbury Interfaith Dialogue Group has produced one especially for the use of hospital visitors and medical personnel. The Ontario Multi-faith Council on Religious and Spiritual Care has produced a substantial book outlining the fundamental beliefs and practices of the major faith communities in the province.

If we practise love and justice, with humility and prayer, we will learn the wisdom of how to be faithful co-workers with God in whole world ecumenism.

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1. This particular branch of Buddhism in its North American expression describes itself as “church” and its leaders as “ministers.”
  2. St. Augustine, Epict. Joann. Tractatus, vii, 8.
  3. P. Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, p. 71.

# Voices

## Responses Received

The study paper *Toward a Renewed Understanding of Ecumenism* drew two hundred and sixty-four responses from twelve conferences, of which one hundred and seven were rural, and one hundred urban. There were forty-nine individual responses and one hundred and eighty group responses including lay, ordered, and scholarly members of the church. Thirteen responses came from various other individuals and organizations and nineteen responses from our ecumenical and interfaith partners.

## What Was Heard

These responses were read initially by members of the writing team and quotations representative of the main ideas, points and concerns in each response were gathered. Seven areas emerged as categories by which the responses could be sorted and analyzed.

- There was enthusiasm for broad United Church collaboration with others to make the world a better place.
- There was general agreement about the validity and need for interfaith dialogue and collaboration but concern that this area was not fully explored.
- There was issue taken with how the Bible was used to support the case for whole world ecumenism.
- There were questions about the Christology and theology of the Spirit in the document.
- There were questions about the use of the term ecumenism to refer to dialogue or collaboration which extends beyond Christian interchurch relations.
- There was concern that distinctive Christian identity may be undermined or watered down by an emphasis on seeking the common good.
- There was discontent about the writing style, length and accessibility of the document for use in the church.

## What We Did

Individual members of the committee studied the responses more closely, based on the above categories. The full range of the theological breadth of the church was represented and the work of the writing team was informed by the responses received. Debate and discussion took place about content, form, and accessibility. It was decided to retain the expanded use of the word ecumenism with its reference to the whole inhabited earth as crucial to our ecumenical understanding into the twenty-first century; to stress the work of joining with others to attend to the needs of the earth and its inhabitants; to reaffirm the centrality of Christ for our ecumenical work as a church and to present a wider variety of Christological perspectives which undergird that work; to narrow the biblical foundation for the document in order to increase its exegetical integrity and to make it more accessible to the church; and to shape the document such that it might be of use both in the courts of the church and for congregational action.

All materials generated by *Toward a Renewed Understanding of Ecumenism* and its predecessor, the *Ecumenical Agenda Research Project*, will be lodged in the United Church Archives.

# Actions of the 36th General Council Regarding Resolution 1—Mending the World

Having studied the report, listened to the voices of ecumenical visitors and of commissioners, and having consulted with representatives of the Interchurch Interfaith Committee and the Division of Finance.

**Therefore be it resolved** that the 36th General Council:

1. Express its deep gratitude to the Interchurch Interfaith Committee (ICIF) for its persistent commitment over 10 years to help the Church discern within its life and witness a new understanding of ecumenism.
2. Affirm the *Mending the World* report:
  - as the fruit of faithfully pursuing the ICIF mandate to “challenge the Church to a vision of ecumenism which includes the whole inhabited world.” (Record of Proceedings, 1988 GC, p. 315); and
  - for clearly linking the UCC’s historic and ongoing commitment to be both a united and uniting church with “God’s work of healing, sharing the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and making common cause with all people of good will, whether they be of faith or not, for the creation of a world that is just, participatory and sustainable”; and
  - as a lens through which the work of the Church can be reviewed and assessed in terms of the whole world understanding of ecumenism.
3. Commit itself
  - to continue and build on “our historic commitment to seek the unity of the body of Christ”;
  - to continue to nurture and foster faithful relationships with others in the Christian family, in national and global inter-church structures, through the ecumenical coalitions, and with partner churches around the world;
  - at the same time to seek conversations and partnerships in mission with other sisters and brothers in God’s wider human family;
  - to use the *Mending the World* report as a lens through which all the work of the General Council is reviewed on an ongoing basis.
4. Offer to the whole United Church
  - the *Mending the World* document, and especially its “Affirmations,” as a resource and tool for use as a lens through which individuals and households, congregations and other mission units may prioritize their response to God’s call to commit ourselves and our resources to work with God for the transformation and healing of the whole human family in a universe that is respected as the creation of God.
5. Invite Congregations
  - to review their mission statements and activities through the lens of the *Mending the World* report;
  - to pursue actively partnerships for mission with other Christian communities and other faith communities and all people who seek healing and wholeness in God’s world.
6. Invite Presbyteries and Conferences
  - to support congregations as they deepen and strengthen their faithful participation in God’s mission’
  - to encourage increased support of the Mission and Service Fund’
  - to review their mission statements and activities through the lens of the *Mending the World* report and to encourage related corporations to do the same.
7. Request the Interchurch and Interfaith Committee
  - to prepare, in cooperation with the Division of Mission in Canada, a supplementary educational resource to *Mending the World* for use by groups and individuals;
  - to prepare, in consultation with relevant units, an instrument by which other mission units and court can use *Mending the World* as a lens through which mission statements and activities are assessed;
  - to ensure that in any printing of the *Mending the World* report, these actions of the General Council Executive precede the body of the report.