

Column on time

Ecumenism in two shapes

Up till now my experience in ecumenism consisted of some local contacts. The discovery of my first half year as chairman of the general synod is, that at a higher level there are two kinds of ecumenism. The first I will call formal ecumenism. The second I call: ecumenism of encounter.

Formal ecumenism

The formal ecumenism is the Council of Churches, discussions with the bishops, agreements with other churches about who does what and not in the last place: who is paying for it. At international level as well there are a good many meetings. The Protestant Church is an active member of international ecumenism. The formal ecumenism as I call it. Essential, because there is a lot to discuss and to organize.

Ecumenism of encounter

There is also another ecumenism, which is rather flourishing lately. I call it the ecumenism of encounter. I am thinking of initiatives as 'We choose unity' and the National Synod. I am aware that both terms could cause confusion. Should all churches be united all at once? Is that step not way too large? Perhaps it is good to clarify that one church certainly is not the primary cause in both initiatives. Foremost it is about encounter, of persons and churches which already knew each other, but sometimes not at all. From Pentecostal to Remonstrant, and from Liberated to Armenians.

Encounter: highly necessary

Such an encounter is highly necessary, because thinking in characteristics is not unknown to Christians. A lot of unnecessary fear can be taken away when we meet face to face.

What appeals to me personally in this new shape of ecumenism is that it exists of a combination of inspiration and objectivity. You want to meet each other, hear what inspires the other. But it does not necessarily have to lead to all kind of conclusions and agreements, let alone to one church. You speak about your faith, not about churches. About Jesus and not about unification.

The journey is the purpose

Nobody knows where these initiatives lead. Maybe nowhere. At least not in the sense that there will be a tangible result in the near future. At that time the journey is the purpose and I could imagine worse destinations.

Formal ecumenism remains crucial

As far as I am concerned this second ecumenical journey is absolutely no disqualification of formal ecumenism. That remains crucial and should be able to count on the Protestant Church. And there as well good encounters occur..!

Meeting face to face

But aside from that it is good to take the other road, which for the time being has no other purpose than the encounter itself. Christians who meet face to face, do not hush up their differences, but also look for what they have in common. They are standing with both feet on the ground, but are also inspired. I am convinced that the time is right for this. And that the time is asking for this as well.

December 19th 2009 – Rev. Peter Verhoef, chairman of the general synod of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands.