

# **BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS AND PRAYERS FOR THE ‘EIGHT DAYS’**

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## **DAY 1                      Walking in conversation**

### **Readings**

Genesis 11: 1-9	The story of Babel and legacy of our diversity
Psalms 34:11-18	“Come...listen”. God’s invitation to conversation
Acts 2: 1-12	The outpouring of the Spirit, the gift of understanding
Luke 24: 13-25	Conversation with the Risen Jesus on the road

### **Commentary**

To walk humbly with God means to walk as people speaking with one another and with the Lord, always attentive to what we hear. And so we begin our celebration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity by reflecting on scripture passages which speak of the essential practice of conversation. Conversation has been central to the ecumenical movement, as it opens up spaces for learning from one another, sharing what we have in common, and for differences to be heard and attended to. In this way mutual understanding is developed. These gifts from the search for unity are part of our basic call to respond to what God requires of us: through true conversation justice is done, and kindness learnt. Experiences of practical liberation from all over the world make clear that the isolation of people who are made to live with poverty is forcefully overcome by practices of dialogue.

Today’s Genesis reading, and the story of Pentecost, both reflect something of this human action, and its place in God’s liberating plan for people. The story of the tower of Babel first describes how, where there is no language barrier great things are possible. However, the story tells how this potential is grasped as a basis for self-promotion: “let us make a name for ourselves”, is the motivation for the building of the great city. In the end this project leads to a confusion of speech; from now on we must learn our proper humanity through patient attentiveness to the other who is strange to us. It is with the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost that understanding across differences is made possible in a new way, through the power of Jesus’ resurrection. Now we are invited to share the gift of speech and listening orientated toward the Lord, and towards freedom. We are called to walk in the Spirit.

The experience of the disciples on the road to Emmaus is a conversation taking place in a context of travel together, but also of loss and disappointed hope. As churches living with levels of disunity, and as societies divided by prejudices and

fear of the other we can recognise ourselves here. Yet it is precisely here that Jesus chooses to join the conversation - not presuming the superior role of teacher, but walking alongside his disciples. It is his desire to be a part of our conversations, and our response of wanting him to stay and speak more with us, that enables a living encounter with the Risen Lord.

All Christians know something of this meeting with Jesus, and the power of his word “burning within us”; this resurrection experience calls us into a deeper unity in Christ. Constant conversation with each other and with Jesus - even in our own disorientation - keeps us walking together towards unity.

## **Prayer**

Jesus Christ, we proclaim with joy our common identity in you, and we thank you for inviting us into a dialogue of love with you. Open our hearts to share more perfectly in your prayer to the Father that we may be one, so that as we journey together we may draw closer to each other. Give us the courage to bear witness to the truth together, and may our conversations embrace those who perpetuate disunity. Send your Spirit to empower us to challenge situations where dignity and compassion are lacking in our societies, nations, and the world.

God of life, lead us to justice and peace. Amen

## **Questions**

- Where do we practice true conversation, across the various differences that separate us?
- Is our conversation orientated towards some grand project of our own, or towards new life which brings hope of resurrection?
- What people do we converse with, and who is not included in our conversations? Why?

## **DAY 2**

## **Walking with the broken body of Christ**

### **Readings**

Ezekiel 37:1-14	“Shall these dry bones live?”
Psalms 22: 1-8	God’s servant, mocked and insulted, cries out to God
Hebrews 13: 12-16	The call to go to Jesus “outside the camp”
Luke 22: 14-23	Jesus breaks the bread, giving the gift of himself before his suffering

### **Commentary**

To walk humbly with God means hearing the call us to walk out of the places of our own comfort, and accompany the other, especially the suffering other.

“Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.” These words from Ezekiel give voice to the experience of many people across the globe today. In India, it is the “broken people” of the Dalit communities whose lives speak vividly of this suffering - a suffering in which Christ, the crucified one, shares. With injured people of every time and place, Jesus cries out to the Father: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Christians are called into this way of the cross. The Epistle to the Hebrews makes clear not only the saving reality of Jesus’ suffering, in the place of the margins, but also the need for his disciples to go “outside the camp” to join him there. When we meet those who have been excluded, like the Dalits, and we recognise the crucified one in their sufferings, the direction we should be going is clear: to be with Christ, means to be in solidarity with those on the margins whose wounds he shares.

