

# **CHRISTIANS IN DIALOGUE**

## **WOULDN'T IT BE NICE**

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# LEADER'S GUIDE

## 1. Gathering

People coming to a group for the first time will often have some anxiety –

- ◆ Will I know anyone?
- ◆ What will be expected of me?
- ◆ Did I switch off the oven?
- ◆ It is important to help them through this first awkward stage. Have all your preparations done well beforehand so that you are able to greet each person warmly on arrival, introducing them to one another, and perhaps having tea and coffee available.

## 2. Beginning

- A. When all have arrived get the session started by giving them a clear statement of what the group is about -  
Welcome the group
- ◆ who we are;
  - ◆ why we're here;
  - ◆ when we will finish.

It might go like this: "Welcome to my place, and I'm delighted that each of you has been able to make it. We are a group of people from Churches gathered together to reflect and share our ideas on ... (*name of study*). Tonight we will be looking at Study One .....

- B. Then invite the members to introduce themselves saying:
- ◆ who I am;
  - ◆ why I'm here;
  - ◆ what I hope to get out of the program.

Lead yourself by giving a short response to each of the three areas. Then invite each of the others to do likewise. Don't worry if some respond to only one or two of the areas.

- C. Then distribute copies of the program.

Encourage participants to listen to one another's ideas with respect.

## 3. Opening Devotion

- A. You may wish to play some music quietly in the background and give the group a few moments to reflect on the opening devotion. Then call for volunteers to lead it.
- B. You might like to choose an appropriate song for the group to share

## 4. Reflection on the Topic

Invite a couple of people to read the teaching. Encourage the readers to pause between each section.

## 5. Discussion

Allow a few minutes of quiet time to reflect on the questions. Encourage participants to share responses to each question but there is to be no pressure put on anyone to speak. Be sure to make some response to each speaker if only to say e.g. "Thank you John". This makes sure the participant feels that he / she has been heard.

## 6. Closure

Thank the participants for their participation. Check to ensure venue is right for next session.

## Closing Devotion

### Cuppa

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## Wouldn't it be Nice

### EVALUATION FORM

**The group leader invites the participants to complete the Evaluation Form at the end of the fourth study.**

1. What did you appreciate about these studies?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What aspects of these studies did you find difficult?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What was the greatest challenge for you and your Church?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. What topics would you like *Christians in Dialogue* to cover in future?

**The Planning Committee invites the leader to respond to the two questions below.**

1. Name of your group, each Church represented, and the number of people present from each denomination.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Generally speaking, how fully did participants enter into the discussion?

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**Thank you for your response.**

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**Study One**  
**Wouldn't it be Nice**  
**SOMETHING DIFFERENT!**  
**The Book of Hope**

**OPENING DEVOTION**

Create an environment with some flowers or a candle and maybe have some quiet music playing in the background.

**Leader:** Come Lord Jesus, fill us with your hope.  
You too were tired from time to time.  
You too gathered with friends - Mary, Martha and Lazarus.  
Awaken us to your presence.

**ALL:** Come Lord Jesus fill us with your hope.

**L:** You too enjoyed  
the sharing and telling of tales  
to all who came to listen.

**ALL:** Come Lord Jesus, fill us with your hope.

**L:** You kindled faith when lamps were low.  
You opened scriptures, broke the bread, and shed your light  
for all to see.

**ALL:** Come Lord Jesus, fill us with your Hope.

**R:** A reading from Romans Ch 5: 1 - 5 (The New Revised Std. Version)

*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*

**Reflective question:** What thoughts, feelings, reactions does this teaching raise in you?

Spend a few moments in silent prayer. You may wish to share a prayer.

**L:** Lord, you read our hearts, you know our deepest needs, we place them in your hands as we pray together.

God the source of all hope, you call us to walk in the light of Christ's love. Free us from darkness, from all our destructive thoughts and actions especially those which prevent us from reaching out to others. Awaken us to your presence within us, then we will be able to think positively and give witness to the hope which comes from believing in Jesus Christ. We make this prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.

