

Report

on the Sixth World Conference on Faith & Order (WCC)

24-28 October 2025 in Wadi El Natrun, Egypt



Introduction and Background

On the 1700th anniversary of the first ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.), the World Council of Churches' Faith & Order Commission held a conference in Wadi El-Natrun, Egypt, to consider the theme, "Where now for visible unity?"

Faith and Order is a central commission in the World Council of Churches (of which the PCANZ is a member). The Commission completes work on behalf of the WCC such as studies and joint statements. Most notably, Faith & Order produced the 1982 resource, "Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry" which showed a surprising degree of unity across the global churches on issues relating to the sacraments and ministry. It was followed up in 2012 by the statement, "The Church Towards a Common Vision". Up until now, there had only been five global conferences: Lausanne (1927), Edinburgh (1937), Lund (1952), Montreal (1963), and Santiago de Compostela (1993).

1700 years on from the first Council of Nicaea, the Conference in Wadi El Natrun considered the question, "Where now for visible unity?" The setting in Africa and the Global South informed the context. Archbishop Emerita of the Church of Sweden, Antje Jackelen, insisted that faith is always contextual. Any expression of unity, while affirming the tradition of Nicaea, must grapple with the legacy of colonisation, the allegiance of the church with the forces of Empire, the historic neglect of creation, and the erosion of truth in a post-truth and populist age.



Mor Coorilose Geevarghese addresses the Assembly

There was much conversation at the Conference about how the ecumenical movement has evolved over the last century and what visible unity might look in our current context. In the final plenary entitled "Ecumenical Future", Mor Coorilose Geevarghese of the Jacobite Malankara Syriac Orthodox Church offered a helpful framework. He distinguished between "ecumenism of the head", "ecumenism of the heart", and "ecumenism of the feet". In my reflections below, I have chosen to use Geevarghese's framework.

Ecumenism of the head

Often we talk about unity in terms of shared belief. “Ecumenism of the head” is finding unity in the ways we think and talk about God. For many churches globally, this shared belief is enshrined in the Nicene Creed, which summarises fundamental tenets of the Christian faith, such as the divinity and humanity of Christ and the resurrection from the dead.

On the 1700th anniversary of Nicaea, the Sixth World Conference on Faith & Order celebrated what was achieved at Nicaea and affirmed the common faith which the Creed articulates. The Creed was a remarkable theological achievement and has served as a symbol of Christian unity across space and time. The Conference also grappled with the complex history of both the Council of Nicaea and its legacy. For instance:

1) Nicaea and Heresy. Nicaea is often described as a great victory over the dangerous heresy of Arius. However, Ms Suk Yi Pang of the Church of Christ China pointed out that this is a simplistic rendering of history. The Arian controversy, as we receive it, is history from the side of the winner. After Nicene Christianity became dominant, most of Arius’ works were burned and his followers exiled and persecuted. We only have fragments of what he said and therefore largely only know what his critics said of him. Furthermore, Arius was by no means a lone voice. For many years, Arianism was “mainstream” in Christianity, not a fringe sectarian breakaway.



Ms Suk Yi Pang, Hong Kong Council Church of Christ China

With this in mind, while we can still affirm Nicene Christianity, it is also helpful to critically reflect on how we tell our history and how the church responds to theological difference. Some have come to question the legacy established by Nicaea. In the words of Rev Dr Susan Durbur: “for some among our churches, creeds first of all symbolize not a celebration of shared and unified faith but an imposed conformity and a denial of freedom of faith and conscience.” Particularly for liberation, indigenous and post-colonial theologians, this dark side of Nicaea must be grappled with. At the Conference, questions were asked like: *who is calling for unity and on whose terms? Is desire for unity merely part of the colonial project?*

2) Nicaea and Empire. The Council of Nicaea gathered at the behest of the Roman Emperor Constantine, whose motives were unclear. On the surface it appears that Constantine genuinely pursued peace and unity in the church. But there was also a political advantage to be gained. A united faith and a centralised church was an effective way to maintain peace, cohesion, and control across the Empire.

Some in the Church see Constantine as a saint and argue that, even if Constantine’s motives were impure, the bishops were nonetheless able to discern the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith in a faithful and timeless way. Others emphasise that Nicaea is to be understood in context and that the truths articulated at the Council, while affirmed today, must also allow space for theologies to emerge in different contexts with new language, imagery, and ways of knowing.