The body of Christ, broken on the cross, is “broken for you”. The story of Christ’s suffering and death is prefaced by the story of the last supper: it is then celebrated as victory over death in every eucharist. In this Christian celebration, Christ’s broken body is his risen and glorious body; his body is broken so that we can share his life, and, in him, be one body.

As Christians on the way to unity we can often see the eucharist as a place where the scandal of our disunity is painfully real, knowing that, as yet, we cannot fully share this sacrament together as we should. This situation calls us to renewed efforts towards deeper communion with one another.

Today’s readings might open up another line of reflection. Walking with Christ’s broken body opens up a way to be eucharistic together: to share our bread with the hungry, to break down the barriers of poverty and inequality - these, too, are

“eucharistic acts”, in which all Christians are called to work together. Pope Benedict XVI frames his reflections on eucharist for the church in just this way: that it is a sacrament not only to be believed in and celebrated, but also to be lived (*Sacramentum caritatis*). In keeping with the Orthodox understanding of “the liturgy after the liturgy”, here it is recognised that there is “nothing authentically human” that does not find its pattern and life in the eucharist. (SC 71)

## **Prayer**

God of compassion, your Son died on the Cross so that by his broken body our divisions might be destroyed. Yet we have crucified him again and again with our disunity, and with systems and practices which obstruct your loving care and undermine your justice towards those who have been excluded from the gifts of your creation. Send us your Spirit to breathe life and healing into our brokenness that we may witness together to the justice and love of Christ. Walk with us towards that day when we can share in the one bread and the one cup at the common table. God of life, lead us to justice and peace. Amen.

## **Questions**

- In light of that prophetic tradition in which God desires justice, rather than ritual without righteousness, we need to ask: how is the eucharist, the mystery of Christ’s brokenness and new life, celebrated in all the places where we walk?
- What might we do, as Christians together, better to witness to our unity in Christ in places of brokenness and marginality?

## **DAY 3**

## **Walking towards freedom**

Exodus 1: 15-22

The Hebrew midwives obey God’s law over the command of Pharaoh

Psalms 17: 1-6

The confident prayer of one open to God’s gaze

2 Cor. 3: 17-18

The glorious freedom of God’s children in Christ

John 4: 4-26

Conversation with Jesus leads the Samaritan woman into freer living

## **Commentary**

Walking humbly with the Lord is always a walk into receiving the freedom he opens up before all people. With this in mind we celebrate. We celebrate the mystery of the struggle for freedom, which takes place even in the places where

oppression, prejudice and poverty seem to be impossible burdens. The resolute refusal to accept inhuman commands and conditions - like those given by Pharaoh to the midwives of the enslaved Hebrew people - can seem like small actions; but these are often the kinds of actions towards freedom going on in local communities everywhere. So we celebrate the determination for freedom—in dignity, social inclusion, and a proper share in all that is good—such as that seen in the Dalit communities. Such determined journeying towards fuller living presents a gift of Gospel hope to all people, caught up, in our different ways, within the patterns of inequality across the globe.

The step by step journey into freedom from unjust discrimination and practices of prejudice is brought home to us by the story of Jesus' meeting at the well with the woman of Samaria. Here is a woman who seeks, first of all, to question the prejudices which confront her, as well as to seek ways of alleviating the practical burdens of her life. These concerns are the starting place for her conversation with Jesus. Jesus himself engages in conversation with her on the bases both of his need for her practical help (he is thirsty) and in a mutual exploration of the social prejudices which make this help seem problematic. Bit by bit the way of a freer life is opened up before the woman, as the reality of the complexities of her life are seen more clearly in the light of Jesus' words. In the end these personal insights return the conversation to a place where what divides these two groups of people - where they should worship - is transcended. "Worship in spirit and in truth" is what is required; and here we learn to be free from all that holds us back from life together, life in its fullness.

