



Interchurch Unity:

CHURCHES WORKING TOGETHER



Presbyterian Church
of Aotearoa New Zealand



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Introduction

From 1940 to 1980, the search for Christian unity was a central priority in the Presbyterian Church, and the Presbyterian Church was a pillar of ecumenism in the churches in New Zealand. Many people hoped that within a few years, a united church would replace all the principal churches of New Zealand, and Christian witness would overcome its reputation for division and competition.

This was the hope. But the Anglican Church failed to give the proposal its backing and the scheme ground to a halt. A further blow to interchurch unity happened in 2005 when the Conference of Churches in Aotearoa New Zealand (CCANZ) closed down. We had entered the ecumenical winter.

So can we consign the idea of interchurch unity to the graveyard? This book explores and evaluates what remains. A range of interchurch and inter-Christian cooperation continues. On a local level, churches often work together. But there are very few guidelines for this cooperation.

The task of this booklet is to suggest how to engage effectively with current opportunities for interchurch cooperation and unity. Another task is to challenge us to give a greater priority to working with other Christians in our community. This study booklet will help you explore the history of this cooperation and suggest ways that we can engage with it.



Interchurch unity: A Biblical and theological perspective

Graham Redding

In John 17, Jesus prays that his followers will be completely one, just as the Father and the Son are completely one, so that the world may believe. The unity of the church witnesses to God's power to reconcile. The unity of the church serves the unity of humankind and the integrity of creation. Such unity calls for a rich, mutual interdependence of churches, consistent with the image of the mutual interdependence of body parts which we read about in 1 Corinthians 12.

The unity for which our Lord prays is both a declared fact and an eschatological hope. Christ is our peace. Through his life, death and resurrection, the dividing walls of hostility that exist between different categories of people – Jew/Gentile, slave/free, male/female, etc. – have been abolished. As Paul declares in 2 Corinthians 5:16, "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view ... If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

However, that which is declared to be a new reality in Christ is not yet complete. We see this in some of Paul's correspondence, which speaks into situations of factional discord, for example, 1 Corinthians 1:10-17. Sadly too, the history of the church tells a story of schism and division as much as it does of unity and reconciliation. So for now, the church lives between the times, between the already and the not yet. It is a time not for passively accepting the myriad forms of division that beset the church, but for prayerfully striving for reconciliation and unity. While we can acknowledge with gratitude the many forms of interchurch cooperation that exist at grassroots level, we should not equate cooperation with reconciliation and unity.

In recent ecumenical discussions the concept of “ecumenical space” has been talked about. According to a paper co-written by church leaders in 2010:

This refers to the setting in which, even in a state of division, churches witness to their common allegiance to Jesus Christ and cooperate together to further the visible unity of the church. It is in this space that our common Christian identity is affirmed. It is here we can talk together in a new way, with a greater opportunity to discern together Christ’s will for the church, in ways that are not possible in isolation from one another. This is a space where there is commitment to overcome former divisions and search for unity. It uses the process of dialogue to achieve transformation and renewal in the light of our common quest.

Ecumenism in the New Testament

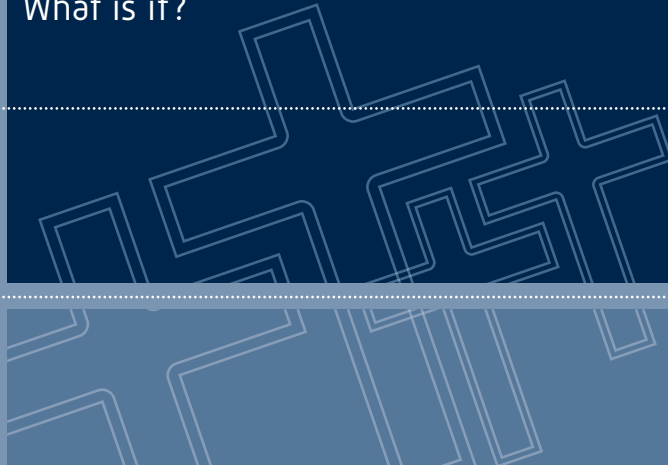
The word ‘ecumenical’ comes from the Greek word *oikouménē* which is used 15 times in the New Testament, mostly to refer to the inhabited world, e.g. Luke 4:5. In so far as it denotes the unity of creation, it conveys something vitally important about the scope and task of Christian mission, which is about the reconciliation of all things in Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:19 and Colossians 1:20). In keeping with this missional mandate, the church is called to reflect and embody in its own life that which it proclaims in relation to creation as a whole. Ecumenism thus has a particular reference to church unity.



01:

STUDY ONE:

Inter-church unity and ecumenism:
What is it?



STUDY ONE: Interchurch Unity and Ecumenism

Defining terms

Two words are the subject of this booklet. In some ways they are in competition with each other.

'Interchurch' is a term which means cooperation between churches, usually at denominational level, but also between local congregations. By and large it focuses on the practicalities and avoids any theological framework.

'Ecumenism' is a term which comes from the Greek *oikos and monos*, meaning 'one house', and therefore seeks to view the Christian movement as one, and to express that fundamental unity in shared structures and organisations. It is framed by a theological emphasis that churches are profoundly intertwined in their inner existence and in their witness in the world.

In this booklet we want to see how we can benefit from both words.

Denominational awareness is declining

Christianity in New Zealand is amazingly varied and the various parts often compete with each other. While the Christian community is slipping backwards in terms of its impact, different parts of the Church struggle for public acceptability and the whole Christian movement seems to be breaking down into rival strands.

Yet on the other hand, nobody seems to know what denominations are any more. The 2011 Church Life Survey suggests that local congregations have a mixture of members from different backgrounds. People change denominations remarkably easily. Forty-nine percent of current Presbyterians come from a non-Presbyterian background. Many young people have virtually no understanding of their denominations.

For many people the great divisions in Christianity seem like an irrelevance. Their experience has given them no hint of the history of divisions in Christianity or of other Christian expressions beyond their local church. They may wonder why a study like this is needed.

The one Christian story

Today, there may be little difference in the form of church service or the beliefs of people in different denominations. Church life is a similar blend no matter what the denomination. We all use the Bible (although the versions we use vary somewhat). We sing many of the same hymns and songs (with a few differences). Above all, we all pray to the same God through the same Lord Jesus. We have a common language and subscribe, mostly, to a common framework of Christian doctrines. So why has the Church been so divided?

CASE STUDY: Jan Gough, Chaplain, Kerikeri Retirement Village

Kerikeri Retirement Village chaplain Jan Gough says that denomination is rarely an issue in her work, which sees her give services to people from a mixture of church backgrounds. Every Sunday there is a service in their chapel led by different denominations – Anglican, Baptist, Catholic and Union.

Jan, who has been working at the rest home for 20 years, says the residents are respectful of other Christian denominations, and are open to the inter-church nature of the services.

“We have never had any complaints about the format of the services and residents keep coming. A few residents only attend when their own denomination is leading but this is rare.”

Jan is also an elder at Kaeo-Kerikeri Union Parish, and says that the rest home staff are very welcoming to her.

“I was thrilled to be asked by a Catholic staff member if I would lead her and her husband in prayer in our chapel for her Grandma who had passed away. Other staff members have also come to me with personal problems.”

She says the different churches often bring members of their congregation along to help with duties and activities in the rest home, and everyone gets along.

There is also a non-denominational Bible study group, which is well attended.

Divisions and tensions – the beginning

Alas, our divisions go right back to Pentecost. Right from the beginning, the Christian community was troubled by huge tensions – between Greek and Jewish Christians, and then between Greek speaking Christians in the East and Latin speaking Christians in the West. The Protestant Reformation caused a huge split in the Western Church in the 16th century, but Protestantism failed to find a common voice. The religious wars of the 17th century added to the strife, and even when those wars ended, divisions remained. In fact, new divisions seemed to emerge in each generation.

The Protestant legacy and the origins of denominations in Britain

The earlier Protestants easily agreed on the faults of the Catholic Church but they could not agree on a system of doctrines or structures to put in its place. A range of national churches emerged, each under the thumb of the local authorities, except for the so-called Anabaptists who rejected links with the state.

In England after the Civil War of the mid-1600s, many congregations refused to be absorbed into the state church or accept the authority of bishops. These congregations cared so much about their style of church organisation (whether Congregationalists or

Presbyterians) and their practices and beliefs on baptism and the like that they became 'Dissenters' from the state church.

For two centuries, denominational identities grew stronger. Traditions about forms of worship expanded. Presbyterians used metrical Psalms, followed the Book of Common Order and had a distinctive way of celebrating communion. Anglicans used the Book of Common Prayer and knelt for communion. Methodists sang Wesley's hymns, held class meetings and had a more informal style of preaching. And so on. Each denomination developed its own language for praying and preaching. Strangely enough, denominational organisations only developed much later.

New Zealand's Christian story has always been divided

New Zealand was settled by Europeans at the height of the denominational age. Our Christian history has always reflected denominational divisions. Yet in our small country, Christians from many backgrounds and traditions connected together. Although the larger denominations worked very independently, their members rubbed shoulders at school and work and often intermarried.

There were real and substantial differences between denominations and, to this day, Christians from one background are often surprised at how others interpret the Bible and react to issues. One lesson of the last 50 years is that we make a great mistake when we minimise these differences.

One difference is essentially cultural. Scots brought with them the Presbyterian Church, while the English brought Anglicanism, and the southern Irish, with help from the French, introduced the Catholic Church. However, culture and denomination were not tidily separate. Irish played a part in all these denominations, and the PCANZ now has significant Dutch, Korean, South African and Pasifika groups.

Some central dividing lines

Not all divisions are cultural, though. An important distinction is between 'establishment' churches with state links and free churches which reject the sponsorship of the state. Today, the notion of a state church has little appeal in New Zealand but Anglicans, Catholics and Presbyterians back in England, Ireland or Scotland still retain these links and they can talk of their country being 'Christian' in a way that we cannot. New Zealand Presbyterians have differing responses towards the 'proper' relationship between church and state. The first Presbyterians in Otago were sent by the Free Church which had just split away from the state Church of Scotland, and that heritage lingers.

Then there are differences over types of church government. Some churches have hierarchical bishops, for example, Catholics, Orthodox and Anglicans, while others put all the authority in the local church, such as the Baptists or Brethren. Presbyterians opt

for a middle course; local churches are always 'under' a regional Presbytery which is under a General Assembly.

Another important distinction is between Protestant and Catholic or Orthodox traditions. The heart of this distinction is a debate over authority. In the Catholic Church, authority has always rested in the institutional structures of the church, whereas in Protestantism, from the time of Martin Luther onwards, authority has been confirmed outwardly from the Bible and inwardly from the heart and the head.

The Calvinists, the most theologically systematic of the Protestants, placed a strong emphasis on the objective truth of Scripture. They had a vision that a truly Protestant or Evangelical Church was ruled by the Word of God. This rational approach led some Calvinists to liberalism, which reinterprets faith in contemporary language, while others take a more fundamentalist approach, constantly searching for the 'original' truth. Calvinism meanwhile has long been challenged by Arminians who feel it denies human freedom by its emphasis on predestination. Methodists and Pentecostals have Arminian origins, although today most people would not know the difference.

The 'restorationist' strand in the Christian tradition aims to get back to the early church, the church of Jesus. Catholic religious orders like the Franciscans took this view, and it has spawned such groups as the Brethren, the Churches of Christ, Adventists and Pentecostals.

Presbyterianism is defined theologically as Reformed Protestantism but it also has a distinctive form of church government, divergent attitudes towards links with the state, and towards the role of reason and faith. So the PCANZ of today is encrusted with historical values and tensions. Even when you don't recognise them, they probably still affect you. You need to understand yourself before you can effectively relate to others!

Global partnerships

Presbyterians in New Zealand have been shaped by the history and context of this country, but the denomination is linked to its Christian brothers and sisters around the globe. PCANZ belongs to five ecumenical bodies: The World Council of Churches (WCC), the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), the Council for World Mission (CWM), the Pacific Council of Churches (PCC) and the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA). The relationships that we have with other churches through these ecumenical bodies in the Asia-Pacific region and around the world are important. They remind us that we are part of a global movement that seeks unity of Christian witness in the midst of immense historical, cultural and geographical diversity. Each of our ecumenical links provides something that is distinctive and enriching to our life and witness here in Aotearoa New Zealand.

CASE STUDY: Dr Hope Antone – leader of the Christian Conference of Asia.

Encouraging New Zealand churches of all denominations to recognise the need for a wider ecumenical vision was the message delivered by Dr Hope Antone, the former executive secretary of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), during her visit to New Zealand in July 2012.

In an email interview for this booklet, Dr Antone said interchurch unity or intrafaith ecumenism, will serve as a real witness to the Christ who prayed that all his disciples will be one.

“In intrafaith ecumenism, denominational differences are not to be eliminated but they will be better acknowledged and understood and they will also enrich and challenge the faith of the different groups that hold and share them,” Dr Antone says.

She says different denominations need to work together, not compete with each other, or oppose each other because “this weakens us all”.

“Together we form a far stronger force. We are all in the household of God, we are all children of God, we are many people, many religions, not just Christian. We need to overcome the barriers and engage in dialogue with each other,” Dr Antone says.

She says churches can promote and encourage ecumenism through their formation programs e.g. Sunday school, Bible Study, and more joint programs with other churches, religious communities, and civil society groups for peace and justice and for the total wellbeing of the community.

CCA currently has 17 member National Councils and 100 member churches, including the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand. The organisation represents 55 million Christians.

What does it mean to be Presbyterian?

Today, Presbyterians value the Celtic roots that nourished and continue to renew Scottish Christianity, but the genesis of Presbyterianism itself was the Reformation in Europe. Particularly important was the influence of the Swiss reformers, Zwingli and Calvin, and the Scots leader, John Knox.

Presbyterianism came to New Zealand as a settler church, brought by migrants. The first Presbyterian church was established in 1844 and later became St Andrew's on the Terrace, Wellington. Auckland's first Presbyterian church was St Andrew's in Symonds Street, which opened in 1849.

Presbyterians share a commitment to education, thoughtful preaching, and the involvement of elders in the governance of the church at congregational, regional and national levels. The word 'Presbyterian' relates to the Greek word *presbuteros*, usually translated as 'an elder'. Ministers and elders are both regarded as presbyters of different kinds sharing in ministry.

Each congregation is led by the minister and the elders in partnership. At the regional level, ministers and elders come together in presbyteries, and nationally every two years in a General Assembly. The Council of Assembly handles issues that arise between meetings of the Assembly and works with the Assembly Executive Secretary and key national staff. The Council is made up people from different regions and groups, such as the Pacific Island synod and the Council of Asian Congregations. We have a particular partnership with Maori, through Te Aka Puaho, the Maori synod. Presbyterianism provides checks and balances on processes and decision-making. The different levels of structure and accountability mean that general consensus is needed before radical change can be enacted. This means that the way we are organised and make decisions helps define the sort of Christians we are.

CASE STUDY: Life in a Union Church

Clare Morrison was raised Presbyterian, but has attended Union Churches for the last 40 years. For the last two years, she has attended Johnsonville Uniting Church and before that, she was at Tawa Union Church.

She says the Presbyterian Church was a big part of growing up in the 1950s and 1960s. "My father was a minister and all our family took part in the life of the church. I remember a lively church, with good attendances, and the church was an important part of the community."

She had her first experience of ecumenism at an Ecumenical Youth Conference when she was in her late teens. "It was an extraordinary experience which left me with a very strong feeling that unity was highly desirable."

Clare moved with her husband to Tawa in 1972, where they attended the local Presbyterian Church. It was about to become part of a union parish of three denominations – Associated Churches of Christ, Methodist and Presbyterian – and it was an exciting time to be involved.

Union parishes are free to draw on the traditions of other Christian groups, and Clare finds this variety stimulating and enriching. "There is access to a greater resource of hymns, prayers, liturgies, creative ideas and training events. We find holding on to denominational labels becomes irrelevant as our main focus is to be Christians."

