

Ecumenical Accountability

What are our responsibilities to and for each other? — A document for study and response

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Preface

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Introduction

In the Gospel according to St. John, our Lord urges us to "Love one another as I have loved you." An important dimension of that love is our ability to understand and respect the feelings, traditions, beliefs, and rituals of those who differ from us. As we find ourselves living in closer proximity to each other, we need to be accountable to those whose lives we touch.

In this context, the Massachusetts Council of Churches presents this guide to issues of ecumenical accountability. It has been prepared by an inclusive Working Group, which spent hours in dialogue about these issues. We hope that you will find it not only a help, but also a way in which you can expand your own knowledge about what it means to be ecumenically accountable in the areas of worship, pastoral care, protocol, evangelism, and social witness. As the Working Group struggled with all these issues, we became increasingly aware that pastors and parishes live in a context and under a discipline which informs ecumenical relations. We hope this guide will promote sensitive ecumenical relationships through increased awareness of the issues involved.

The document is intended for study, use, and response. The Massachusetts Council of Churches invites feedback from ecumenical commissions, local councils of churches, parish clergy and laity – indeed, anyone who uses this document. We encourage you to make use of the response form at the end of this document to let us know of your positive input and/or criticism. The Working Group will be reconvened at an appropriate time to review these responses.

In preparing this guide, our Working Group has used a long-standing ecumenical principle; that churches "act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately." (Section 3, Report of Lund Third World Conference on Faith and Order, 1952) Today, we are challenged to act by this principle in a responsible and caring way. This guide is a tool for that purpose.

An additional bit of advice that we, as a committee, add to all that follows is: NEVER BE BASHFUL. WHEN YOU ARE IN DOUBT, ALWAYS ASK!

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Ecumenical Accountability — A Definition

Ecumenical accountability is the living out concretely of the irrevocable mandate toward unity. Christ calls Christians to this unity at all times and in all places.

Ecumenical accountability is mutual commitment to a mutual faithfulness in mutual responsibility. Our accountability to each other should lead us to be sensitive and to avoid any speech and/or action that would make the living out of this call more difficult. Humility should enable us as individuals and churches to look honestly at ourselves and to renew and reform the elements that make us stumbling blocks to one another.

Our dream for unity is that the churches will be grounded in the apostolic faith, and that we will make this unity visible through eucharistic fellowship and witness. Unity, however, does not mean uniformity. Within the Christian community, we need to celebrate a rich diversity which flourishes. Ecumenism consists not in losing the distinctive features of our various traditions, but in appreciating them as many ways of proclaiming and demonstrating our common faith rooted in a common baptism. Where differences create barriers to our unity, we trust the transforming power of the Spirit to work in us and through us. In recognizing the legitimacy of this diversity, we avoid rigidity as we work toward a creative, inclusive, and growing unity.

The ultimate goal of oneness in Christ requires us to receive from one another and to live with one another, so that the world may believe in Christ who makes us one.

Accountability in Ecumenical Worship

Ecumenical worship occurs when Christians from different traditions prepare and celebrate together their common prayer and praise of God. Occasions when this might occur include a gathering of a council of churches, a special ecumenical convocation, a Martin Luther King Day or Thanksgiving service, special celebrations during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, etc.

Ecumenical Worship is an area of our ongoing life as separated Christians where differences and distinctions become clearly apparent. Ecumenical worship tests our ability and commitment to be Christ's followers, praise God together, and learn to pray and worship in the presence of other Christians, according to differing traditions. Through this experience, we allow God to mold us into that Body which is then capable of demonstrating and proclaiming reconciling Love.

Ecumenical worship is distinct from confessional acts of worship, which belong to a particular tradition but may be open to others.

The ecumenical dimension of worship will vary in our churches regarding form, context and scope. The form and/or text of a service often borrows from existing denominational sources or from significant ecumenical events. These sources might include the World Council of Churches, (i.e. *With all God's People - Resources for Worship*, the National Council of Churches or local conciliar bodies). Other models for ecumenical worship may be provided from annual events such as the National Workshop on Christian Unity, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (Graymoor, Garrison, New York), and the World Day of Prayer (Church Women United).