To be called into greater freedom in Christ, is a calling to deeper communion. Those things which separate us - both as Christians searching for unity, and as people kept apart by unjust traditions and inequalities - keep us captives, and hidden from one another. Our freedom in Christ is, rather, characterised by that new life in the Spirit, which enables us, together, to stand before the glories of God "with unveiled faces". It is in this glorious light that we learn to see each other more truly, as we grow in Christ's likeness towards the fullness of Christian unity.

## **Prayer**

Liberating God, we thank you for the resilience and hopeful faith of those who struggle for dignity and fullness of life. We know that you raise up those who are cast down, and free those who are bound. Your Son Jesus walks with us to show us the path to authentic freedom. May we appreciate what has been given to us, and be strengthened to overcome all within us that enslaves. Send us your Spirit so that the truth shall set us free, so that with voices united we can proclaim your love to the world. God of life, lead us to justice and peace. Amen.

## Questions

- Are there times, even in our own Christian communities, when the prejudices and judgments of the world, - with regard to caste, age, gender, race, educational background - stop us seeing each other clearly in the light of God's glory?
- What small, practical steps can we take, as Christians together, towards the freedom of the Children of God (Romans 8.21) for our churches, and for wider society?

## DAY 4

## Walking as children of the earth

Leviticus 25: 8-17

The land is for the common good, not personal gain

Psalms 65: 5b-13

The fruitful outpouring of God's grace on the earth

Romans 8: 18-25

The longing of all creation for redemption

John 9: 1-11

Jesus' healing, mud, bodies and water

## Commentary

If we are to walk in humility with God, we will need always to be aware of ourselves as part of creation, and recipients of God's gifts. There is a growing recognition in today's world that better understanding of our authentic place in creation must become a priority for us. Among Christians, especially, there is a growing awareness of the ways in which ecological concern is a part of "walking humbly with God", the creator; for all we have is given by God in his creation, and so is not "ours" to do with as we wish. It is for this reason that from 1 September to 4 October Christians are called to observe the Time for Creation—a practice increasingly observed by many churches. In 1989 the Ecumenical Patriarch, Dimitrios I, proclaimed 1 September as a day of prayer for the environment. The Orthodox Church's liturgical year starts on that day with a commemoration of God's creation of the world. On 4 October, many churches from the Western traditions commemorate Francis of Assisi, the author of the "Canticle of Creation". The beginning and closing of the Time for Creation are thus linked with the concern for creation in the Eastern and the Western traditions of Christianity, respectively.

The Christian story is one of redemption for all creation; it is creation's own story. The belief that, in Jesus, God becomes a human person, in a particular place and time is a central belief around which all Christians gather. It is a shared belief in the Incarnation which carries with it a profound recognition of the importance of creation - of bodies, food, earth, water, and all that feeds our life as people on the planet. Jesus is fully part of this world. It may be slightly shocking to hear how

Jesus heals using his spittle and the dust from the earth; but it is true to this real sense of the created world as integral to God's bringing us to new life.

Across the world the earth is often worked by the poorest people, who frequently do not themselves share in the fruitfulness that results; such is the experience of many Dalits in India. At the same time it is the Dalit communities who have a particular care for the earth, as the practical wisdom of working the land is shown forth in their labours.

Care of the earth includes basic questions of how human beings are to live within creation, in ways which are more fully human for all. That the earth - its working and ownership - should so often be a source of economic inequalities, and degrading work practices is a cause for great concern and action for Christians together. The covenantal recognition of these dangers of exploitation with regard to the earth is spoken about in Leviticus' instructions concerning the Year of Jubilee: the land and its fruits are not given to be an opportunity for "taking advantage of one another", rather the working of the land is for the benefit of all. This is not just a "religious idea"; it is tied to very real economic and business practices concerning how the land is managed, bought and sold.

## **Prayer**

God of life, we thank you for the earth, and for those who care for it and bring forth its fruits. May the Spirit, the giver of life, help us to recognise that we are part of creation's web of relationships. May we learn to cherish the earth and listen to creation's groaning. May we truly walk together in the steps of Christ, bringing healing to all that wounds this earth, and ensuring a just sharing of the things that it brings forth.

God of life, lead us to justice and peace. Amen.