### **Discussion:**

**What does “hope” mean for the Christian? How does this idea differ from the ordinary concept of hope?**

When we use the word hope in ordinary speech, it usually implies a degree of uncertainty. “I hope to graduate at the end of next year”, says the student, but that, of course, depends on the performance of the student, and also upon the actions of others over whom there is no control. The degree of certainty in an ordinary human expression of hope depends upon the object of our hope, whether it is ourselves or others. One or other or both of us may be unreliable, or circumstances might thwart us all.

When the word hope is used in the specific Christian sense, the uncertainty drops out and we may speak of “a sure and certain hope”, that is, of something which we surely believe will happen. This element of certainty is always there in the Christian hope because the object of hope, the One in whom we hope, is the faithful God. Our faith tells us that God is totally reliable, what has been promised will always be carried out, and will be in accordance with the abiding character of God as expressed in his actions in the world.

**To do:** Look up the Bible passages given in italics in the following paragraphs.

For the ancient Hebrews the hope is a concrete one, expressed by the symbol of the Promised Land. The promise comes to Abraham (Genesis 12: 1 - 3, 14- 18), and begins to find its fulfilment in the call of Moses (Exodus 3:1 - 12). An important aspect of this hope focuses on the promise of a Messiah (Isaiah 9:1- 7).

The early Church was in no doubt that in Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah had appeared among the people. Nevertheless, with the fulfilment of the hope of the Old Covenant there was still more to hope for, the ultimate fulfilment of all things in Jesus Christ. This hope was centred on Jesus Christ as seen in the light of the resurrection (Colossians 1: 18). Through faith in the risen Christ, the early Christians were convinced that everything would turn out right in the end. The prayer “come, Lord Jesus”, (Revelation 22:20) was an earnest looking forward to the coming of the Lord and the establishment of the “new heavens and a new earth” as the fulfilment of God’s purpose for his creation.

In his teaching, Jesus does not explicitly mention hope, but his Parables of the Kingdom are all, in one way or another, Parables of hope, (as we shall see in a later study).

### **Discussion:**

**“Everything will turn out right in the end.” How does this belief comfort and strengthen us in relation to (a) ourselves (b) our loved ones) (c) the whole world in which we live?**

Knowing Christ, and what God has done for us in him in the past, the Christian learns to expect future blessings from him (2 Corinthians 1:10). The Holy Spirit is the inner witness that our hope in Christ will never disappoint us (Romans 5:1 - 5). Thus we may go through the difficulties and trials of this world, even persecutions, knowing that “nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

(Romans 8:35-39).

### **Discussion:**

**“Speculation about the details of the coming of Christ is not required of us. Rather, our hope requires that we be found faithful at the present moment, whatever our circumstances.” Comment on this.**

As for exactly what the future will bring, Christians differ in their interpretation of such passages as Mark 13. We can only know that God's ultimate future for us all is good. We are not given any encouragement to speculate about times and seasons relating to his coming (Acts 1: 6- 2), although some, of course, are tempted to do so at the prospect of the coming of a new Millennium. The hope we have in Christ strengthens us for our life here and now, and Christ's word is "keep awake, for you do not know when the master of the house will come". (Mark 13: 55).

**Concluding Question:**

**A twentieth century theologian saw "hope" as the "future tense of love"1 How are "faith, hope and love" related as abiding factors which together comprise the Christian way of life? (1 Corinthian 13: 13).**

**CLOSING DEVOTION**

**Leader:** Play some reflective music.

Invite the members of the group to reflect silently on the question;  
**What insights have I gained from our discussion?**

Talk to God about your hopes and desires. Make a decision that will encourage you to be more hopeful in your daily life.

You may wish to pray aloud.

**Leader:** Let us bring all the desires of our hearts to God as we pray together.

**ALL:** God, the source of all hope it can be difficult at times to be positive, especially when things go wrong. Yet we believe that you live in us to strengthen and encourage us. Awaken us to this presence and help us to take the time we need to be quiet so that we can hear your voice. We make this prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Leader:** May the God of hope kindle in our hearts the faith we need to be people of hope.