Ecumenical worship occurs in differing contexts according to circumstance and need, whenever and wherever Christians of varying traditions intentionally come together to witness and celebrate their life in Christ. In some traditions this also may include specific times of celebrating rites of passage (baptisms, marriages, funerals) as well as times of special celebration or catastrophe.

It is important to recognize that certain acts of worship have ecumenical components but are not necessarily acts of truly ecumenical worship. Bi-lateral or multi-lateral celebrations, by their very nature or definition, are not fully ecumenical acts of worship if they exclude other Christians from full participation.

Guidelines:

Initial Preparation

In preparing services of Ecumenical Worship, it is prudent not to borrow haphazardly from various Christian traditions, but rather to use the richness of hymnody, prayers, and forms of liturgy from these traditions to create a service that is internally coherent.

Inclusive Planning Process

1. Responsible representatives from each tradition should be involved in each part of the planning process. Feelings can be hurt when matters of protocol are ignored or not known by the planners. A responsible representative knows what is appropriate and what is not in your setting.
2. When in doubt, *ask*; *don't assume* anything about another tradition.
3. Reflection by planners afterward provides learnings for future events.

Participation

Participate as fully as conscience allows. Remember that individuals may not wish to accept an invitation because of their inability to reciprocate.

Pastoral Opportunities

In some traditions it is appropriate to explore pastoral opportunities in which Christians from different traditions can be involved ecumenically in the preparation for significant events, including baptisms, marriages, and funerals. Pastors from differing traditions can serve as healthy role models in their joint preparation of couples contemplating holy matrimony and in preparing parents and godparents for holy baptism, as well as working with bereaved family members who come from different Christian churches. In circumstances where there are no canonical barriers or prohibitions, such events should be celebrated ecumenically, reflecting the uniqueness and integrity of each tradition represented.

Holy Communion

1. Where Protestants, Orthodox, and Roman Catholics are formally gathered together, Holy Communion is not an option for ecumenical worship and other provisions for worship should be made.
2. In situations where celebrating Holy Communion ecumenically can be inclusive and therefore appropriate, it is recommended that orders of worship be used that were designed and composed in an ecumenical context. Liturgies prepared by the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) or the World Council of Churches (e.g. the Lima Liturgy) provide excellent models which should be adapted according to local need and circumstance.
3. In circumstances where some Christians, due to conscience, are not able to respond to an invitation to receive Holy Communion, it is important to be sensitive to that reality and to find other ways which would help such persons to feel included (e.g. act as lectors, ushers, alms and oblation bearers, etc.)
4. Leavened or unleavened bread is acceptable in most Christian traditions; however, the use of grape juice in addition to wine should be provided in those ecumenical celebrations of the Eucharist involving any group with a prohibition against the use of alcohol.
5. Reverent consumption or disposal of the Communion elements should be observed.

Vestments

Leaders and participants in ecumenical worship express outwardly the principle of unity-in-diversity by wearing or not wearing vestments according to their tradition.

Colors and other symbols

The use of liturgical colors or other symbols (bells, flowers, incense, water, fruit, etc.) should be used with appropriate explanation as to the intended meaning in their ecumenical context.

Ecumenical Accountability in Pastoral Concerns

In preparation for the celebration of Christian Worship, a number of *pastoral concerns* may arise. These concerns in ecumenical relations require thoughtful cooperation in areas of common responsibility, with sensitivity to differing principles and traditions within the Christian communities involved.

Guidelines:

Baptism

Christian baptism is traditionally administered with water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt. 28:19). Because this act provides the basis for mutual recognition of baptism, it provides the basis for unity and is administered to persons according to the practice of particular churches. By virtue of baptism all baptized persons become members of the body of Christ and in a relationship to a particular ecclesial community where their baptism is recorded. In most Christian traditions, baptism is an unrepeatable act.

