

## Ecumenical space expanded for whom?

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In this article we are setting out to address the dire need for reorientation within the ecumenical movement. In so doing, we are going to argue for a shift of emphasis that will take the notion of “ecumenical space” seriously. The traditional option for ecumenical agreements so as to achieve a progressively higher level of unity seems to have reached a dead end. The very ideal of visible unity is also under threat.

We are going to do three things. First, after a paragraph on the very notion of space, we will identify the emergence of the concept ecumenical space within the ecumenical movement itself and argue for its relevance in this same movement on a global scale. Second, we will use the ecumenical endeavours in South Africa as a case study and try to find out why there so far seems to be no tendency to make use of such a notion in the present struggle for Christian and church unity. We will only be able to hint at certain crucial factors that have meant that the ecumenical movement in South Africa has been and is losing ground. Third, we will turn to the current discussion within the World Council of Churches (WCC) on the need for a space, be it “ecumenical” or “expanded,” leading us towards the 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly in Busan, South Korea. Drawing from the earlier conceptualization of space in WCC thinking towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we argue that ecumenical space remains a powerful tool in progressive, ecumenical thinking in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Space

Space is a geographical term, but it is also social, political and theological. It is not a bad idea to start from the geographical and physical end, as it will have a bearing on all the others. “[S]pace is directly lived, through its associated images and symbols and hence the space of inhabitants and users . . . It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects.”<sup>1</sup> A space will be understood through our “spatial practices – for instance in working, walking or worshipping but also through the buildings and their forms that frame our potential to act.”<sup>2</sup>

Building on this physical and geographical definition of space, one may continue further and say that space could be seen as a product of interrelations, as coexisting heterogeneity, and as

<sup>1</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 38f; Henrik Widmark, “Space, Materiality and the Politics of Leaving,” in *For the Sake of the World: Swedish Ecclesiology in Dialogue with William T Cavanaugh*, ed. Jonas Ideström (Eugene: Pickwick [Church of Sweden, Research Series 3], 2009), 49–64, 55.

<sup>2</sup> Widmark, “Space,” 54.































for one's own agenda or pet projects. But we have already provided what one could call a core definition articulated by Raiser: Commitment to Christ will open such a space.

In addition one should also say that the mission to serve the whole oikoumene makes it necessary to work with or provide auxiliary spaces, some of which would have "being human" or "being part of this world" as criterion.

The WCC has in fact reached consensus on very few points. One such, which became evident in the CUV process, is the search for visible unity, a conviction which must not be taken for granted and which must therefore be guarded at all costs. In striving for visible unity, it goes without saying that ecumenical space cannot just be an idea or a metaphor for something less tangible; above all it is a place where matter and spirit dwell together. The ecumenical space concept could be instrumental in the search for visible unity. It could also do away with two pitfalls: unity understood as uniformity, and, on the other hand, unity as allowing for laissez faire diversity. Nevertheless, ecumenical space offers room for difference as well as sameness. One could also wish that a properly utilized ecumenical space would be the end of the entrenched ecumenical reductionism that willingly has tried to avoid any element that might be deemed unacceptable to some. Liturgy belongs in this ecumenical space. We foresee a renewal confessional and beyond, with an abundance of unabridged, relevant, expressive, representative liturgies. Indeed, an ecumenical space under the auspices of the WCC would have the potential of becoming a place where the God of life could lead us to justice and peace.