Furthermore, the Council is seen by some as the beginning of a long and often-times ugly relationship of the Church with Empire. As we have seen throughout history, faith and institutional structures can be used to control and oppress. As Dr Mano Emmanuel from Sri Lanka expressed: “Harmony can stifle dissent and voices from the margins.”

3) Legitimate diversity? All of this raises a question of how we deal with theological difference in the church. Metropolitan Dr Job of Pisidia affirmed that diversity is not opposed to unity. We shouldn't all be forced to think the same way. But are there limits to diversity, he asked? How do we decide where those limits are today? And who decides what is "legitimate diversity" and what falls outside the realm of orthodox Christianity?

Dr Job of Pisidia stated that a line is crossed when "common confession of Jesus Christ as God and Saviour as proclaimed in the Holy Spirit and preached by the apostolic community" becomes impossible. He went on to point out, however, that the Church has not worked out an effective means of fairly judging when "common confession of Jesus Christ" is no longer possible. What may be acceptable to one person may be totally unacceptable to another, and the difference of opinion typically comes down to a matter of interpretation of the Bible and of church tradition.

Ecumenism of the heart



For these reasons, while ecumenical efforts to reach consensus on matters of doctrine and polity are worthwhile, they are also limited in what they can achieve because there will always be differences that divide us. If believing the same thing is the basis of the church's unity, it is a shaky foundation. Indeed, the history of a fractured and divided church bears witness to its instability. The World Council of Churches celebrates the diversity of the church while condemning its ongoing division as "scandalous".

More recent ecumenical dialogues have shifted towards an "ecumenism of the heart". An "ecumenism of the heart" emphasises gathering together, building relationship and trust, standing in solidarity on issues where we can agree, and respecting and seeking to understand one another when we can't.

What ultimately unites us is not our shared beliefs *about* Jesus Christ, but our communion *in* him. Consequently, the purpose of the World Council of Churches is not to create a "superchurch" or homogenous system of faith. Antje Jackelen helpfully distinguished between *fides quae* (what we believe) and *fides qua* (the act of believing). Both are important, but she suggests that the church would do well to focus its efforts less on believing the same things and more on the act of believing together through our shared witness and communion.

In this light, the *Creed* of Nicaea falls more into the background while the *Council* itself comes to the fore. Yes, the Creed is and will continue to be a central document in the church's faith. But perhaps the greatest achievement of Nicaea was the act of the global church gathering for the first time to discern together in a conciliar way.

Honouring the Council of Nicaea means continuing to discern together even when there are theological and social issues that deeply divide us. Unity is hard precisely because we are different. Minimising difference as "diversity" does not do justice to the genuine "otherness" when we encounter people who think and act differently than we do. Consequently, Suk Yi Pang argued that unity is less about ontology (i.e. we are already one and therefore differences are minimised, stifled, or rejected) and more about ethics (we become one as we learn to see Christ in and to love the other). This ethics-based approach to ecumenism sums up an "ecumenism of the heart".

Ecumenism of the feet

In the closing plenary entitled “Ecumenical Future”, Geevarghese suggested that a new, emerging ecumenism must centre on the “feet”. While the head is for thinking, and the heart is for feeling, the feet are for walking. Furthermore, the feet are at the extremities of the body and the closest to the dirt. It was the job of servants to wash the feet of their masters. In light of this, an “ecumenism of the feet” focuses on the church’s visible unity in loving service, in solidarity with the poor and marginalised, and through a pursuit of justice for those who are made low.

According to Prof Dr Miroslav Volf, we are currently going through a time of “epochal change” comparable in significance to the industrial or agricultural revolutions. Today, there is “an absence of normalcy” which has been enjoyed for much of the world since the end of World War II. In Antje Jackelen’s words, the church’s faith must account for the “polycrisis” of our day and age. She mentioned the five “poisonous P’s” (polarisation, populism, protectionism, post-truth, and patriarchy) which are exacerbating wicked problems like climate change, loss of biodiversity, and growing inequality.



Prof Dr Miroslav Volf

The ecumenical efforts of the past were right for their time. Indeed, we will continue to need an ecumenism of the “head” and “heart” in the future. But these alone do not compel the church to engage beyond itself. The ecumenical project can very easily become inward looking as the church focuses on its own internal divisions and strife. In today’s climate of epochal change, Geevarghese reasoned, the church must engage in a different kind of ecumenism which shifts the focus away from the church to those who suffer injustice.



Rev Dr Jackline Makena from Kenya

As Rev Jackline Makena put it: “Cheap justice breeds cheap unity.” If the church’s unity is imposed from above and does not take account of the voices on the margins, it is not a rich and enduring unity. By contrast, an ecumenism that finds expression in solidarity with the poor and marginalised (including creation) is one that places itself with Jesus and his ministry in the world.

Concluding Reflection

With the context of the PCANZ in mind, I offer some concluding comments:

1. **Receiving our tradition differently.** One theologian at the Conference asked: “how can Nicaea be received without it being a memory of Empire?” He was articulating that orthodox Christianity has often been inextricably bound up with imperial expansion, patriarchal structures, colonisation, and ecological destruction. It is not enough to simply reaffirm the creeds and confessions of the past. How can we receive the past differently? As the PCANZ comes to terms with the history of colonisation in Aotearoa and its ongoing effects, this question of *how* we critically remember while remaining faithful to the past is vital.
2. **Division over doctrine.** The Conference affirmed that “more unites us than divides us”. However, it also became clear that issues that divide us run deep and are often irreconcilable. We see the same within the PCANZ. Understanding unity as *uniformity* is fraught. The complex

legacy of Nicaea reveals that, when unity is imposed from above it is often experienced as conformity. In light of this, is it time for the PCANZ to reconsider some commonly used concepts like “fundamental doctrines” or “subordinate standards”? This language implies a standard of uniformity that can be restrictive and lead to a dishonesty in the church i.e. when diverse opinions which already exist are not given legitimacy. How do we affirm our common confession in Jesus Christ as God and Saviour in faithfulness to our tradition, while allowing space for diverse theologies to emerge?

3. **The prominence of the Global South.**

Some of the most exciting theology at the Conference came from theologians and church leaders in the Global South. For instance, in its pre-conference meeting, the Pacific Region produced a Pasifika Creed, weaving Pacific languages and concepts into the historic Nicene Creed to produce an original piece of theological and liturgical reflection; Rev Tara Tautari of the Methodist Church gave a brilliant address at the conference; theologians from the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa, the Pacific and Southeast Asia were calling for justice for indigenous and marginalised peoples and for the planet. Situated in the Global South, the PCANZ would do well to listen to these voices and the theologies that are emerging from the ground up. In our churches and in our regional and national gatherings, who is at the decision-making table? Who needs a seat at the table? And what space needs to be made in order for all to have a place?



Delegates gather together for evening worship

Furthermore, younger voices from the Global South were overwhelmingly calling for the Church to step up in responding to some of the challenges of our age, such as climate change, social fragmentation, racism, sexism and ableism. The WCC has just begun “the Ecumenical Decade of Climate Justice Action”. If Miroslav Volf is correct that we are living through a time of “epochal change” where there is “an absence of normalcy”, what prominence are we giving to these issues in the PCANZ? We must consider afresh who Jesus Christ is for us today.

4. **Generosity towards one another.** In the opening address, Rev Prof Dr Stephanie Dietrich remarked that the goal of the World Council of Churches is not to *achieve* visible unity, but rather to *call* one another to visible unity”. This call is from God, but it is also from and to one another: an invitation into relationship. The end *is* the means when we honour that call in gathering together. Prof Dr Sandra Beardsall similarly urged the churches to be *generous* with one another. A generosity of spirit to receive with love and respect those who are different to us will go a long way. It is a good reminder for the PCANZ too. How can we allow generous space for a breadth of witness while still affirming the common faith in which we believe?

Personal note

On a personal note, it was an honour to be the PCANZ delegate. I enjoyed the connections I made and found the addresses and dialogues stimulating. I was heartened by the kind of conversations being had at the Conference, which were a soothing balm to much of the inflammatory rhetoric we hear in

politics and in the public square right now. Thanks to the Global Mission Office for making a significant contribution towards the costs of my attendance.



Some of the Delegates from the Pacific, including myself (far left) and Rev Dr Tara Tautari of the Methodist Church (centre)

In Christ,
Rev Dr Jordan Redding
PCANZ Delegate at the 6th World Conference on Faith & Order