Clare says cooperative ventures (union and cooperating churches) differ from Presbyterian churches in key ways. "We can choose different ways of doing things, like celebrating communion in different styles. We have a rotation of ministers from the partner churches and the appointments are for a defined term. The local church is run by a church council and this provides for greater representation than a session. A negative difference is that the administration can be time-consuming as the partner churches each put demands on the cooperative ventures. However, I believe the positive outweighs the negatives."

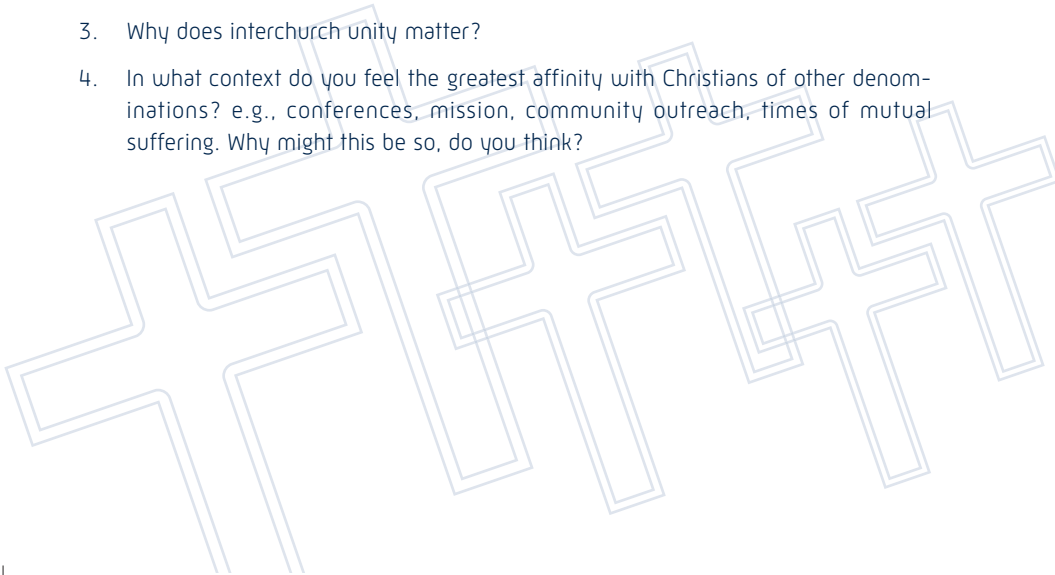
Her faith journey has been enhanced by being a member of a union church. "While I value my Presbyterian roots, I am very much in favour of interchurch unity and ecumenism. It is very much part of the gospel message and it gives Christianity more credibility. It is also a very fulfilling and satisfying way to be a Christian."

TALKING POINTS:

1. What does being Presbyterian mean to you?
2. In what ways is your Christian identity shaped by your membership of a Presbyterian church? If you have recently started attending a Presbyterian church, what attracted you to this denomination, or this congregation?
3. What experiences do you have of other denominations? Share these with the group.

REFLECTION:

1. Read John 17:20–23
2. What does this passage tell us about Jesus' views on church unity?
3. Why does interchurch unity matter?
4. In what context do you feel the greatest affinity with Christians of other denominations? e.g., conferences, mission, community outreach, times of mutual suffering. Why might this be so, do you think?





Delegates at the first conference of the NZ Council of Religious Education at a park in Christchurch, on 3 July 1922. (Photo courtesy of Presbyterian Archives)

02:

STUDY TWO: Ecumenism and interchurch cooperation then and now



STUDY TWO: Ecumenism and interchurch cooperation then and now

*"In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit."
Ephesians 2:22*

There has always been a lot of mingling between Christians with different backgrounds, although cooperation seems to be declining. Let's explore both the cooperation and its decline.

Ecumenical mission

The idea that credible mission called for profound cooperation between churches inspired the ecumenical movement. The Young Men's Christian Association was a pioneer. Founded by non-Anglican Protestants in London in 1844, it soon had branches in New Zealand. The Student Volunteer Movement which developed from it was founded in 1886 on the basis of a shared vision of international mission. John R. Mott brought this influential movement to New Zealand students in 1896. Out of it came the Student Christian Movement which was a joint Christian movement in secular universities and secondary schools.

An important milestone in the ecumenical movement was the founding of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948. From it came an ecumenical theology of mission as well as an astonishing mingling of churches.

Denominational cooperation in New Zealand

Formal church cooperation goes back a long way. When the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society arrived in New Zealand, seven years after the Anglican Church Missionary Society pioneered the Māori Mission, they recognised the need for the two missions to cooperate in a 'comity of mission'. So the Methodists evangelised the West Coast of the North Island down to Wanganui, while the Anglicans covered the rest of the coastline. Tensions and disagreements still surged where the missions abutted each other, but mostly the energy flowed into mission until Bishop Selwyn stopped the cooperation.

Cooperating to change society

Later in the history of the settler church, the churches and the broader Christian community worked happily together to influence society and the state. For example, in the campaign to get the Bible taught in schools, and in the provision of chaplains in prisons and hospitals, committees representing the denominations were able to coordinate their efforts in a common task.

Prohibition of alcohol was the hot issue in the 19th and early 20th century, while in the later 20th century it was racism in sport and politics. Non-Anglican Protestants generally agreed on these issues, and this led them into grand talk and militant action. Typically,

the Anglican and Catholic churches were more cautious. Today, environmentalism has created a new passionate Christian movement, and organisations like A Rocha seek to express a distinctive Christian respect for the earth as God's world.

CASE STUDY: Rev Ross Scott, Hospital Chaplain

As an ecumenical hospital chaplain at Wellington Hospital, Reverend Ross Scott has experienced both extremes of interchurch relations – remarkable openness and fierce denominationalism.

Once, he was introduced as a Presbyterian chaplain to a fundamentalist Christian couple whose son was expected to die after an accident. Despite the mother's initial distrust of him, he stayed with the family for more than three weeks as the boy eventually made a full recovery. When they left, the mother expressed her gratitude to Ross for being there.

"When people realise I'm not there to impose my own beliefs on them, they generally become more open. My job is to help people return to their own faith or core values in difficult times, and generally the feedback I get is very appreciative."

He has also experienced other chaplains who take a strict line, dealing only with patients from their own denomination. "But I've also worked in a team where there were three hospital chaplains – a Methodist, Anglican and Presbyterian – and we would just divide the hospital between us, regardless of the patients' denominations."

Ross says the chaplain's role is to address the spiritual, emotional and pastoral needs of patients.

"People in a crisis situation get knocked off the rails. I'm concerned about their spirituality – whether it is atheism, Hindu, or Catholicism. It's my job to get them back to their core beliefs and values, rather than to make good Presbyterians out of them."

Hospital chaplaincy in New Zealand is a service provided by the Interchurch Council of Hospital Chaplaincy (ICHC) in partnership with the Ministry of Health. ICHC is a national chaplaincy body of nine churches, including Anglicans, Baptists, Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians and the Salvation Army.

For more information visit www.ichc.org.nz

Local and international development work

The churches have long been engaged in assisting and transforming the lives of needy people locally and internationally. Sometimes, they compete. While some activities are organised by local churches, (e.g. opportunity shops), others are the domain of denominational agencies. Independent agencies appeal to sectors of the church (e.g. Habitat for Humanity) while non-church bodies like Red Cross engage in the same activities.

Overseas aid and development organisations have a similar pattern. The churches participated in CORSO, for example, which was established to help needy parts of Europe after World War II. Today the scene is much more diverse, with congregational and denominational development projects all vying for attention. Christian World Services (CWS) is an ecumenical agency and its Christmas Appeal targets our churches. A number of other organisations, including World Vision and TEAR Fund, compete for our support on more or less explicitly Christian grounds.

CASE STUDY: Te Ara Hou – combined social services in Hamilton

Interdenominational social services in Hamilton operate from one site, known as Te Ara Hou Village (The New Way).

Presbyterian Support Northern's Family Works and the Enliven day programme, Anglican Action, Catholic Family Support Services and a number of others are all based at the Hillcrest complex. They provide support, counselling, residential and advocacy services to meet a complex range of social and community needs in the Waikato district.

One building houses the chapel and auditorium along with four different agencies. Another is home to the Brothers of the Anglican Franciscan Friary. A community garden provides vegetables for the local combined Christian food bank. Also on site is a youth residential facility, a personal skills training centre, plus accommodation for those in need and a day programme for older people.