**ALL:** AMEN

## Study Two

### YES!!!

#### Hope gives meaning to life

##### OPENING DEVOTION:

**L.** Let us begin by worshipping the God of our being,  
the cause that gives meaning to our lives and the Spirit who sets us free.

**ALL:** O God whose heart is wise, give hope to those who search for you. Help us to see that a relationship with you is far more important than gold or any possession. Gift us with hearts that are open and full of hope so that we may take that hope where it is needed most. We make this prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.

**R:** A reading from the letter to the Romans Ch 4: 17- 19

*As it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations" - in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations", according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about one hundred years old) or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.*

##### REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

**Can you recall a time when God asked you to be like Abraham and really trust that God could bring good out of some barren situation?**

You might like to take a few moments to share with the person beside you or with the group. (this needs to be worked out prior to starting the prayer.)

After each person has broken open his or her own word, you may wish to respond by praying, "Lord hear our prayer."

At the appropriate time, the leader could invite the group to pray.

**L.** Lord when it is dark and I cannot see the way ahead.

**ALL:** Lord fill me with hope.

**L:** Lord when life seems stormy and bleak.

**ALL:** Lord fill me with hope.

**L:** Lord when I feel lost and lonely.

**ALL:** Lord fill me with hope.

**L:** Lord when I am tired and weighed down.

**ALL:** Lord fill me with hope.

**L:** Lord when I feel fearful.

**ALL:** Lord fill me with hope.

**ALL:** Lord you are the centre of my life. I will always try to praise and serve you. I ask you to help me to do this by being the God who gives meaning and purpose to my life. This I ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

An old 'chestnut' essay topic was "What would you do if you had a million dollars?" For teachers, it provided an insight into the ethical and moral development of the student as well as being an indicator of their present circumstances.

Hope seems to be a characteristic unique to human beings. What a person hopes for is associated with his/her anticipation and aspirations for the future. What we hope for is also an indicator of how we are coping with the present.

We have been given the ability to daydream - to act out one's aspirations - to dream of our participation in the future, and often to rise above current restraints and misfortunes.

Current circumstances and the way we are coping with them, colour the way hope can be expressed. There is no substance to hope without a knowledge and awareness of the activities and pressures of the present. There is no breaking out to new horizons without the sacrifice of life as it is known: there is no anticipation of a future without first investing in the present.

The human capacity for hope underlies the inclination to gamble for a different future or for changes in the future. Is there such a thing as 'good luck'?

To encourage people to buy scratchies or lotto tickets, you tell them stories about other people who have won amounts of money that in their normal jobs they could never possibly earn. "Wouldn't it be nice to win a million?" You encourage them in their daydreaming by planning what to do with the hoped for treasure before it's won.

For these people, in their present circumstances, there are many things beyond their reach. The majority of those who buy lotto tickets and scratchies are the people who are at the lower end of the economic scale, and who work in a job which pays minimally.

A quick glance at headlines and advertisements in the newspaper show banks and building societies relying on the Australian hope for each person or family to own his/her own home.

Parents hope for successful lives for their children.

**(a) In our western society we invest in the future - what does that mean?**

**(b) How does this thinking relate to the teaching that the hope which is born out of the resurrection of Christ prepares one to live fully in the present, with unquestioning love in the knowledge that life is once for all?**

**(c) Do we use a different part of our being to hope religiously?**

There does seem to be such a gap between religious hope and human yearning for positive outcomes in the future. Paul gives us the example of Abraham "**hoping against hope**" (Rom 4:18), who proceeded in faith to fulfil the promise "**you shall be the father of many nations**". What's the difference between hoping against hope that you can win lotto with the odds stacked against you, and Abraham's hoping against hope for a child in his old age?

**Is the following a good definition?**

**Religious hope is faith directed towards the future**

There seems to be an associated condition of liberation from material need, the attaining of eternal life and blessedness after death, and the coming of the kingdom of God. Wouldn't it be nice?

**(Discussion point)**

As a member of the global family, a human being exercising hope, acknowledges more acutely the suffering from injustice in this world and the pain of the godless in humanity. Yet hope gives strength to the struggle for right and justice to combat hopelessness.