## **Questions**

- Today's readings invite Christians into a deep unity of action in common concern for the earth. Where do we practice the spirit of the year of Jubilee in our life as Christians together?
- Where, in our Christian communities, are we complicit with things that degrade and exploit the earth? Where can we work more together in learning and teaching reverence for God's creation?

## DAY 5

## Walking as the friends of Jesus

### Readings

Song of Solomon 1.5-8	Love and the beloved
Psalms 139.1-6	You have searched me out and known me
3 John 2-8	Hospitality to friends in Christ
John 15.12-17	I call you friends

### Commentary

To walk humbly with God does not mean walking alone. It means walking with those who are those vital signs of God's presence among us, our friends. "But I have called you friends" says Jesus in John's Gospel. Within the freedom of love, we are able to choose our friends, and to be chosen as a friend. "You did not choose me, but I chose you" Jesus says to each of us. Jesus' friendship with each of us transfigures and transcends our relationships with family and society. It speaks of God's deep and abiding love for us all.

The Bible's love poem, the Song of Solomon, has been interpreted in various ways such as the love of God for Israel, or the love of Christ for the Church. It remains the testimony of passion between lovers which transcends the imposed boundaries of society. While the lover says to her beloved "I am black and beautiful", her words come with the plea "do not gaze at me because I am dark." But the lover does gaze, and chooses love, as does God in Christ. Dalits know that when God gazes upon them it is with this same passionate love. When Christ says to Dalits "I have called you friends" it is a form of liberation from the inhumanity and injustice inflicted upon them by the caste system. In India today, it is a costly response for a Dalit to become a friend of Jesus.

What does the Lord require of those called to walk with Jesus and his friends? In India it is a call to the churches to embrace the Dalits as equal friends of their common friend. Such a call to be friends with the friends of Jesus is another way of understanding the unity of Christians for which we pray this week. Christians around the world are called to be friends with all those who struggle against discrimination and injustice. The walk towards Christian unity requires that we walk humbly with God with—and as—the friends of Jesus.

### Prayer

Jesus, from the first moment of our being you offered us your friendship. Your love embraces all peoples, especially those who are excluded or rejected because of human constructions of caste, race or colour. Filled with the confidence and assurance of our dignity in you, may we walk in solidarity towards each other, and



embrace each other in the Spirit, as children of God. God of life, lead us to justice and peace. Amen.

### **Questions**

- Who are those in your communities whom Christ calls into your friendship?
- What prevents the friends of Jesus from being friends with one another?
- How does being the friends of the same Jesus challenge the divided churches?

## **DAY 6                      Walking beyond barriers**

### **Readings**

Ruth 4.13-18	The offspring of Ruth and Boaz
Psalms 113	God the helper of the needy
Ephesians 2.13-16	Christ has broken down the dividing wall between us
Matthew 15.21-28	Jesus and the Canaanite woman

### **Commentary**

To walk humbly with God means walking beyond barriers that divide and damage the children of God. Christians in India are aware of the divisions among themselves. The treatment of Dalits within the churches and between them is a church-dividing issue that betrays the biblical vision of that unity for which we pray this week. St Paul lived with the devastating divisions in the earliest Christian community between Gentile and Jewish Christians. To this barrier and to every subsequent one, Paul proclaims that Christ “is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall between us.” Elsewhere Paul writes, “As many of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3.27-28). In Christ, all the deep barriers of the ancient world—and their modern successors—have been removed because on the Cross Jesus created in himself one new humanity.

In a world in which religious barriers are often difficult to cross, Christians who are a tiny minority in the multi-religious context of India remind us of the importance of interreligious dialogue and cooperation. Matthew’s Gospel tells of the difficult journey for Jesus—and his disciples—to cross the barriers of religion, culture and gender when he is confronted by a Canaanite woman who pleads with Jesus to cure her daughter. The disciples’ visceral instinct to send her away and

Jesus' own hesitation are overcome by her faith, and by her need. From hence Jesus and his disciples were able to cross the imposed human barriers and boundaries of the ancient world. Such is already present in the Hebrew Bible. The book of Ruth, the Moabite woman of a different culture and religion, concludes with a list of her offspring with the Israelite Boaz. Their child Obed was the father of Jesse, the father of David. The ancestry of the hero-King of ancient Israel reflects the fact that God's will may be fulfilled when people cross the barriers of religion and culture. The walk with God today requires that we cross the barriers that separate Christians from one another and from people of other faiths. The walk towards Christian unity requires walking humbly with God beyond the barriers that separate us from one another.

