

Ecumenical Guidelines

A Guideline of The Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada

1. Introduction

Strategic partnerships for the advancement of God’s Kingdom are vital. We will never reach the nations of the world in isolation; however, we must be wise and discerning in the kinds of partnerships in which we engage.

In seeking to establish a discernment pathway, we recognize that there is a high level of complexity and diversity in the area of ecumenical partnerships. In other words, how do we both understand and implement “entering into relationships with other like-minded churches for accountability, encouragement, and mission?”

At a foundational level, this is lived out as churches relating to each other in The Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA), regionally in districts, nationally as a denomination in Canada, and internationally through the Alliance World Fellowship.

Beyond those relationships, there are other spheres of partnership in which we can and should engage. As opportunities for partnership present themselves, more questions surface.

Therefore, simply making a list of which organizations are “in” or “out” is both extremely complicated and could result in grieving the Holy Spirit and minimizing our Kingdom advancement. This document is designed to provide congregations with discernment questions that will assist them to make wise decisions in the types of partnerships that will serve the Kingdom of God most effectively, taking special care in the areas of evangelism and discipleship.

2. Attentive Discernment

We want to introduce what we call “Attentive Discernment.” “Attentive” reflects the reality that we cannot and must not judge based on labels or stereotypes; rather, we must be attentive to the theology that is taught and the life that is lived. We must be willing to evaluate each potential partnership with an open heart and teachable spirit to hear what the Spirit is saying in this specific situation. Discernment reflects the need to be wise and careful in thinking through the various aspects of any partnership. This will include the type of partnership and the degree of connection.

Unity among Christians is certainly something that Jesus prayed for: *My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you 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 17:20-21).

The Apostle Paul urged us to endeavor to *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace* (Ephesians 4:3). The Bible also warns us, *Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?* (2 Corinthians 6:14).

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God’s curse! (Galatians 1:6-8).

We invite you as churches to consider the following discernment questions as a starting place in developing your own clarity and convictions in how to work with others in advancing God’s Kingdom.

2.1. What kind of partnership are we considering?

Expectations and agreements will be very different for partnerships around justice and compassion issues as opposed to evangelism and discipleship issues. When there is a common opinion or stance on an ethical,

moral, or social issue, we need to have the freedom to join with organizations, religious or not, that carry the same concerns and perspective that we do.

Standing up for traditional marriage, defending the right to life of the unborn, or fighting against pornography are examples of issues of deep passion shared by a variety of groups with varied religious perspectives and opinions about God.

To lend our support on these matters is both wise and powerful; however, if we are considering a partnership around evangelism and discipleship, other layers of discernment need to be employed.

2.2. Do we have common consensus on the core aspects of the Christian faith?

The Christian and Missionary Alliance has always cooperated in ministry with agencies and churches of evangelical perspective in the pursuit of Christ's mission and in obedience to our Lord's Great Commission. Matters of secondary theological importance that have been debated by orthodox believers for centuries shall not be deemed of sufficient importance to hinder believers from working together to proclaim the Gospel in those places where Christ's saving work is unknown.

Another way of stating this would be to affirm that the C&MA works freely with those believers who affirm the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds (both included in Hymns of the Christian Life, the C&MA hymnal) and who live Christ-centred, Spirit-empowered, Mission-focused lives.

It is vital to explore not only what is affirmed theologically, but also what is practised. The Spirit sometimes works slowly; therefore, we must look for the trajectory or movement in others, not just their current reality.

The Apostles' Creed was written at least 150 years after the apostles had all died. It is called the Apostles' Creed because it is a record of what the apostles taught. The Nicene Creed was first adopted in A.D. 325 at the Council of Nicea.

The Roman Emperor Constantine had convened the Council of Nicea in an attempt to unify the Christian church with one doctrine, especially on the issues of the Trinity and the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ. These creeds provide a good summary of Christian doctrine and form a basis of theological consensus that will assist us in discerning who we can work well with on evangelism, mission, and discipleship.

2.3. Does it seem good to the Holy Spirit and to us?

When the Early Church was faced with a tough theological issue around the question of whether *The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses* (Acts 15:5), it was a combination of testimony, the Scriptures, and the mystical work of the Holy Spirit that guided them to a positive conclusion.

At the end of the discernment process they were able to affirm, *It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...* (Acts 15:28). Mystery is a place where each of us may feel uncomfortable, but it is the very realm in which we need to grow. In terms of deciding which partnerships are right for us, we must consider the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit.

Put another way, "Do we sense increased peace or increased discomfort in our decision?" There can be times when every other aspect of our "attentive discernment" points us toward a clear "yes," and yet there is an increasing discomfort in our spirit towards the partnership. On the other hand, there might be moments when our "attentive discernment" raises some concerns, and yet we sense the Holy Spirit pulling us to move forward. These internal tugs of the Holy Spirit must not be ignored.

3. Conclusion

“Attentive Discernment” is not a perfect science, but rather a place of honest reflection before God and with others in a community of faith. Each church needs to be empowered to find their own comfort zone when it comes to helpful ecumenical partnerships. Each community is unique, and what works in one setting may be disastrous in another.

We must provide freedom within the Alliance for various applications of ecumenical partnerships without judgment or scepticism. We have every opportunity to ask for clarification on decisions others have made, but we must be willing to trust the work of the Holy Spirit in them as much as we trust His work in us. *For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline* (2 Timothy 1:7).

There will always be risks involved in partnering with other individuals and groups—and we need to be willing to take risks for the Kingdom—but we believe that such risks can be minimized by using this “Attentive Discernment” process. Each church might want to add other questions to their discernment process, and we encourage them to do so. In the end, the focus needs to be seeing God’s Kingdom advanced and God’s glory revealed.

4. Amendments

This guideline may be amended by a majority vote of General Assembly, written notice having been given prior to General Assembly.

Adopted - General Assembly 2016

The Apostles’ Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day He arose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; whence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

The Nicene Creed

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made: who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father. And He shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead: whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets. And I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.