Moltmann wrote that “there is no transcending of hope without the paradoxical countermovement of the incarnation of love”. He continued with the statement that “it is in the incarnational movement even unto passion and death that, paradoxically, the kingdom of God can even now be lived and not just hoped for.” (p186 Theology of Human Dignity)

**What do those statements mean to you?**

2 Cor 5:18-21 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Our calling then is to bring the right of reconciliation to bear on the worldwide struggle for privileges and power.

**Do you agree with the statement:**

**Christians are witnesses to the future, and agents of hope.**

1 Peter 3:15 .... *but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you;*

**Can we be called to account for the hope that is in us? And if we are, can we really account for that hope that is in us?**

And there is always the paradox “as dying ... behold we live”

2 Cor 6: 9 **as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed;**

**What part does hope play in this paradox?**

**CLOSING DEVOTION**

Take some time to create a prayerful atmosphere.

In the quiet of your own heart where you are alone with God, take some time now to come up with a few goals or at least one goal in response to:

**Step One:**

Wouldn't it be nice to...

**Step Two:**

Decide on a way to bring your dream to fruition in your own life.

**Step Three:**

Write down your decision.

Let us pray: Out of your infinite goodness may God give us the power through His Spirit for our hidden selves to grow strong. So that Christ may live in our hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, we will with all the saints have strength to grasp the length and the breadth, the height and the depth; until knowing the love of Christ which is beyond all knowledge, we will be filled with is beyond all knowledge, we are filled with the fullness of God.

Glory be to God, who power working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ever ask or imagine; glory be to Him from generation to generation in the church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.

## STUDY 3

# Wouldn't it be Nice

## Worth Waiting For – Hope in the Promises

### INTRODUCTION:

Over the weeks we have been reflecting on Christian Hope. We have seen how hope changes the meaning we give to life, our way of living, of dying, of acting and the value we give to things. This hope is grounded in our belief in the glorified risen Lord.

### OPENING DEVOTION:

**Leader:** There is a poem called “One Solitary Life”. As you listen to it I invite you to reflect on the person it describes.

**R.1:** Here was a young man born in an obscure village the child of a peasant woman. He worked in a carpenter's shop until he was thirty, and then for three years he was an itinerant preacher.

**R.2:** He never wrote a book. He never held an office.  
He never owned a home. He never had a family.  
He never went to college. He never set his foot inside a big city.  
He never travelled two hundred miles from the place where he was born.  
He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness.  
He had no credentials but himself.

**R3:** While he was still a young man, the tide of public opinion turned against him.  
His friends ran away. He was turned over to his enemies.  
He went through the mockery of a trial.  
He was nailed to a cross between two thieves.  
While he was dying, his executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth and that was his coat.  
When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a Mend.

**R4:** Nineteen centuries have come and gone and he is still the central figure of the human race and the leader of the column of progress.

**R.5:** I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that have ever sailed, and all the parliaments that have ever sat, and all the kings that have ever reigned put together, have not affected human life upon this earth as has that one solitary life. (Author unknown)

From all external experiences this man's life was a complete failure, yet we know this is not so.

### How does belief in Him nurture hope in your life?

You may wish to share something of your reflections with the group.

(Do not enter into discussion just simply listen to one another.)

At the appropriate time the Leader prays, “We make this prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

This week we will explore the vision of hope presented in some life parables and in the parables and teachings of Jesus. The Arabic word for ‘parable’ can be translated as ‘riddle’ and that is just what a parable is. A parable does not appeal to the logical mind; it does not have a meaning that can be clearly understood. Therefore it cannot be easily ‘misunderstood’ or made to fit into fixed categories. Its appeal is directed to the imagination. The task of the listener is to decipher the hidden code and then everything falls into place and the meaning becomes apparent. Let us turn now to a life parable.

### **A LIFE PARABLE: The Face at the Wall**

There was once a most heart breaking leper colony where men had nothing to do, and for whom nothing could be done. They were lonely, abandoned men who could only prowl around the yard. Yet one of these men kept a gleam in his eye. He could smile and if you offered him something he would graciously reply, “Thank you”. He was the only man who could remain human.