### **Prayer**

Father, forgive us for the barriers of greed, prejudice, and contempt that we continually build which separate us within and between churches, from people of other faiths, and from those we consider to be less important than us. May your Spirit give us courage to cross these boundaries, and to tear down the walls that disconnect us from each other. Then with Christ may we step forth into unknown terrain, to carry his message of loving acceptance and unity to all the world. God of life, lead us to justice and peace. Amen.

### **Questions**

- What are the barriers that separate Christians in your community?
- What are the barriers that separate Christians from other religious traditions in your community?
- What are the differences and similarities between walking beyond the barriers that separate Christians from one another, and walking beyond those between Christianity and other religions?

## DAY 7

## Walking in solidarity

### Readings

Numbers 27.1-11

The right of inheritance to daughters

Psalms 15

Who shall abide in God's sanctuary?

Acts 2.43-47

The disciples held all things in common

Luke 10.25-37

The Good Samaritan

### Commentary

To walk humbly with God means walking in solidarity with all who struggle for justice and peace. This poses a question for those who pray for the unity of Christians this week: what is the unity we seek? The Faith and Order Commission, which includes the members of the fellowship of the World Council of Churches as well as the Catholic Church, understands unity as "visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship." The ecumenical movement is dedicated to overcome the historic and current barriers that divide Christians, but it does so with a vision of visible unity that links the nature and mission of the Church in the service of the unity of humankind and the overcoming of all that harms the dignity of human beings and keeps us apart. As Faith and Order has said:

The Church is called and empowered to share the suffering of all by advocacy and care for the poor, the needy and the marginalised. This entails critically analysing and exposing unjust structures, and working for their transformation... This faithful witness may involve Christians themselves in suffering for the sake of the Gospel. The Church is called to heal and reconcile broken human relationships and to be God's instrument in the reconciliation of human division and hatred (*Nature and Mission of the Church*).

There are many examples of such acts of healing and reconciliation by the Indian churches. Dalit Christians remind us of other kinds of injustice and the ways in which they are overcome. Until very recently, Christian inheritance laws in India disempowered daughters. The churches supported the demand for a repeal of this archaic law. The story of the daughters of Zelophehad, in which Moses turned to God for justice in support of the rights of the daughters, was invoked to demand justice for women. Thus, Dalit Christians have been moved in their struggles for justice by such biblical witness. They have engaged with Dalits of other faiths and with secular networks and social movements in India and all over the world in their resistance to injustice. Dalits have been inspired in their struggle for justice by the examples of other movements for social reform.

A biblical image of Church united in solidarity with the oppressed is Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan. Like the Dalits, the Good Samaritan is from a

despised and outcast community, who is the one in the story who cares for the man abandoned by the wayside, and who proclaims by his solidarity in action, the hope and comfort of the Gospel. The walk towards Christian unity is inseparable from walking humbly with God in solidarity with any and all in need of justice and kindness.

### **Prayer**

Triune God, in your very life you offer us a unique pattern of interdependence, loving relationships and solidarity. Unite us to live our lives in this way. Teach us to share the hope that we find in people who struggle for life all over the world. May their endurance inspire us to overcome our own divisions, to live in holy accord with one another, and to walk together in solidarity. God of life, lead us to justice and peace. Amen.

### **Questions**

- Who in your community stands in need of the solidarity of the Christian community?
- What churches are, or have been in solidarity with you?
- In what ways would more visible Christian unity enhance the Church's solidarity with those who stand in need of justice and kindness in your context?