Susanna Uerata is the Service Manager for Family Works, Waikato, and has been connected with Te Ara Hou since 2000 when she lived on site with her family for three years while working with another agency based there. She says the agencies are independent of each other but sometimes refer clients to one another or run complementary programmes.

"There will always be some competition for government funding, but we try not to compete in what we offer."

Staff can attend weekly ecumenical chapel services if they wish, and aim to get together every month to discuss operational issues. Christmas, Easter and community events like Neighbours Day are opportunities to strengthen the links informally. The 'Just Food' café on site also fosters connections, says Susanna.

"We're all so busy with our own workload that we don't have much time for extra meetings, but the café has brought about that cooperation naturally. People just happen to meet others there or sit down with their lunch together. It's a place where you can get to know others as neighbours."

The village's organisational structure continues to evolve as it strives to express the collaborative kaupapa on which it is based, but Susanna says there is a lot of goodwill and Te Ara Hou is a "great concept" with much to offer the community.

The role of ecumenism

The National Council of Churches (NCC) in New Zealand was based on a desire from denominations to work together where possible. The Presbyterian Church was a key body in the formation of the Council in 1941. The NCC focused on expressing Christian values in the community, but it also allowed discussion of 'faith and order' - the doctrinal commonalities and differences of the Christian community. The NCC was also an important local mirror of the World Council of Churches, although membership of the global body was by denominations, not national councils.

A wide range of ecumenical efforts gathered under the umbrella of the NCC, including ecumenical youth work, chaplaincy appointments, international aid and development, and broader contact with the world-wide church. In the process, a generation of young people in different churches grew up with a profound commitment to ecumenism nurtured by the Student Christian Movement and under such influential leaders such as T.C. Brash, one of the first lay moderators of the Presbyterian Church.

Ecumenism attracted criticism, however, because it got caught up in political issues that were remote from local congregations. The NCC Commission of Churches on International Affairs, and the Church and Society Commission spoke out on the Vietnam War, race relations, and the Treaty of Waitangi. Detachment from denominations enabled the NCC to speak more prophetically, but the price was criticism from some in the member churches, who felt the ecumenical voice was alien to them. This is the challenge of any renewed ecumenism.

Church union negotiations

When the PCANZ became a fully national church in 1901, thoughts turned to a possible amalgamation with other Protestant churches. Discussions progressed after World War II and a Joint Standing Committee on Church Union was established in 1951, comprising

Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational representatives. Later the Associated Churches of Christ joined in.

In the early 1960s, the Anglican General Synod voted to join the negotiations and the churches made a formal commitment to unite in 1967. The Plan for Union was published in 1969. However, Anglican attitudes were much divided, leading its General Synod to vote against union in 1974 and in 1976. This proved decisive, and although there were some later discussions between the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches, they came to nothing. There had always been resistance to union from some Presbyterians, and the Church has now abandoned further negotiations.

In many other countries, there has been some church union, but the ambitious New Zealand plan failed. Most Congregational Churches joined the Presbyterian Church in 1969, and many union parishes were created in anticipation of the merger. Nothing much else remains from that hopeful era.

Union and Cooperating Parishes

The first union parish was created at Raglan in 1943. From the 1970s, Anglicans began to participate in 'cooperating parishes'. Most of the earlier unions were in rural areas where no denomination could afford to provide regular ministry. Later, cooperating parishes were established in new housing areas, including Tawa, Johnsonville and Wainuiomata in Wellington. Some Anglican dioceses embraced cooperating parishes; others did not.

The end of formal church union negotiations discouraged the formation of new union congregations, leaving existing congregations in a quandary. They were required to keep separate rolls of the Anglicans, Methodists and Presbyterians in their midst, and ministers were supposed to alternate, while denominations retained ownership of their property. Congregations were not always comfortable with these rules and increasingly sought their own identity. The Uniting Congregations of Aotearoa New Zealand (UCANZ) has for the last decade provided a distinctive identity for these congregations.

Tawa Union Church is a good example of a cooperating venture. It was founded in new suburban housing area by the Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregational and Church of Christ churches in 1972 at the high point of ecumenical hopes. Several existing congregations merged into one parish but in 1999, as numbers declined, they combined in St Aidan's for their services while one of the redundant churches was dedicated to community activities.

SOME DEFINITIONS

UCANZ (Uniting Congregations of Aotearoa New Zealand) is made up of five partner churches: Anglican, Christian Churches, Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian.

Cooperating parish – A parish in which some or all of the partners have agreed to share ministry, worship, buildings and other aspects of local church life. The legal position is that the former parishes or mission districts are still considered to exist within the life of the co-operating parish.

Union parish – A parish in which some of the partners other than the Anglican Church have united to form one parish.

Cooperative Ventures (CVs) – Include Union and Cooperating parishes, joint use schemes, shared ministries, covenants and other joint local ecumenical activity working together within approved guidelines.

Local Ecumenical Project (LEP) – A project where at least two congregations in an area formally agree to work more closely together. LEPs may include congregations which are not a party to the UCANZ.

Cooperation with the Catholic Church

A major change in Catholic attitudes took place as a result of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. One aspect of this was a new openness to other Christian traditions. Finally, an end was in sight to generations of rules about Protestant–Catholic marriages and restrictions on attending Protestant services and funerals. The change has been extraordinary – friendships have flourished, marriages have become easier, and joint services of worship have taken place. But there are still rules against intercommunion and the Vatican still restricts organisational links. The Conference of Churches of Aotearoa New Zealand (CCANZ) was created in 1987 so that the Catholic Church could be a member but the result was not smooth sailing.

Cooperation with the state

The main benefit of the NCC was that it provided a recognised body to represent the concerns of the churches to government ministers and departments. The Wellington-based Interchurch Council for Public Affairs, which included Catholic representatives, proved remarkably effective. The state had previously tended to ignore pressure from churches because denominational interests usually cancelled each other out. Careful representations protected church interests through wartime regulations, and ensured that churches had a voice in postwar immigration and town planning. Later, the combined churches were able to present a strong case for the state to fund chaplaincy in prisons and hospitals.

Such issues depended on the perception that the combined weight of churches was significant in society. The decline of churches in recent years has undercut this argument. The state no longer sees New Zealand as a Christian nation and church representations are now regarded as special pleading.

The state still respects the social work of the churches, however. An important coordinating agency, the New Zealand Council for Christian Social Services (NZCCSS), serves as an effective lobby for the social services of six denominations with the largest social agencies (Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Salvation Army and Baptist). A formal agreement in 1999 committed senior government ministers involved in welfare to regular meetings with the NZCCSS, enabling the churches to raise issues with the government. The Presbyterian Church is represented in these regular discussions through the CEO of Presbyterian Support and the Moderator.

CASE STUDY: NZCCSS – Working together for a more just society

The New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services (NZCCSS) began in the 1960s as a gathering of Christian providers of services to older people, and expanded to become an independent Christian voice advocating for positive change for poor and vulnerable New Zealanders.

The Council's mission, which it sees as continuing the mission of Jesus Christ, is to "...work for a just and compassionate society in Aotearoa/New Zealand". It works in three main areas: housing and poverty, child and family, and services to older people.

The Council is made up of the social services organisations of six churches: Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist and Salvation Army. Each of these organisations appoints two denominational representatives to sit on the Council.

In 2008, the Council released promotional material around five social justice issues in the lead up to the General Election as part of an educational programme called "Let us look after each other – Aroha tētahi ki tētahi". Feedback was used to inform questions in candidate meetings around the country, and the Council believes that a greater knowledge of New Zealand-based social justice issues has been developed in many church communities as a result of the programme.

After the 2008 election, the NZCCSS responded to the global economic crisis by calling its member church leaders together to discuss the impacts of the recession. They issued a "Together we can..." statement offering hope and support to communities, and suggesting some initiatives the Government might like to consider as part of its own response.

As a result, a wider group of church leaders was invited to meet with the Prime Minister, Hon John Key, and other senior government ministers. This relationship has continued and the NZCCSS continues to meet with church leaders and their social justice advisors to consider the range of ideas and analysis that is currently being developed.