The sister in charge wondered why this was so. She observed him closely for a few days. To her amazement she saw this small little face peer over the forbidding wall and her face would be all smiles. The man would be there waiting to receive her smiles; the food of his strength and support for his hope. He would smile back and the head would disappear.

When the Sister one day took them by surprise, he simply said, “She is my wife. I know it is because of her I can go on living.”

(Adapted from Stories for sharing p75)

### **Discussion**

**What does this parable on the relationship between the leper and his wife tell us about the gift of hope?**

**How can we be faces of hope to other people?**

### **REFLECTION ON THE PARABLES**

Jesus spoke in parables when it became obvious to him that certain groups of people were not grasping the Good News. It is a gentle way of teaching as no one is forced to see, or forced to reject. The parable penetrates only in so far as the listener is open to receive. Jesus uses the parable to try to break into the hearts and minds of those who ‘look without seeing and listen without understanding’. Let us now move to explore two parables.

A reading from Luke 13:18-19 -The Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matt 13:31-32, Mk 4:30-32).

Jesus said therefore, “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.”

We should recall that the phrase, “it is like a mustard seed” means that what happens in the kingdom of God is like what happens with a mustard seed. In other words, it is not the seed itself that is the focus but rather what happens to the seed that is significant. It grows into a tree and the kingdom is really like the tree that grows out of the seed. All three evangelists in

recording these parables specify that the birds come to nest in its branches. This is Old Testament imagery where a tree sheltering the birds is a symbol for a great empire embracing all peoples. (Daniel 4:12 and Ezekiel 17:22-23; 31) We tend to read in the parable of the Mustard Seed, the story of the sure growth of the kingdom from its tiny beginnings. The startling contrast between the seed and the tree encourages us not to judge by external appearances but to trust in that which is invisible to the eye. It is in this belief that hope is born. All growth is in the hands of the Creator.

And again in the gospel of Mark 4:26-29 we read. "Jesus also said 'This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man throws seed on the land. Night and day, while he sleeps, when he is awake, the seed is sprouting and growing; how, he does not know. Of its own accord the land produces first the shoot then the ear, then the full grain of the ear. And when the crop is ready, he loses no time; he starts to reap because the harvest has come.'"

In this parable Jesus stresses the essential qualities of the kingdom of God. The seed is good and it will yield a harvest. Jesus is asking his disciples to be willing like him, to wait on God, to believe in him, to hope in his promises, to be free from care and to be open to His will. There is really no room for either anxiety or for pride. There is something happening among us that is much bigger than we are. We are to sow the seed. We are to live the Christ life. We are to surrender since the results do not depend on our efforts only.

## **Discussion**

**Where have you seen the "mustard seed" or the "seed" at work in our world today - something with a small beginning gradually making a great impact?**

**What does the life parable and these parables of Jesus have in common? -**

**Have we taken to heart the promises of hope held out to us?**

Let us now move on to explore some of these concepts more deeply.

## **STORY: Hope in the midst of wretchedness**

"A friend of mine who had come over from France wanted to see a slum. When we arrived at a shantytown that truly deserved the terrible description "subhuman", I asked a courageous old lady named Severina to help us on our tour. When the visit was over and my friend was ready to leave, she observed: "Lord! What wretchedness!"

When Severina caught the French word *misere* (which is very like the Brazilian word for wretchedness: *miseria*), she asked me: Did I hear the lady talk of wretchedness? Please tell her I realise how terrible conditions are in our shantytown. Perhaps our favela does deserve to be called 'wretched,' but I do not consider myself to be in any way wretched. I have riches that all the money in the world cannot buy: my eyes, my ears, my nose, my mouth, my hands, my arms, my feet, my legs, my head, my heart! And above all my faith! this faith I would not exchange or sell for all the money in the banks of the world!"

Severina spoke with neither pride nor hatred. But I could see that the visitor's words had unintentionally touched a sensitive nerve: her deepest conviction, her reason for living, her wealth! Severina continues to be a sign of hope. I saw in her one truly rich with genuine wealth."

