

THE ECUMENICAL SITUATION IN KENYA

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EARLY EXAMPLES OF INTERDENOMINATIONAL COOPERATION (AMONG PROTESTANTS)

Interdenominational relations and co-operation in Kenya go back many years though these generally excluded the Catholic Church. Although relations between the missionaries from different Protestant denominations were sometimes far from cordial and in some cases downright frosty, there have been a number of instances when there was good cooperation between them.

Early instances of cooperation are the two missionary conferences held in 1908 and the establishment of the National Christian Council of Kenya in 1913 (now known as the National Council of Churches in Kenya (NCK)).

In education there is a long tradition of cooperation among Protestant churches. The Alliance of Protestant Missions, which is the forerunner of the NCK, was instrumental in the establishment of the Alliance High School (for boys) and the Alliance Girls Secondary School. And also in higher education, St. Paul's United Theological College in Limuru, started in 1955, trains pastors for Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Reformed Churches. Many of the various members of the African Instituted churches also send students there for theological training.

PRESENT -DAY EXAMPLES OF COOPERATION BETWEEN PROTESTANTS AND CATHOLICS

The establishment of Ufungamano House (the Christian Students Leadership Centre) on a site close to the University of Nairobi is an example of cooperation between Catholics and Protestants. It was set up through the efforts of the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCK) and the Kenya Episcopal Conference (now the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops - KCCB). The latter body has a Commission for Ecumenism and encourages the teaching of ecumenism in Catholic seminaries and other institutions of formation.

Other examples of cooperation between Catholic and Protestants can be mentioned. The Christian Churches Education Association produces common religious education syllabi for both primary and secondary schools. The Bible Society of Kenya has representatives of various Protestant denominations (or churches) as well as of the Catholic Church on its Board. In higher education joint chaplaincies have been set up in especially public universities and in some instances students of various Christian backgrounds meet together ecumenically.

The Catholic University of Eastern Africa (which has Protestants on its staff and among its students) offers a course which seeks to foster knowledge about the ecumenical movement. It is an excellent avenue for friendship and cooperation. Hospitals and prisons provide opportunity for cooperation as well: its chaplains may meet together to enhance their common Christian witness.

Under the Ufungamano Initiative, the Churches together with Civil Society groups played a significant role in championing for the new Constitution which was promulgated in 2010. In addition, mention should be made as well of the Inter-Religious Council of Kenya: here representatives from many church denominations meet regularly, together with people from other faiths. It has been especially active in reducing prejudice against people living with HIV/AIDS.

Christians from many different backgrounds also meet informally in many situations: at weddings and funerals, for example. Christian music often transcends the denomination in which it was

composed, and is an element of unity among Christians. In urban areas there are instances of small ecumenical Bible study groups in certain estates. In certain places in Kenya there is joint participation in the way of the cross during Lent.

CHALLENGES REMAIN

Though we are grateful for the increased cooperation between Christians of various backgrounds (with respect to Catholics, especially after Vatican II in the 1960's) many challenges remain in order for us to arrive at the unity for which our Lord prayed.

For one, those Christians who are passionate about the attainment of unity are few and ecumenical awareness is not widespread. There are church members with the highest level of education who do not know the meaning of the word "ecumenism." Though there are exceptions (a Pan-African Leadership Assembly held in the 1990s included participants from mainline Protestant churches in addition to evangelicals) many evangelical, Pentecostal, fundamentalist and AIC churches avoid cooperation with other Christians altogether; to some of them, ecumenism is anathema.

Another challenge is the lack of official theological dialogue between the churches at a regional level, focusing on issues particularly strident in East Africa. Issues, such as intercommunion, priestly celibacy, ordination of women, polygamy, use of contraceptives, church weddings for the divorced and attitude towards people with a different sexual orientation remain controversial. But they call for ecumenical dialogue if we hope to achieve greater unity.

The role of the media in Kenya with respect to Christian witness is very diverse and in many instances sectarian. It would be wonderful if there were an ecumenical Christian witness emanating from a common Christian media source but we are far from this at present.

Kenyan party politics, often hotly divided along ethnic lines and stoked by individual or group ambitions, has made the path of Christian unity more difficult inasmuch as some churches are identified largely with certain ethnic groups which are, in turn, in their majority identified with a given political persuasion. Manipulation or making use of religious events for political purposes is common in our country, and makes true Christian unity more difficult.

The visit of Pope Francis to Kenya, Uganda and the Central African Republic in November 2015 posed a great challenge to Christians in these countries and to Africa in general. His example of humility and his deep concern for the millions of poor among us, as well as his welcoming attitude towards Christians of backgrounds other than Catholic, made us ask ourselves questions about our own Christian values, including that of ecumenism. In a speech the Pope gave in the U.S. in 2015, he said: "Every Christian is called to work for the unity of the Church, allowing ourselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit who creates unity in diversity."¹

1. ¹As quoted by Fr. Thomas Rosica, in an address to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (<http://saltandlighttv.org/blog/general/fr-thomas-rosica-addresses-usccb-committee-for-ecumenical-interreligious-affairs>)