Christian marriage

The marriage of two Christians belonging to different ecclesial communities of churches presents positive opportunities as well as occasion for difficulties, since the marriage ceremony so deeply affects both the marriage partners and their families. Accordingly, the following guidelines are recommended:

1. Since a *church building* is where the community of faith gathers to celebrate, it is appropriate that baptized Christians be married in a church. By custom this is normally the bride's church unless there are significant reasons otherwise.
2. *The pastor of the church is the primary authority for the marriage rite*, subject to the discipline of his or her church, and normally should be the principal officiant. Upon the invitation of the host pastor, other clergy, especially the non-parishioner's pastor or representative, may be welcome to assist or otherwise participate in the ceremony. Their vesture should be appropriate to their own church's customary usage. The rite needs to be acceptable to the wedding couple jointly, mindful that the limits of liturgical variance may be prescribed by the requirements of the host church's denomination. Provision for traditional, contemporary, or inclusive language texts, specific rites for vows and blessing, and Holy Communion, are among subjects for agreement as to their use.
3. The pastors of the marriage couple are expected to provide *marriage preparation counseling* over an extended period (e.g. the Roman Catholic requirement is six months). This period is to provide full discussion of the meaning and purpose of Christian marriage, vows, parenthood, church and state requirements for licenses and witnesses, religious education of the couple and their children, and the faith and practice of each other's religious communities including marriage outside one's own

church or denomination. Issues of divorce, annulment, and remarriage also may require additional counseling and actions.

4. *The music* is always subject to the church's own requirements. Normally the wedding church's organist or musician is responsible for the music and is expected to play after consultation with the wedding couple. Some churches require that their organist, if available, is entitled to his or her fee even if another organist actually will play for the wedding.
5. *Local requirements and priorities of the church* and congregation are to be respected; rehearsal time, sexton's required presence, lights, keys, heat, no flash photography during the service nor throwing of rice or confetti; placement of flowers, candles, aisle runner, etc.

Funerals

Baptized Christians are properly buried from a church when possible. *Funerals often are appropriate occasions for ecumenical participation*, subject to the circumstances of the ceremony and the practice of the church and denomination involved. The clergy of other churches may be invited to participate in the service upon invitation of the host church's pastor. This is particularly appropriate when family members may belong to other denominations.

Ecumenical Accountability in Protocol

Ecumenical protocol involves interacting graciously with members of other churches, understanding their traditions and customs, showing genuine respect for persons and for the offices they may hold in those churches.

Since our churches have many differences, people who engage in ecumenical activity need to know:

1. How to identify, and give respectful recognition of their varied officers and other members
2. How to communicate clearly and properly with appropriate persons in the church's organization

Some examples of the need for ecumenical protocol follow:

1. In correspondence, and at public gatherings, what are the *appropriate titles and forms of salutation* for church leaders and ministers? (e.g. "the Reverend Mr. or Ms.", "Father", "Your excellency", "Doctor", or just plain Mr., Mrs., or Ms.)
2. When ministers gather from different churches for ecumenical purposes, what *order of procession or seating* should be followed? How are clergy of non-Christian religions recognized? (e.g. Rabbi, Imam) How are secular leaders recognized on such occasions? (e.g. mayor, senator, representative)
3. When organizing ministers at a *confessional* worship service, how are visiting clergy placed with respect to clergy of one's own tradition? How are visiting clergy placed with respect to each other? Is it appropriate to recognize certain bonds of unity which exist? (e.g. Roman Catholic and Orthodox, UCC and Disciples)

4. How should *individuals of special stature* be recognized? (e.g. Archbishop of Canterbury, WCC General Secretary)
5. What significance is given to heads of churches? (e.g.. Patriarchs of Eastern churches, a General in the Salvation Army, President of the UCC)

Guidelines:

1. The basic guideline which undergirds all others is to respect other people and their traditions. A corollary of this is that there should be *no surprises* at an ecumenical occasion. When inviting others to any form of worship, the host pastor, presider, or church should indicate briefly (a) the program or structure of the service, (b) the role the guest is to take (e.g. in procession, during the service, afterward,) and (c) the appropriate attire (Note: For specifics with regard to appropriate attire and participation in worship, refer to guidelines on Ecumenical Worship). Visitors should check beforehand if in doubt about any matters. Know what you are doing. When in doubt, *ask*. If, in spite of all due care being taken, the unexpected occurs, openness and graciousness often can redeem the situation and prevent future problems.
2. When *corresponding* with a member of another church, be sure to *use the correct title*. (e.g. Bishop, Archbishop, Chairperson, Clerk), the correct salutation (e.g. Father, Ms., Rev. Mr.), and the correct spelling or pronunciation of the name of the person. (Note: Traditional protocol for Protestant clergy has one *introduce* an ordained person *simply* as Mr., Mrs., Ms., or with a title such as Dr. if the person has such a degree. However, when *writing* such persons they are addressed as the Rev. Mr. (or Mrs. or Ms. or Dr.). In some traditions now, however, the use of the spoken address, (Rev. N.), is accepted. It is wise to check discreetly to discover what a person prefers.)
3. At a *confessional* gathering, when arranging the order in which clergy or officers of *other* churches process or are seated, the person in charge (e.g. master or mistress of ceremonies) should take care to give appropriate places and greeting, according to the traditions of the *host* confession. The host church also should indicate proper attire (e.g. vestments: if so, what kind) and manner of participation (e.g. concelebration, welcome to the eucharist, receiving the blessed bread). Guests may respond according to the canons of their own tradition, and may decline participation if their tradition so stipulates.
4. When arranging an *ecumenical* meeting or worship service, the person in charge should arrange processions and seating according to a *functional* order (e.g. presiding person, speakers, lectors). Other positions should be assigned at random, and participants should be informed that this is the policy.

Ecumenical Accountability in Evangelism

Christian witness is the sharing of the unique Gospel of God's love and grace *known in Jesus, the Christ*. Such sharing is by definition reciprocal: the sharer, whether individual or corporate, listens as well as speaks. It is based on our ecclesial formulations and preaching of God's revelation, which are distinct from the mystery of faith: the God who transcends human language while being revealed in and through Christ.

Christian witness to faith will recognize that faith includes not only personal experience and recognition of Biblical truth, but also the traditions and creedal formulations of the historic Church in its various traditions. Because God has made each sharer a unique person and representative of a unique institution, Christian witness will include a variety of content and styles within the parameters of witness to the Gospel.

Christian witness may include but is not exhausted by institutional recruitment. Membership recruitment is important but does not exhaust the meaning of evangelism.

In a context of "cultural Christianity" Christian witness must be a witness which says something, giving witness to an understanding of truth, while avoiding the hubris of saying too much, making exclusive or imperialistic claims to truth. ("God defined is God finished!")

Guidelines:

1. In programs or services with the stated purpose of Christian witness, care should be taken to *present the Gospel without undue emphasis on denominational distinctives*. (Denominational distinctives are a significant part of history, but are distinguishable from what Christians throughout history have regarded as essential to the Gospel.)

For example, in a religious census that includes a larger intention to involve non-believers, all neighborhood Christian churches should appear in handouts, normally arranged in a random order, except that the sponsoring group could be listed first. Interdenominational evangelistic meetings should offer participation to all Christian churches in the community.

2. The focus of interdenominational (and denominational) evangelistic endeavors will be to share the Gospel without denigration of denominational distinctives.
3. Ecumenical accountability in Christian witness will be *sensitive to historic relationships*, choosing normally to reach the unbeliever rather than to awaken and shift the nominal believer. Ecumenical partners recognize, however, that cultural mobility is an inevitable and even appropriate phenomenon in American society and may include movement among denominations.

Ecumenical Accountability in Social Witness

In the name of Christ, Christians of various traditions seek to be signs of life, love, and justice in our world. When united in *advocacy and service*, we can be more effective stewards of creation, more faithful witnesses to the Gospel, and more powerful enablers of social justice. Too often, we go our own way.

Christian pursuit of love and justice has its origin in the nature of God, the self-giving One from whom all receive life. *Christian social witness is the demonstration of respect and concern for all people, who are made in the image of God.*

Guidelines

1. The concerns of our time no longer can be perceived as "the other person's problem." Matters such as care for the sick and dying, human tragedies, natural disasters, the abuse of the environment, oppression or injustice - all call for our response.
2. **For example, if a community is devastated by flooding, area churches banding together can discern the most appropriate response, and then coordinate relief efforts. Ecumenical accountability in social witness entails responding to these concerns cooperatively,**

whenever differences of conviction do not compel our churches to act separately. Too often, our inclination is toward unilateral action.