*Hoping against all Hope by D. Helda Camara*

Severina sees her wealth above all as having the gift of faith, while Dom Helda Camara praises her for being a sign of hope. As we have mentioned earlier, faith and hope are intimately connected and they in turn give birth to love. What then distinguishes hope from faith? “Hope is the firm conviction that what we know by faith will be fulfilled - not the whole contents of faith, only the contents of the promises of hope”. (Spirituality of Hope p 4) It is fitting therefore that Severina be praised as a woman of faith for her hope in the promises.

Once again we are confronted with the stark reality that Christian hope does not depend on what is visible to the eye but rather on the security that comes from believing in that which cannot be seen.

Luke’s Christ expresses these truths in another way when he teaches, “Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man, Jesus promises the fullness and happiness of heaven to the poor, the merciful, those who hunger and thirst for justice, the peacemakers, the pure of heart and those persecuted for their goodness. The Beatitudes embody the great promises of Christ and his New Covenant. Promises when believed in bring great inner freedom and peace to those who believe.

### **Discussion**

Take a few moments to reflect on the responses made by Severina and Helda Camara’s friend.

**How do they differ?**

**What is it that makes us rich in this life”?**

**What insights have you gained from this discussion?**

**CLOSING DEVOTION** - Play some music and rest in the Lord’s presence.

**ALL:** God of all goodness, we pray for each of us here, for all our loved ones and for our Congregations. Open the eyes of our hearts and deepen our convictions so that we will come to a deeper belief in your promises and trust wholeheartedly in them. Through this grace may we become people of hope who reach out in love to all our brothers and sisters. We make this prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.

## STUDY 4

### Wouldn't it be Nice

#### Getting our Act Together – Ecumenical Hope

##### OPENING DEVOTION

(You may wish to create an atmosphere for prayer by lighting a candle or playing soft music.)

**L:** O God, you summon the day to dawn, You teach the morning to waken the earth.

**All:** Great is your name. Great is your love.

**L:** For you the valleys shall sing for joy, the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

**All:** Great is your name. Great is your love.

**L:** For you the kings of the earth shall bow, the poor and the persecuted shall shout for joy.

**All:** Great is your name. Great is your love.

**L:** Your love and mercy shall last forever, Fresh as the morning, sure as the sunrise.

**All:** Great is your name. Great is your love.

**L:** Great is our God. On all whose lives are open to change from guilt to grace, from darkness to light, God promises them pardon and grants them peace. We make this prayer in Jesus' Name.

*(A Wee Worship Book p 4)*

**All:** Amen.

##### A reading from the Book of Revelation Ch 7: 9- 12

**R:** After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes, and peoples and languages standing before the throne and the Lamb, robed in white with palm branches in their hands. They cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

And all the angels stood around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God singing, "Amen! blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

*The New Revised Standard Version*

##### REFLECTION

Think of a time in your life when you would have felt very comfortable to join in with these believers to pray. **What was happening in your life at that time?**

You may wish to give thanks to God and pray aloud. You may wish to invite members of your group to join with you by responding to your prayer with the refrain, “We give you thanks, O God.”

When those who wish to pray aloud do so, the leader leads the group in prayer.

**L:** With the great multitude standing before the throne and the Lamb we pray.

**All:** Great is your name. Great is your love.

**L:** With all the angels around the elders and the four living creatures we pray.

**All:** Great is your name. Great is your love. We make this prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The birth of the modern ecumenical movement is said to have been the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910. 1,355 delegates from many churches met to discuss common questions about missions and missionaries. From this conference sprang further international organisations, which eventually merged into the World Council of Churches in 1948.

Even earlier, in 1945 the Australian Council of Churches was constituted. It was replaced in 1994 by the National Council of Churches in Australia, with even more member churches.

