



Religious identity through unification

Eduqas A level R.S. G1A Christianity Theme 4D

Key Concepts:

- The ecumenical movement (Greek '**oikoumene**' meaning 'entire, inhabited world') strives to create unity amongst the many denominations that make up Christianity.
- The movement sees its mandate in the prayer of Jesus for unity in **John 17:21**.
- There was a great deal of unity – but also schisms – prior to 1054; since this date with the reformation and subsequent splintering in Protestantism, the Christian Church has developed widely different practices and theologies.
- The World Missionary Conference (**WMC**) brought together 1200 missionaries from 160 missionary boards in an attempt to build cooperation. Their slogan was 'doctrine divides but service unites'. This was solely an evangelical Protestant event, neither the RCC nor Orthodox Churches were invited.
- This conference kick-started a number of initiatives which led to the formation of the World Council of Churches (**WCC**). This includes the International Missionary Conference (**IMC**) (1921), The **Life and Work Movement** (1925; promoting social responsibility) and the **Faith and Order Movement** (1927; considering doctrinal differences).
- These last two groups, in 1937 proposed the WCC in 1937; this was delayed due to WWII.
- The World Council of Churches first met in Amsterdam in **1948** with 351 delegates from 147 church bodies, defining itself as a 'fellowship of churches' and described by outsiders as an 'ecclesiastical United Nations'.
- Today there are **350 church bodies** involved, including Orthodox, Anglican, United and many other Churches. The Roman Catholic Church is not a member, though it participates in two subgroups with full voting rights: The Faith and Order and World Mission and Evangelism Commissions.
- The WCC defines its mission as '**visible unity** of the Church' which includes striving for a common confession, sacramental life, mission and service.
- Three main areas of its work are
 - (i) Unity, Mission and Ecumenical Relations. This is the area related to the prayer of Jesus and has resulted in the ground-breaking document 'Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry' (**BEM**) (1982) which explores agreements and disagreements in this area.
 - (ii) Public Witness and Diakonia extends the legacy of the Life and Work movement, raising awareness of Churches in politically troubled areas and sponsoring initiatives aimed at global health, women's rights and HIV – to name a few.
 - (iii) Ecumenical formation is the area of training and education aimed at raising the profile of Christian unity in churches around the globe. The WCC's **Ecumenical Institute** at Bossey, near Geneva, acts as a centre for this work.

Key arguments/debates:

Some see the WCC as a failure, for the RCC, larger than all of the churches in the WCC combined, is not a full member. Furthermore, tensions within threaten it. For example, some Protestant and Orthodox members are concerned that 'mission' is interpreted as interfaith dialogue and human rights rather than conversion. Yet, the WCC represents a half a billion Christians worldwide and involves Catholics in some of their commissions. If ecumenism is a journey and not a destination, then surely it can be seen as successful, considering that there has been nothing like it in the history of the Church.

Some say that the WCC is achieving its aims despite the lack of full member status of RCCs. The RC declaration, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, recognises that there are Christians outside of the WCC – yet this same document insists that the true Church 'subsists' in the RCC. Is this not absolutist? Doesn't belief in a divinely ordained Papacy and Magisterium rule out church Unity on WCC terms? However, the WCC is only 70 years old; relatively young in the life of Christianity.

Key questions:

- Do the numbers involved in the WCC point to success or failure?
- Does the breadth and vitality of the WCC's programmes point to success or failure?
- How is the WCC weakened by denominations thinking they are the 'true Church'?
- Can you make a case for the involvement of the RCC in the WCC being both positive and negative for the future of the ecumenical movement?

Key quotes:

"That they might be one. As you, Father, 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 17:21)

*"Catholicism's observer status with the WCC would seem to have become more or less a permanent condition."
(J. Allen)*

Key words:

Oikoumene | John 17:21 | WMC | WCC | IMC | Life and Work Movement | Faith and Order Movement | 1948 | 350 church bodies | visible unity | BEM | Ecumenical Institute