3. Whenever possible, *all participants should be involved in the planning from the very beginning*. Churches which have been invited to share in the design of a program are more likely to take part fully in its implementation.
4. Ecumenical responsibility in social witness also is demonstrated by *sharing resources* (e.g. draft statements, resolutions, background papers, human expertise). Often, denominations will wrestle with the same issues at the same time (e.g. the ecological crisis, reform of the health care system), and prepare policies and programs for approval by authoritative bodies. The sharing of such resources often is mutually beneficial.
5. Sometimes churches agree about a public policy, but disagree about the theological and ethical rationale they use to reach their position. *They share the same conclusion, but argue the case differently*. In such cases, churches should look for ways to *address the concern in parallel form*.
6. For example, when church leaders in one region found that they all opposed capital punishment, but for different reasons, they agreed to issue separate statements, but released them simultaneously, to underscore their unity on the issue.
7. Sometimes churches *share concern about a common problem, but are divided about an appropriate solution*. Whenever possible, they should strive to make common statements of concern, even if they are not in full agreement about the remedies. Mutual responses amidst differences are important because, despite our disagreements, we share common problems. In a world of differences, the churches at least can voice their common care and concern.
8. *Churches sometimes disagree* about public policy issues. *Dialogue*, then, is a useful means of clarifying positions and increasing understanding. When public statements or actions are made, they should be issued in an atmosphere of *mutual respect*. If it is necessary to articulate an opposing view, this should be done *fully and fairly*. Whenever possible, churches should provide forewarning to each other before a public action occurs, as a gesture of good will, thus enabling others to be prepared if a response is necessary. For instance, as a courtesy and sign of mutual respect, a religious leader who is planning to release a major statement dealing with a public policy on abortion may want to send an advance copy to other religious leaders whose positions differ.

Glossary of Terms

Accountability

Responsibility; answering for one's actions.

Alms bearers

Those carrying the monetary offerings of the people. "Alms" properly refers to money, food, or clothing given to poor people.

Autocephalous church

Literally, having its own head. Each Orthodox church is self-ruling; therefore each has its own head, or patriarch.* This is true of both the churches which accept the Council of Chalcedon and those that do not.

Bi-lateral (or multi-lateral)

The terms refer to particular relationships between two churches (or a number of churches). Usually used to distinguish such relationships from ecumenical* relationships of a wider sort. (Examples: Lutheran-Reformed Conversations; Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue.)

Blessed Bread

Not the eucharistic bread; given as a gift to those leaving an Eastern Orthodox eucharistic* liturgy*.

Celebrate

In church usage the term refers to engaging in any liturgical rite, particularly the eucharist*.

Christian communities

Another way to refer to denominations* or church bodies, especially by those who may not consider the bodies they are referring to as, properly, churches.

Communion elements

The bread and wine used in the eucharist*.

COCU

The Consultation on Church Union. A multi-lateral conversation on achieving church unity* among a number of denominations* including the Episcopal, Disciples, United Church of Christ, Presbyterian, Methodist (United, Christian, African Episcopal, and African Episcopal Zion) and International Council of Community Churches.

Concelebration

An act where more than one ordained minister participates fully in a liturgical rite at one time.

Confessional

Having to do with a particular "confession" or denominational* tradition.

Conciliar

Having to do with councils of churches* or with ecumenical councils such as Nicea (325) and Chalcedon (425) or any future such ecumenical council. (The term also can be used to refer to a theological method.)

Canonical

Having to do with the canons, or laws, of a given church body; in those terms, lawful.

Church growth

An approach to evangelism which focuses on numerical growth and has as one of its tenets the "homogenous unit principle" which stresses congregations of people who are alike in as many ways as possible.

Corollary

A proposition that follows from one already proven or accepted. Anything that normally follows.