## **DAY 8**

## **Walking in celebration**

### **Readings**

Habakkuk 3.17-19	Celebrating in a time of hardship
Psalms 100	The worship of God through all the earth
Philippians 4.4-9	Rejoice in the Lord always
Luke 1:46-55	The Song of Mary

### **Commentary**

To walk humbly with God means to walk in celebration. The visitor to India is struck by the hardships and struggles endured by Dalits, but at the same time by their sense of hope and celebration. There was a slum on railway land near Bangalore that was inhabited largely by Dalits and other “backward classes” who were migrant workers from Tamilnadu who came to build the original railways before Indian independence. After the community was threatened by expulsion by the railway company in the early 1980s, the community—through its women’s

leadership—organized itself in such a way that it was able to find new land, and build permanent housing for nearly a thousand people. The community of Dalits and others moved into their new homes in 2011, homes paid for by themselves. This is but one instance of struggle against injustice carried out with great hope, which calls forth celebration.

Hope and celebration occur together in today's biblical readings. The prophet Habakkuk rejoices in the Lord at a time of drought and crop failure. Such testimony that God will walk with his people in their difficulties is a celebration of hope. The Blessed Virgin Mary walks to her cousin Elizabeth in order to celebrate her pregnancy. She sings her *Magnificat* as a song of hope even before the birth of her child. And from prison, Paul exhorts the Christian community at Philippi to celebration: "Rejoice in the Lord always." In the Bible, celebration is linked to hope in God's faithfulness.

The celebratory aspects of Dalit culture bear similar testimony to a gospel of faith and hope, forged out of the crucible of the Dalit experience of struggle for dignity and resilient survival. As we pray for Christian unity this week, we turn to the celebration of life that we see in India with focus on the faithfulness of Dalits to their Christian identity in the context of their struggles for life. Our celebration for a unity among Christians which has yet to be achieved likewise occurs in hope and struggle. It is grounded in hope that Christ's prayer that we may be one will be achieved in God's time and through God's means. It is grounded in gratitude that unity is God's gift, and in recognition of the unity we already experience as the friends of Jesus, expressed in one baptism. It is grounded in the conviction that God calls each of us to work for that unity, and that all our efforts will be used by God, trusting with St Paul "in everything by prayer and thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." The walk towards Christian unity requires that we walk humbly with God in celebration, in prayer, and in hope.

## **Prayer**

Gracious God, may your Holy Spirit fill our communities with joy and celebration, so that we can cherish the unity we already share, and zealously continue in the search for visible unity. We rejoice in the faith and hope of peoples who refuse to allow their dignity to be diminished, seeing in them your wonderful grace and your promise of freedom. Teach us to share in their joy and learn from their faithful endurance. Rekindle our hope and sustain our resolve, that in Christ's name we may walk together in love, raising a united voice of praise, and singing together one prayer of adoration.

God of life, lead us to justice and peace. Amen.

## Questions

- What are the struggles towards justice in your community? What are the causes for celebration on the way?
- What are the struggles towards Christian unity in your community? What are the causes for celebration along the way?

# **INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA: THE CONTEXT FOR THE CHURCHES<sup>2</sup>**

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The churches in India have had a complex and rich history. The Christian population continues to be significantly engaged in the life of the nation, especially in the areas of education and health care, a heritage from the Christian missionary movement which began in the 1500s. Through these services and through conversions to Christianity, the major contribution made by the missions was to empower the socially discriminated sections of Indian society to gain dignity and self respect. Christianity is India's third-largest religion with approximately 24 million followers, constituting roughly 2.3% of India's population of 1.2 billion people. These are the figures based on the 2001 census – the findings of the 2011 census which is ongoing suggests a marginal increase in the number of Christians in India. Of the Christian population the largest number adhere to the Roman Catholic Church. Churches in the Eastern tradition include the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, the Malabar Independent Syrian Church, the Malankara Jacobite Syrian Church, the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian, and the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church Church which are prominent in Kerala. Major Protestant denominations include the Church of South India (CSI), the Church of North India (CNI), Presbyterians, Baptists, Lutherans and evangelical communities.

There has been recent contestation of the way in which the history of the Indian churches has been depicted – as having their origins in the Western Missionary movements. Based on the assumption sometimes made that in recent years the centre of Christianity is “moving to the South”, Ninan Koshy writes: “Those who say that the ‘day of Southern Christianity is dawning’ are apparently oblivious of

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<sup>2</sup> This text is reproduced under the sole authority and responsibility of the ecumenical group in India which came together to write the source texts for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2013.