#### **Discussion:**

#### **What else do you know about the modern ecumenical movement, including the National Council of Churches in Australia?**

The road of ecumenism was not smooth. There was distrust and suspicion. In his Memoirs the founding General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Dr. W. A. Visser't Hooft, told of his first encounter with Cardinal Bea, who had just been appointed head of the Vatican's new secretariat for promoting Christian Unity. It was September, 1960. Visser't Hooft dared not even tell his wife where he was going. The concierge of the Milan convent where they first met was under strict orders on no account to ask the name of the mysterious visitor from Geneva. It was all “hush hush”, very delicate, very risky.

Father Paul Couturier, a Roman Catholic supporter of ecumenism, said 60 years ago:  
*In order to unite with one another we must love one another In order to love one another we must know one another In order to know one another we must go and meet one another.*

A great deal has happened since then. Dialogue has blossomed between leaders and members of many Churches. Participants have found these discussions to be:

guided by the Holy Spirit;

disturbing, because they confront and challenge long-held beliefs;

frustrating, because sometimes it is impossible to agree;

extremely rewarding, because of real growth in understanding and faith;

practical in their purpose, since they have changed the way we do things.

Did you know that, up until 1994, the Anglican Church, Churches of Christ, Lutheran Church, Roman Catholic Church, Reformed Church and Uniting Church had held official dialogues on a wide range of topics, including the Eucharist, The Ministry, Baptism, Episcopate and Unity,

Law and Gospel, Holy Scripture, Predestination and The Election of Grace, and Understanding the Importance of the Church? Since 1994 dialogues have continued on these and other topics.

Early in the life of the ecumenical movement one of the key goals was to achieve organic unity between Christian denominations. Today this appears to be a more distant, more difficult, and not necessarily even a desirable goal. Christianity may stand to lose more than it gains if all the Churches were to unite into one body.

**Discussion:**

**How desirable is it for the main goal of ecumenism to be the dissolving of denominational differences and the creation of one world-wide mega-church? To what extent do you find that the different generations have different attitudes about this?**

The constitution of the National Council of Churches in Australia states, as one of the goals of the organisation:

*to encourage and enable member churches to develop their existing relationships by raising awareness among their people of Christ's gift of unity and of his call to express that unity through prayer, dialogue and shared engagement in mission.*

This raises the fundamental truth that, for Christians, unity is both a gift and a task.

It is a gift because it is not achieved by the church, but given to the church. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13 about the body of Christ:

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body - whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free - and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

The same apostle writes in Ephesians 4:

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit -just as you were called to one hope when you were called - one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

And Jesus is recorded as saying in John 17:23 in a prayer for all believers:

May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

The Apostles' Creed affirms the holy Catholic Church, and the Nicene Creed affirms one holy catholic and apostolic church.

**Discussion:**

**What do the Bible passages above say about the Christian ecumenical hope?**

Are you aware that Churches in Queensland will be recognising and celebrating the new millennium by joining together in various activities under the themes of Hope, Love, Faith and Justice? What would you hope to be the outcome of this?

The last century has witnessed astonishing progress in ecumenical dialogue and cooperation. Where will it eventually lead? Will more and more denominational barriers be broken down? Will there ever be one worldwide organisation called the Christian Church? Should there be? Will Christians find more and more ways of worshipping together and cooperating in mission?

## **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. In what ways have you personally experienced Christian unity?
2. Read Revelation 7:9-17. What does this say to you about Christian ecumenical hope?
3. In John 10:16 Jesus says, "There will be one flock and one shepherd". Read John 10:14-16. What do you believe Jesus is saying that we should expect to happen?
4. Give some examples of Christians of different denominations worshipping together and doing mission together.
5. To what degree would you like to see serious dialogue between Christians and other living religions, e.g. Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism. What might the goals of such dialogue be?

## **CLOSING DEVOTION**

**L:** Take a little quiet time to reflect on the discussion. You could play some soft music in the background. Then at the appropriate time invite members to join in the following prayer of praise.

### **Let us pray:**

You are God: We praise you.

You are Lord: We acclaim you.

You are the creator of heaven and earth: We give you thanks.

All creation bows down in adoration before you.

With all the angels and the powers of heaven

We join in their endless song of praise and

We make this prayer through Christ, our Lord. Amen.