Evangelical and Pentecostal approaches to unity

Originally, evangelicals were rather on the fringe of denominations although the movement was widespread among lay people. Evangelicals shared a common theology of the atonement and the Bible and typically played down differences over 'non-essential doctrines'. While the mainline churches focused on organisational ecumenism, evangelicals continued to pursue cooperation based on mission and vision. Combined evangelical missions were common, reaching their high point in the 1950s. For instance, evangelicals from all denominations rallied to hear popular speakers such as Billy Graham, the great American evangelist, who insisted on an ecumenical basis for his crusades. His 1959 crusade was sponsored by the NCC but consensus had disappeared by the time of his second visit in 1969.

The Pentecostal movement created new energy and led to a vast expansion of evangelical organisations. Local and international organisations vied for support in their desire to convert and transform New Zealand. It was a somewhat chaotic scene and in 1989 several organisations formed an Evangelical Alliance to provide some coordination. This later morphed into Vision New Zealand and more recently became the New Zealand Christian Network.

CASE STUDY: New Zealand Christian Network

The New Zealand Christian Network is a broad-spectrum network of churches and Christian leaders, with a Board of Reference that includes leaders from 23 main denominations, including Catholic and Pentecostal. It is a member of the World Evangelical Alliance and its motto is Gather – Build – Speak.

The network is directly involved in task-force groups on issues including evangelism, prayer, mission, education, crime and punishment, disabilities, and the environment. It also organises a national Christian Leaders' Congress every three years.

NZCN communicates publicly through submissions on legislation and public discussion documents; meetings with groups such as the Human Rights Commission and interfaith forums; and statements to Christian and secular media.

In 2012, the network held national forums on three major areas of social concern: secularism, marriage, and the sacredness of life. It toured the country, bringing church leaders up to date with what is happening in these areas. It is involved in interchurch planning to mark the bicentenary of the Gospel's arrival in New Zealand in 2014.

The network's national director, Glyn Carpenter, says sectarianism weakens the Church's witness and undermines the unity Jesus prayed for. He says interchurch unity and cooperation is absolutely vital. "Jesus linked our unity with our witness to His truth and reality (John 17). It's good for the kingdom of God and provides more effective use of resources. In working together, we are more able to see our respective denominational 'blind-spots'."

Ethnic dimensions of cooperation

Ecumenism looks different when viewed through cultural lenses. Māori Christians, for instance have always had a different take on Christian cooperation from Pākehā. Much Māori Christianity has been practised on marae, where denominations have rarely had exclusive rights. The Māori Council of Churches, Te Runanga Whakawhanaunga I nga Hahi o Aotearoa, which branched out from the NCC in 1982, has a broader membership than its Pākehā counterpart.

When Pasifika peoples came to New Zealand, they were mismatched with their New Zealand denominations. The Congregational Church was the largest denomination in Samoa and the Cook Islands but much smaller in New Zealand, and it could not cope with the arrival of the new migrants. Eventually the Pacific Islands Congregational Church became the Pacific Islands Presbyterian Church or PIC for short. PCANZ undertook to provide a supportive organisational structure for ministers, congregations, and their properties.

Over the next 40 years, the PIC worked to bring together different island traditions and theological backgrounds. The challenge of differing languages and traditions has altered as the leadership has matured. There are often tensions between the young, who are drawn to Pentecostal-style worship, and older folk who love the distinctive Pasifika forms of singing and preaching.

Since 1980, many Asian migrants have found their way to churches in search of community. But Christianity here is not like what it is at home. In Korea, for instance, Christianity is a strong force and Presbyterianism (expressed in hundreds of denominations) is the most common form. Rather than integrating with European congregations in New Zealand, Koreans have founded branches of their home denominations.

In April 2011, PCANZ welcomed 11 Korean congregations into the Church – congregations founded by a number of Korean Presbyterian denominations. In 2012, the Church appointed an Asian Ministries Coordinator, the Rev Kyoung Gyun, a missionary from one of these Presbyterian Churches, for a 3-year term. The challenge for PCANZ is to learn how to gain and benefit from the influx of Koreans and others from a wider Presbyterian world.

CASE STUDY: Te Aka Puaho

For Te Aka Puaho – the Presbyterian Church’s Maori Synod – interchurch unity runs in the blood.

“For us, being church means being ecumenical as many of us were gifted to the Presbyterian Church from other Maori churches,” says the Moderator, Reverend Wayne Te Kāawa.

Te Aka Puaho has covenanted relationships with Ringatu (followers of Te Kooti) and Ihāraira (followers of Rua Kenana), which are the major churches amongst Maori in the Eastern Bay of Plenty.

As a result, the Presbyterian Maori Missions built nine mission schools, including Turakina Maori Girls’ College in Marton and Te Whaiti Nui-a-Toi agricultural school for Maori boys.

Wayne says that because of this background, interchurch unity comes naturally to many Maori Presbyterians. “Often you will find that many of us belong to two or three churches at the same time rather than centring ourselves in just the one church. It is our belief that which church conducts the service is not important; what is important is that a service of worship is conducted.”

Te Aka Puaho also has a historical relationship with the Ratana Church, and attends its two major church celebrations each year.

The National Council of Maori Churches (Te Runanga Whakawhanaunga I nga Hahi o Aotearoa), was established in 1982 but its roots go back to the mid 1940s. Te Aka Puaho was a foundation member and remains committed to the ecumenical movement.

TALKING POINTS:

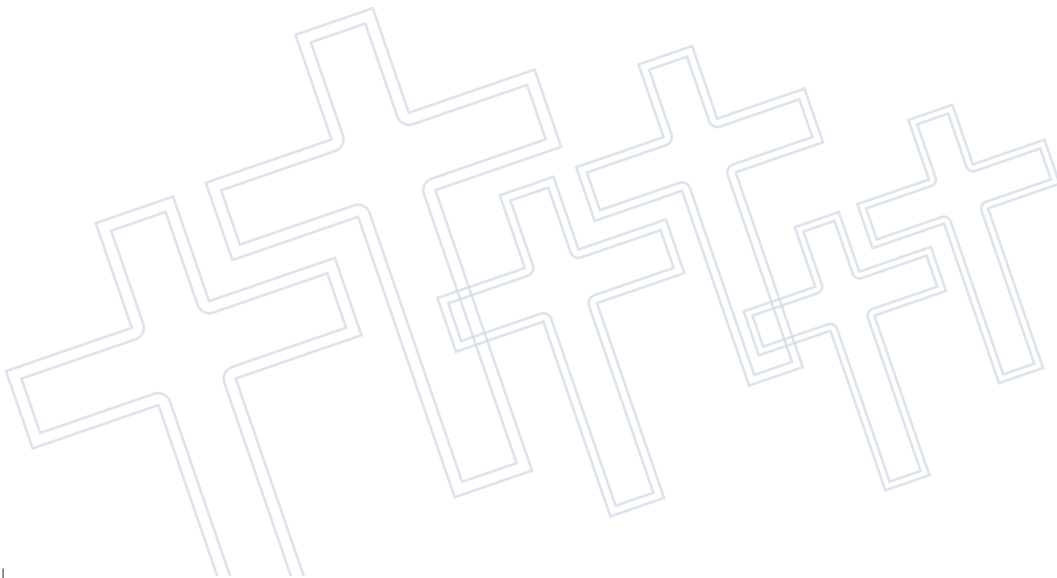
Various metaphors have been used to describe the relationship between the different denominations. One is a potluck dinner where everyone brings a unique dish to add to the feast. Each dish remains separate but contributes to the whole, and there's always room for more. Another image describes ecumenism as a flotilla of yachts. The individual boats are all headed in the same direction and guided by the same compass. Welding two hulls together may be needed sometimes but is not the only option.

1. What aspects of these 'word-pictures' help you understand ecumenism better? Perhaps you could come up with your own to share with the group!
2. What are the main obstacles to ecumenism and interchurch unity?
3. What are the benefits of interchurch unity? What are the drawbacks?

REFLECTION:

Read 1 Corinthians 12

1. What does this image of the body tell us about unity and diversity?
2. How should we relate to people from other denominations while still being true to our own?
3. In what aspect of church life do you feel the tension between unity and diversity most keenly? What would enable you to live well with this paradox?





03

STUDY THREE:

• Where is inter-church unity heading?
• A Presbyterian response to inter-church unity and cooperation



STUDY THREE: Finding the shared road

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me."
John 17: 20-21

In order to consider the future of interchurch unity in New Zealand, we need to be aware of how current trends in ecumenism affect us as individuals and local churches. Four main factors have changed the shape of the Christian community in New Zealand:

1. Denominational decline

The largest decline has been in the traditional mainstream Protestant denominations – Anglicans, Methodists and Presbyterians. Financial constraints are a key factor. The churches have all reduced their superstructure as parishes express their reluctance to increase their support of denominational offices. Some ecumenical activities have been sacrificed in order to preserve denominational essentials. Joint Presbyterian-Methodist activities, including magazine and mission offices, have ended. Anglicans have increasingly withdrawn from cooperative ventures in some dioceses.

The PCANZ General Assembly decided to reduce its structure of sub-committees, and now the Council of Assembly is charged with a very broad range of responsibilities. As a result, engagement with other churches jostles with other priorities and is sometimes overlooked.

Andrew Norton, minister of a large parish at St Columba in Botany, Auckland, commented: "We are fiercely congregational at the grass roots until on certain issues we choose to be national." But Andrew also recognises that the church needs to use its assets strategically, and as chair of PressGo he sees the value of careful investment by the denomination.

"We are fiercely congregational at the grass roots until on certain issues we choose to be national."

Andrew Norton, minister at St Columba in Botany, Auckland.

At the same time as the traditional denominations have declined, there has been an increase in the number of independent church movements and networks, including the 'mega-churches'. Many of these have little time for ecumenism, at least as it has been understood in the past.

Denominationalism meant more when terms like 'Presbyterian' had a clear theological meaning, but levels of theological knowledge have declined, and the passions around denominational differences have waned. Gone too are the days when you were Presbyterian because you were Scottish!

Local congregations of every hue are increasingly independent in their approach to ministry.

Ministers' fraternals are much less formal these days. Congregations 'choose their own suppliers' for everything from Sunday school resources to missionary organisations. Larger congregations are particularly willing to 'do their own thing' with their chosen associates.

2. Hiatus in ecumenism

There has been a massive decline in formal ecumenism in the last two decades. The Baptists were part of the NCC but did not join the Conference of Churches (CCANZ). That was seen as a small price to pay for Catholic participation, but in 1999 the Catholic Church withdrew from CCANZ, discontented with its independence from denominational control. Other denominations became increasingly dissatisfied with its direction and withdrew funding until the organisation finally closed down in 2005.

Warm contact continues between individual Catholics and Protestants, but at certain critical points around theology and worship, Catholics cannot disown their church. This calls for real care, especially as Catholics, with their influx of migrants, are now a stronger element in the Christian community.

In 2008 the Methodist Church launched an ecumenical initiative known as the National Dialogue for Christian Unity which included the Assemblies of God, Christian Churches NZ, Congregational Union of NZ, Salvation Army, plus Baptist, Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Wesleyan Methodist Churches. An attempt was made to develop a theology of unity and terms of reference for a 'Churches Forum for Christian Unity'. However, in early 2012 only the Anglicans, Catholics and Methodists were keen to continue with the CFCU; others were reluctant to proceed with a formal ecumenical entity and instead, favoured cooperation as a basis for and by-product of mission activities.

The PCANZ Council of Assembly's decision not to support the proposed CFCU came in the context of several requests for ecumenical partnering. There was general reluctance to join these, when several years ago, PCANZ had pulled out of a number of relationships in which it was financially supporting other organisations. The CFCU was also seen as an "old-fashioned type of organisational union." (Peter Cheyne)

National church leaders continue to meet twice a year but this is an informal gathering and has not been officially recognised by the denominations to speak on their behalf, although the group does contribute to discussion on public issues.

3. The development of independent agencies

As a result of the decline in denominational funding, interchurch organisations lack support and recognition. Some, including missions to the poor and needy, have copied other charities and sought to attract support from individuals. Consequently, they have been forced to change their focus.

Other agencies have placed an emphasis on finding government or organisational recognition of their work. Prison chaplains, for example, have become a collective body which contracts to supply chaplaincy services to the Department of Corrections. The emergence of private prisons calls for further flexibility. Industrial and university chaplaincies have sought support from the organisations they serve because they help them fulfil their legal obligations. But he who pays the piper calls the tune!

Since the denominations have less infrastructure, a significant proportion of Christian thinking now comes from non-denominational organisations. Relations with other faiths, for example, are explored within the context of the Human Rights Commission. The Centre for Public Theology at the University of Otago plays a role in developing Christian responses to some ethical issues. Organisations like NZCN, the NZCCSS and the Interchurch Bioethics Council engage with public issues and with government in key areas.

Theological education is now undertaken primarily at universities (Otago and Auckland primarily) or independent providers such as Laidlaw College and the Ecumenical Institute of Distance Theological Studies. Each denomination then takes responsibility for the task of ministry formation and training in its own context. Ecumenism is thus most evident at the level of theological education rather than that of ministry formation.

CASE STUDY: Interchurch Bioethics Council

The Interchurch Bioethics Council (ICBC) was set up in 2002 by the Presbyterian, Anglican and Methodist Churches. Its role is to consider biotechnology from a spiritual, ethical and cultural point of view and respond to issues that are important to churchgoers and the community in general.

Helen Bichan, who represents the Presbyterian Church on the council, says the interchurch approach is the ICBC's greatest strength.

"The advantages of collaboration include drawing from a much wider range of resources, having a variety of theological approaches and having different networks for collecting information and dispersing the results of our work."

Between them, ICBC members have considerable expertise in science, ethics, theology, medicine and education, and they relate to the tangata whenua through two of their members. They make resources available to churches, and speak on their behalf to select committees and other bodies. Where there is more than one viewpoint, the council works through the issues and tries to represent them fairly.

"It's important that we share a commitment to addressing spiritual, cultural and ethical issues as a group of Christians."

Helen says the ICBC provides an opportunity to express a Christian viewpoint on national issues, particularly in relation to Government policies.

"There are many opportunities for ecumenical collaboration in new and creative ways. The vision 'that they all may be one' continues to inspire. If the Churches cannot be seen as working together, then what have they to say to a fractured world?"

4. Grassroots relationships

The healthiest examples of interchurch unity are often found in local congregations. Congregational members come from many backgrounds. They choose to worship together for reasons that usually have nothing to do with the denomination. Maybe their children like the mainly music programme, or the youth group, or they like the preaching emphasis or the community outreach of the congregation.

Presbyterian congregations may form their own networks and alliances with mission agencies and others working across denominations. One might have close relationships with the ethnic congregation which uses its building. Another relates closely to an Anglican church down the road. A third links to a university faculty of theology or is keenly involved in an overseas mission agency, while a fourth supports the interdenominational chaplains on the local tertiary campus. Many churches hold combined services with their neighbouring churches on Good Friday. The television programme Praise Be and World Vision's 40 Hour Famine bring local congregations together.

The rural ministry network which supports many smaller rural congregations in ecumenical partnerships gives these congregations new hope, while in the cities, churches combine to serve their communities in creative ways.

CASE STUDY: Combined Churches Floral and Arts Festival

Every two years, a Combined Churches Floral and Arts Festival brings people together in the eastern suburbs of Auckland.

The festival began in 1997 as part of Howick District's 150 year celebrations. Floral arrangers from a number of churches in Howick and Pakuranga worked together on large displays at Trinity Methodist Church to illustrate historic aspects of the area.

More recently, the festival has been hosted at St Columba by the Botany Charitable Trust and funded by Creative NZ through the Auckland Council's Howick Local Board. In 2012, it was part of the first Arts Festival Out East with "The Glory of Easter" as its theme.

Floral arrangements depicting the Easter story filled St Columba's auditorium and about 100 artworks were exhibited in the foyer.

Coordinator Cynthia Karlsen says one of the best aspects of the festival is that it unites several churches in a common cause including Baptists, Presbyterians, Catholics and Methodists.