Councils of Churches

In today's world these refer to covenantal gatherings of churches or denominations* which seek to fulfill what has been called the "Lund principle": "to act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately". (Lund Report, 1952) Such councils may be on the local, state, national and international levels. (Massachusetts Council of Churches; National Council of Churches; World Council of Churches.)

Creedal formulations

Any formal statements of belief of a church or churches. They may be formal creeds such as the Apostles' Creed, or statements of what is normally and widely believed within a denomination* or confession*.

Cultural Christianity

This phrase refers to an attitude among some Christians that the church is to bless and sanctify culture rather than challenge it in a prophetic fashion. An extreme example would be the "German Christians" who supported Hitler and the Third Reich.

Denomination

A particular religious body, or church, with its own name, organization, and other identifying, characteristics.

Denominational distinctives

Those particular characteristics which a denomination* considers to be peculiar to its identity, e.g. believers' baptism for Baptists.

Ecclesial Communities

This phrase refers to churches in regard to that aspect of their being as communities; may also be used instead of "Christian communities"*.

Ecumenical

Literally, having to do with the whole world; specifically, having to do with the unity of the church.

Eucharist

Giving thanks. It refers to what is called, in the various traditions*, Holy Communion*, the Lord's Supper, and includes both the service of the Word and the service of the Sacrament.

Evangelism

The sharing of the good news of the Gospel. Implicit in such sharing is an invitation to become Christian. This may, but need not, include an attempt to convert other people to Christianity. Some groups understand it to be evangelism even when they seek to recruit other Christians to their own denomination* or Christian community*.

Guidelines

Suggested procedures or behaviors. Guidelines do not have the force of law or canons* but are strong suggestions.

Holy Communion

The eucharist; the Lord's Supper. The central rite of the Christian Church which centers on the Last Supper Jesus had with his disciples.

Hymnody

The singing of hymns; hymns collectively.

Imam

The spiritual leader of a Muslim congregation.

Inclusive language

Referring to language which makes all individuals feel included in the worship service. The "inclusive" character may be limited to the human dimension or also include inclusive language with regard to God. The end can be achieved both by using non-gender-specific language (humankind) or by using words referring to both genders (brothers and sisters).

Interdenominational

This term refers to doing things together as various denominations* but without necessarily having in mind the ecumenical* dimension of the activity.

Lectors

Readers; specifically those reading Scripture.

Liturgy

A service of worship particularly referring to its order and manner of being carried out. Sometimes referring specifically to the eucharist.

Multilateral

See "bilateral".

Oblation

An offering, especially, of thanksgiving to God; it refers especially to the bread and wine of the eucharist*.

Officiant

The person presiding at any worship service.

Patriarch

The highest ranking bishop of certain autocephalous* churches such as Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem.

Procession

An act of proceeding (normally, walking) in an orderly, formal way.

Protocol

An accepted code of ceremonial forms and courtesies which is considered proper in formal relationships especially among officials of various bodies; in the present instance, church bodies.

Rabbi

The spiritual leader of a Jewish congregation.

Religious census

A survey of a neighborhood regarding religious preference and church or synagogue membership. It is often used as a part of or prelude to membership recruitment. It can be done unilaterally or multilaterally*.

Rite

The prescribed form of words used in a worship service.

Ritual

A formal act constituting a religious service; a prescribed form of ceremonial procedure.

Salutation

A greeting, a "salute": e.g. "The Lord be with you."

Sexton

The janitor of a church.

Tradition

Originally, the handing down orally of beliefs, stories, customs. It has come to mean that which characterizes a denomination* or confession* (tradition with a small "t"). But more importantly it denotes teachings of the Church which are authoritative (Tradition with a capital "T").

Unity

Undividedness. In terms of the church, the goal of overcoming divisions within the body of Christ. The nature of that unity continues to be debated and discovered.

Vestments (or vesture)

Special garments worn when participating in worship, specifically when leading worship.

Witness

Giving testimony. One who attests to the truth of something. Witness can consist of words or actions that demonstrate faith.

Worship

Giving glory to God; worship is properly, always theocentric (centered on God).