

Ecumenism at the local level: 20 years of 'Mechelen lunch conversations'

Summary

In the city of Mechelen, representatives and observers from various Christian faith communities meet four times a year for a lunchtime discussion. This paper describes the experiences of 73 ecumenical meetings over a period of 20 years, highlighting some events and draws some conclusions.

I. A framework for the local ecumenical dialogue

On June 16, 2005, a meeting took place with local representatives and observers from various Christian faith communities in Mechelen. It had been customary for some decades to organize an annual ecumenical prayer service during the International Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, when in 2004 there was broad-based ecumenical cooperation in the ad hoc "Working Group for the Introduction of a New Bible Translation in Mechelen." The event called the "Week of the Bible", sparked a desire to meet more frequently throughout the year. That wish became a reality in the spring of 2005. Dr. Eduardus (Eddy) Van der Borcht (emeritus professor at Free University Amsterdam, with roots in Mechelen) was asked to address the first meeting and outlined a framework for the local ecumenical dialogue.

Professor Van der Borcht's pitch held four recommendations:

1. Ensure that those responsible for Christian communities know each other, and develop a sense of shared responsibility for the city and the region.
2. Create permanent places of practice for communal prayer.
3. The multi-religious reality calls for interreligious dialogue.
4. We need to be more hospitable (inclusive) to Christians from other cultures.

Regarding the first point (the focus of this short paper), his suggestions for a practical implementation are:

- meet each other during a catered lunch
- avoid it being an extra burden on people who are already busy
- always provide a topic of conversation

The response was positive, and it was decided to meet four times a year, at varying locations. These meetings continue up to this day, for 20 years now.

The format of the lunch conversations has remained the same throughout the years. During a meal with soup and bread, the focus is on casual and informal contact. Next a theme is discussed, sometimes introduced by a guest speaker, for example on prayer or evangelisation, or a local project is presented,. The primary goal of the conversation is to get to know each other and to respect each other's individuality and differences in faith (not always easy). Usually starting at noon, but sometimes at 6 p.m., the meeting time is limited to two hours. Participants in the lunch conversation are leaders or officials of churches and Christian institutions, but other interested parties are also welcome.

II. A Manifesto for Unity

At the 25th meeting in 2011 participants, looking back on six years of lunch conversations, noted the immense value of these meetings, saying: we learn to understand each other, recognize ourselves in others, and learn from each other. On May 12th, the group made a statement by signing a "Manifesto for Unity." Unity in diversity – and in all modesty. Archbishop Mgr Leonard was the first to put his signature!

But what have all these encounters yielded, besides the significant importance of getting to know each other? Over the years various activities have been initiated or supported, such as:

- The annual celebration in January
- MemoMechelen.be (a website and newsletter, 2005-present)
- Bible Evenings, lectures and discussion (annual, 2008-2021)
- Crossing, Youth Events (2006, 2007, 2008)
- Midday Prayer on Weekdays in the Cathedral (2007-2017)
- Supporting the Taizé European Youth Meeting (2008) and local Taizé Prayer
- Pentecost Vigil (2009 and 2010)
- Lectio Divina prayer group (2016-present)
- The Mark drama (2018)
- The Passion Cross (as part of The Passion) 2018

It seems quite impressive, isn't it? But in 2018 the members of the ecumenical group wondered whether they could become even more visible together in the city and how ecumenism could be relevant for all Christians—and thus for Mechelen as a whole.

III. Ecumenism as a cloverleaf

They organized a festive gathering to celebrate the 50th lunch meeting and invited Jean Bastiaens to inspire us. Professor Bastiaens was then director of the Bible House Zevenkerken and had also contributed to the ecumenical New Bible Translation for the Dutch-speaking region. He presented us with his vision of ecumenical unity in diversity and visualized this using a cloverleaf, referring to four Christian expressions, 4 types of communities, challenging us position our own community in the spectrum and to discover their strengths and weaknesses, their pitfalls and challenges:

1. Kefas: the narrative community, where you can 'get your story straight'

2. Jacob: the active community, focused on life in the 'polis' (city/society)
3. John: the mystic community, focused on prayer (contemplation) and 'knowledge'.
4. Paul: the charismatic community, attentive to maximise expression of charismata of its members.

Bastiaens concluded: "Churches are complementary, and co-operation is self-evident."

During this celebration (with food, of course), the participants renewed their commitment by signing the 'Manifesto for Unity.' The city council of Mechelen had been invited and in his speech a representative called this approach to connecting churches "an example of coexistence in diversity in the city."

IV. Conclusion

Approaching the 75th lunch meeting, what can be concluded?

1. The lunchtime discussions have significantly contributed to the mutual relationships between the participating churches and denominations. These were particularly:
 - Roman Catholic (including Charismatic Renewal),
 - Protestants (including Assyrian Protestants)
 - Evangelicals/Pentecostals
 - Orthodox
- However, it's proving difficult to involve the new (non-Dutch-speaking) communities. There are barriers:
 - ◆ cultural and language barriers (French, English, Arabic, Armenian)
 - ◆ practical barriers (no full-time staff in the service, or less city-bound)
- The number of activities we organized as an ecumenical working group (besides the annual celebration) has remained limited. As a result, the visibility of ecumenical

collaboration in the public sphere has remained minimal.

- However, recent projects give us hope for the future.
 - ◆ Since 2023, the Alpha (originated and well-known in the UK) has been organized several times in an ecumenical context. Also an Alpha Youth started.
 - ◆ The Easter evocation organized in spring with *Cross that Bridge* attracted youth and older people alike.

In short, what has become of the initial intention as stated by Professor Van der Borgh; which items can we check off?

1. Did we get to know each other and developed a sense of shared responsibility - yes, we did
2. Did we created permanent practice areas for communal prayer - only occasional, not permanent
3. Did we translated the multi-religious reality into interreligious dialogue - no, we dit not
4. Did we practice hospitality (inclusion) towards Christians from other cultures - not enough

So in fact only the first one is fulfilled, the other ones need attention for the next 20 years.

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The Centenary of the Malines Conversations and
Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue Today, September 18-20,
2025 - Short paper presentation by Willem Kolpa