Cynthia is also involved in a number of activities at St Columba that draw people together from other churches. The Soul Music hymn festival has been "overwhelmingly popular" in past years. A quarterly luncheon for the over 60s, with a cooked meal and guest speaker, attracts about 120 people, less than half of whom attend St Columba.

"We're not really known as a Presbyterian church. It's just 'St Columba at Botany' and it's a great facility for people to meet one another. Our foyer and café are used a lot by different groups. It enriches the place to be able to welcome others here."

An interesting feature of the post-ecumenical age is that evangelicals from smaller churches are now more cooperative than in the past. Some of these people – Baptists, Brethren, Pentecostals – once wanted nothing to do with Presbyterians. How come they are now getting involved?

One factor is that the general decline in church life has affected them too. They have also learnt that separatism is not in their long term interests and that Christian impact in society is a product of Christian cooperation. It is ironic that these denominations now provide the key agencies for cooperation.

"The movement is no longer held together under one umbrella but under many tents." – from a WCC report on ecumenism in New Zealand, 2009.

The future of cooperative ventures

Union and cooperating parishes face particular problems. They are an anomaly in current terms. Some would like them all to be dissolved because supervision is so difficult, particularly when it comes to property issues. Financial problems certainly remain, but such congregations are willing to experiment with different forms of ministry. There has been a natural reaction within their congregations against the very institutional and formal character of union agreements, according to the Executive Officer of UCANZ, Peter MacKenzie.

Cooperative ventures can be practical and creative solutions for shrunken Christian communities with scarce resources. Consider the value of joint congregations in rural areas where no church could effectively provide for its own. It is very important that they are encouraged to develop a clear and positive identity. Many do have a strong congregational life, but they get frustrated with having to report to so many masters! The real need is to encourage CVs to develop their mission to the community in the same way as everyone else.

CASE STUDY: Cooperative Ventures

Some CVs have worked particularly well in recent years. Mangapapa Union Parish in Gisborne is going against most of the trends – it is looking at renovating its property and building more space for a thriving community church. Chartwell Cooperating Parish in Hamilton has an exciting range of ministries and a big impact on the community.

Waihao Cooperating and St Andrew's Cooperating are two rural CVs in South Canterbury. The area used to have over a dozen church buildings between what is now the parish boundaries but demographic changes have seen virtually all services depart from Glenavy, Morven, Waihao, Pareora and Otaio, and the number of parishes reduce to a minimum.

Waihao and St Andrew's have been incredibly successful at maintaining a Christian presence in southern South Canterbury. It is out of their courage that a new Cooperative Venture is being proposed to include the Anglican Church in Waimate and to resource the ongoing work of the church in rural South Canterbury.

St Alban's Uniting Church in Christchurch faced some very hard decisions when they realised that having three worship centres could not be justified. Led by the Joint Regional Committee, the local church eventually decided to consolidate on one site and sell the other two properties. Interestingly, the earthquakes destroyed both the properties that were let go and caused only minor damage on the one that was kept.

UCANZ Executive Officer Peter MacKenzie says that very few of the problems he encounters are caused by denominational issues. "CVs continue to proclaim that denominational differences can be set aside and people can work together in a local church."

Ethnic issues

Churches today have their greatest social impact with needy new immigrants. Many churches have found new ministries and new uses for their church buildings as ethnic congregations have flourished. But after a few generations, fresh problems typically emerge. Younger Pasifika people, for instance, sometimes escape to Pentecostal churches in reaction to the control of their grandparents. They need to find space in congregations to be themselves.

For Asian congregations, the concern is for the '1.5 generation' – young people who have grown up in New Zealand as the children of Asian immigrants. Koreans are the fastest-growing group of migrants to New Zealand; most have arrived since 1990 and the majority are affiliated to Congregational, Reformed, or one of a myriad of Korean Presbyterian denominations (compared with Filipino migrants, for instance, who are mostly Catholic).

Ethnic congregations play an important role in their own community, but they can also become isolated from other churches. In turn, ethnic communities have much to offer the wider church, particularly as the face of Christianity worldwide is changing, with far fewer European Christians and many more living in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Pacific than ever before.

Pacific Islanders and Koreans are redefining what it means to be Presbyterian. There is much richness to be found in traditional ethnic expressions to add to the church's mission and interchurch cooperation.

CASE STUDY: Division and unity among Pacific Island churches

Denominationalism is very strong among Pacific communities in New Zealand, says PCANZ Pasifika Misionare, Rev Don Ikitolagi.

Church background is an integral part of the makeup and identity of those who have settled in New Zealand. The "home" to which they remain loyal is the village and denomination that nurtured them in the Islands. This can sometimes create division among families.

Don says Catholic, Congregational and Methodist backgrounds are the most common among Pacific Islanders in New Zealand but a growing number have joined and developed Assemblies of God and similar Pentecostal churches.

PCANZ is a member of the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) which has a strong influence in the region and there are signs of developing ecumenism in New Zealand. In Auckland, for example, many Niuean independent churches are coming together and forming a united front of leaders.

Presbyterian Samoans have close associations with the CCCS (Congregational Christian Church of Samoa) and will often collaborate when either group opens a new church, to the extent of helping the host church pay off large debts.

"These are joyous occasions when gifts are exchanged, church choirs and cultural groups compete, and a healthy competitive spirit also encourages fundraising."

Among Cook Islanders, affinity to a particular island community often takes precedence over denominational ties.

"It may be appropriate to see these island communities as active ecumenical gatherings with people from different faith communities working together for the betterment of members and the wider communities," says Don.

Other examples of interchurch collaboration between Pacific churches in New Zealand include combined fundraising when natural disasters strike in the Pacific, such as the Fiji floods in early 2012.

Cooperation in hard times

Local congregations are capable of imaginative cooperation, including sharing resources such as buildings, in order to make the best of what they have. The decline in church attendance may even prove to be an instrument for helping congregations work together. When a local church has a clear sense of its mission it will be more strategic in its use of its resources.

A special spirit of cooperation is often fostered during times of hardship and suffering; what unites human beings becomes more important than what separates them. Churches come together publically in times of national disaster, such as the Pike River mine explosion and the Christchurch earthquakes, to provide input into memorial services and offer practical support to the grieving.

The situation in Christchurch is forcing many denominations to reconsider how they 'do church' in their communities, particularly as buildings have been damaged beyond their ability to rebuild or re-insure. There is great potential for a wider movement of greater cooperation, but it remains to be seen whether this will continue.

CASE STUDY: Christchurch earthquakes – rebuilding in the spirit of unity

Rev Geoff King, minister of Knox Church in Christchurch, says the Canterbury earthquakes have done a great deal to foster positive interchurch relationships in the region.

Many iconic church buildings were destroyed, but a spirit of cooperation and unity has risen from the ruins.

“What seems to be working very well is a grass-roots, pragmatically driven ecumenism founded on respectful relationships, compassion and common need, and in this regard I think the Christchurch experience has much to offer the wider Church and community as a whole,” says Geoff.

Although Knox Church was severely damaged in the earthquake, the adjoining Knox Centre remained intact and has since been opened to other churches, including the congregation of St Luke’s in the City (Anglican) whose historic building on Manchester Street was destroyed.

The two churches planned a combined worship service for Pentecost Sunday 2012 and Geoff says there is no tension over sharing a worship space. He already shared a collegial friendship with the vicar of St Luke’s and it was a simple matter to invite the congregation to meet at Knox.

“There are also several personal and pastoral connections between members of the respective congregations. It is a genuine privilege and pleasure to be able to embody the unity of the body of Christ in this way.”

Such relationships can be found across Christchurch, as churches that previously had little to do with each other now work and worship together. Geoff says however that it remains to be seen whether this results in a shared approach to rebuilding church structures.

“The challenge facing us now is to maintain the sense of being ‘all in this together’, to continue loving our neighbours as ourselves by reaching out to others in the spirit of Christ.”

What can we do?

It’s easy to feel that ecumenism and cooperation between churches is the responsibility of our leaders, but as members of the Christian community, we are all encouraged to find ways to express the unity we share in Jesus Christ.

Some suggestions for individuals

- » Share a meal with people from a neighbouring church.
- » Swap churches occasionally with a friend who attends a church of a different denomination. Compare impressions and discuss the strengths of each.
- » Encourage your minister to connect with other church leaders in the area, either formally in combined ministers' meetings or through informal networking.
- » Encourage young people to attend interdenominational camps or gatherings and talk with them about they have learnt from spending time with others, e.g. Parachute Music Festival, Scripture Union holiday camps.
- » Get involved in an action or mission group, e.g. A Rocha (conservation), Love your Neighbour (community partnerships), Mission without Borders (overseas aid and development).

Some suggestions for congregations

- » Get together for a meal with another church in your area.
- » Tell the other churches in your neighbourhood about a special event or project and invite them to help you plan it and be part of it.
- » Arrange a combined church service on the fifth Sunday of the month.
- » Contact your local council for ideas on projects to serve your community.
- » Invite speakers to inform your congregation about national or social issues from a Christian perspective, e.g. child poverty in NZ, 'Money Matters', health issues, legislation.
- » Think about ways you could combine with other churches in ministries like Alpha or Promise Keepers.
- » Work together with other churches in your area to run marriage, parenting, or faith in the workplace courses.
- » Celebrate national days or festivals locally e.g. Neighbours Day, ANZAC Day, Fathers' and Mothers' Day events.
- » Host a 'Conversation Café' about how you can connect in practical ways with other churches to serve your local community.
- » Find out about the ecumenical bodies to which PCANZ belongs and discuss with others what you can do to support their work, e.g. NZCCSS, the Council for World Mission (CWM), the Pacific Council of Churches (PCC) and the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA).

Looking to the future

What then is the future for interchurch cooperation?

Denominations are in troubled times. The organisations will remain, but the life of the church moves in wider circles as Christian traditions become more blurred. Congregations are becoming creative in their practice of being church. Some people drop out of conventional church structures altogether because they cannot abide organised Christianity.

Denominations will probably have a more limited role in the future. Mission-focused churches will identify with other churches with the same calling. We will use denominations for some aspects of our ministry, and non-denominational organisations for other aspects. Smart denominations need to think how they can be more effective to serve the needs of the church and the kingdom of God.

Meanwhile, local churches need to find their own vision. Congregations must change as the scale and form of their activity and community is reassessed. Yet it would be pathetic if congregations lowered their visions at such a time of need; instead, they should develop a broader vision and then look for allies in this challenging task. They will find other churches struggling with the same issues. We can surely work together to encourage one another.

The challenge before each congregation is to work out ways of being church which stimulate a more powerful presence in the community. Denominations will have to recover their ability to help congregations, or they will perish. The local congregation will meantime discover its true identity as it works with other churches to listen to its community and respond with the love of Christ.

CASE STUDY: Presbyterian Support Northern and community connections

Presbyterian Support Northern is behind a number of initiatives that encourage congregations to partner with other churches and connect with their community.

In Whakatane, for instance, Knox Presbyterian Church hosted a Heart to Heart Family Expo and Festival which drew together church members, local families and 16 different community agencies.

The church spent eight months planning and praying for the event, with support from Family Works, Kids Friendly, Te Aka Puako, PSN's Community Missions Advisor, Anne Overton, and Family Violence Prevention Advocate, Jude Simpson.

Because it was a first for the church, some people were a little hesitant, says Knox's minister, Rev Chris Barnard.

"We had the support and blessing of the other churches, but it was informal rather than formal cooperation. We had people from the Baptist, Christian Fellowship, Catholic and Anglican churches. The music group was predominantly Maori and a big crowd came from Destiny Church to support them."

Chris says the purpose of the event, which was followed by a seminar on living without violence, was to break down social barriers.

He says the positive feedback was "overwhelming" from agencies like Child Youth and Family and the Department of Corrections, and the church would like to continue building positive relationships in the community.

TALKING POINTS:

1. How could your congregation work with others from different denominations to reach a joint sense of mission?
2. What do you think about the suggestions for action above? Which one could you take up and begin to act on? What further resources do you need to make it happen?
3. Some believe that while the term 'ecumenism' is now outdated, the spirit of the movement continues. Do you agree? Where or when have you seen interchurch cooperation most in evidence?

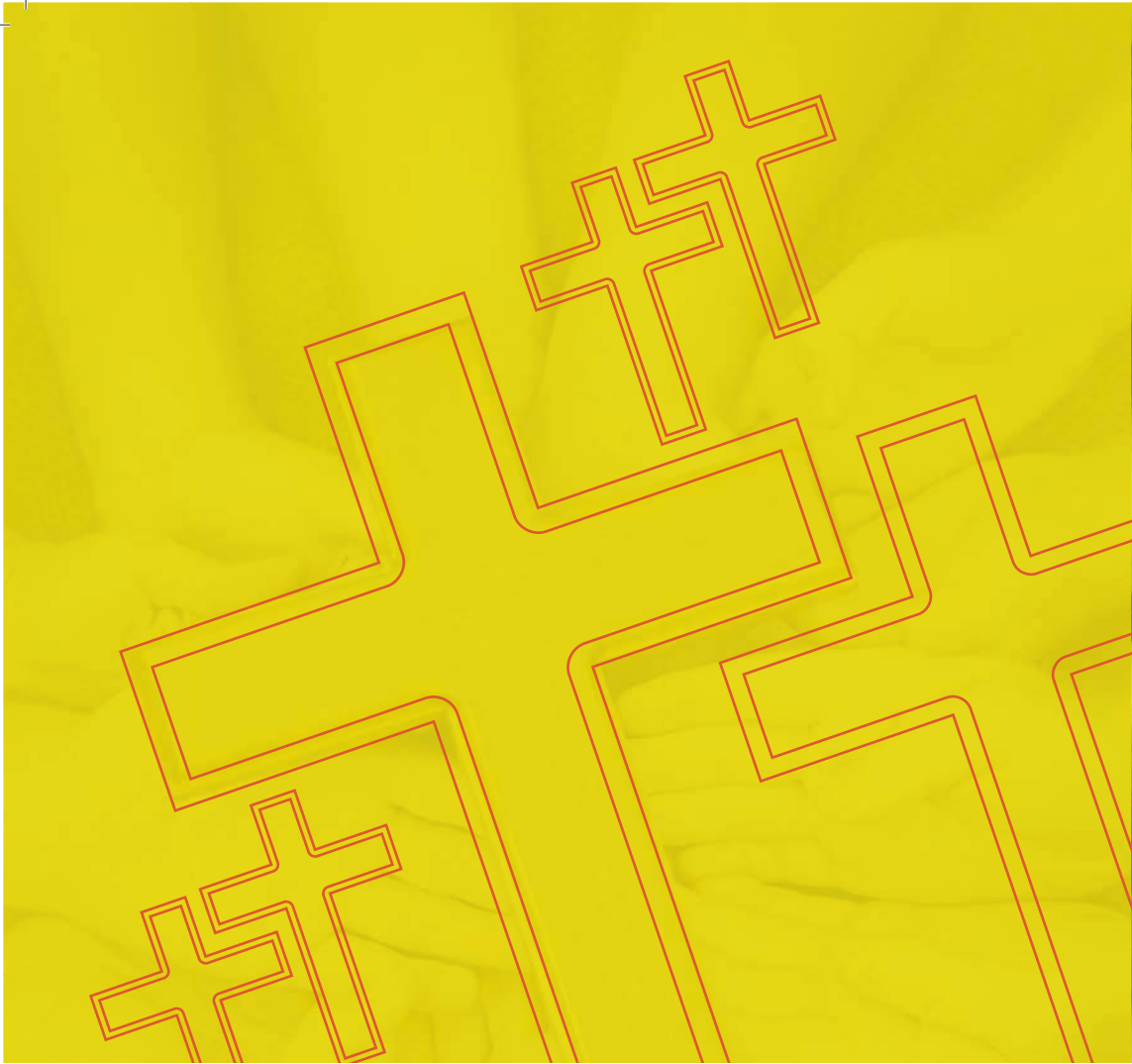
REFLECTION:

Read Ephesians 4:1-16

1. How can you find out which particular 'works of service' Christ has equipped you for as a congregation? (verse 12)
2. It is clear from Scripture that God calls us to unity. What might that unity look like in your congregation and community?

"Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you." 2 Corinthians 13:11 (TNIV)





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