

ReStorying¹ Nicaea - In the Empire but not of the Empire?

(A reflective report from the gathering on 'Reaffirming our Common Faith for Uncommon Times' organised by United Society Partners in the Gospel (USPG) to commemorate the 1700th anniversary of the first ecumenical council of Nicaea)

Our Gathering:

How do we revisit the first Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, 1700 years after the historic council took place, in a spirit of honesty, humility and hope? How do we re-affirm our common faith as expressed in the words of the Nicene Creed (AD 381) in times which can be described as 'uncommon' - when unprecedented changes and challenges mark our life together on the earth, our common home?

A global group of theologians convened by the Anglican mission agency United Society Partners in the Gospel (USPG) met in Istanbul (Constantinople) and Iznik (Nicaea) in Türkiye from the 25th to 28th August 2025 to explore these questions and reflect on the influence of the Council of Nicaea (325 CE) and the Nicene Creed (381 CE) for Christian faith, mission and unity. The participants were theologians from India, Canada, the United Kingdom, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Brazil, Panama, Switzerland, Serbia, Greece, Aotearoa New Zealand, Germany and the United States and belonged to the Anglican, Baptist, Orthodox, Reformed, Methodist, and United and Uniting Churches.

Although our gathering commemorated the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, our reflections were not limited to the historical event itself. Rather, we sought to consider Nicaea in its broader dimensions: the Nicene faith, the Council of Nicaea, and the outcomes of the Council. By "Nicene faith," we mean the affirmation of the trinitarian faith—confessing Jesus Christ as fully divine, worshipped together with the Father and the Holy Spirit—which remains the most solid common basis for all Christians. By "Council of Nicaea," we recall the assembly of 325 CE, an event that was only fully received by the whole church in the complex process of reception across the following decades. And by "outcomes of the Council," we recognize, most prominently, the Creed that originated in Nicaea but assumed its final form as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed in 381 CE, together with other decisions such as the regulation of the common date of Easter and the canons on church order.

Therefore, while this report foregrounds our reflections on the Nicene Creed, we remain mindful that different church traditions may read, use, or relate to the Creed

¹ The term ReStorying can be attributed to Tongan theologian Jione Havea.

differently, and that views on the Council itself and its status also vary. Yet in all these differences, what unites us most firmly is the Nicene faith itself: the confession of Jesus Christ's divinity within the life of the Trinity.

Our revisiting the Nicene faith may be understood as 'reweaving the theological mat of our common faith' (to use a metaphor from the Pasifika). Prayer, pilgrimage, playfulness and praxis emerged as important strands for this reweaving as we acknowledged the liturgical nature of the Nicene Creed, undertook a pilgrimage to the ancient city of Nicaea (Iznik), embraced playfulness as a method for our theological imagination and sought to hold together orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxis (right action) as integrally connected. What marked our time was a broad diversity of perspectives, but also deep and growing friendship, common life and a shared longing for a peaceable and just world.

Our Focus: Empire (Past and Present)

We acknowledged that there have been many different initiatives in this important year to reflect theologically on Nicaea. We agreed that what might give this gathering a distinctive voice would be to reflect on Nicaea through the lens of empire, which might be defined as "large and ever-changing conglomerates of power that are aimed at controlling all aspects of our lives".²

The lens of empire becomes important given the well-known explicit entanglements between the Council of Nicaea and the imperial interests of the emperor Constantine, but also because of the continuing entanglements between church and empire born out of the later European enslavement and colonisation of peoples and lands, and ways in which, even today, church and theology sometimes become tools of imperial ambition and control. Were there ways in which those who gathered in Nicaea managed to transcend imperial interests, and how do we do that today? Further, given that the council of Nicaea, and the Nicene Creed that eventually emerged, had a distinct focus on Jesus Christ - affirmed as one who suffers and is put to death by the Empire - what subversive potential might this focus, and this understanding of Jesus, hold in our current context?

There are many potential ways to read and re-read the Council of Nicaea and Nicene faith, but this reflection focuses on the lens of empire. It was this that, quite naturally among us, emerged from and framed our discussions.

² Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), vii.

In the Empire: Reading Nicaea Across Context(s)

The Council of Nicaea was convened by the emperor Constantine to respond to challenges within Christian communities, with the aim that the unity of Christians would contribute to the stability of the *oikoumene* – (the whole inhabited world under the Roman empire). Given its imperial patronage, the importance of exploring the relationship between the empire, the council of Nicaea and the Nicene Creed was acknowledged.

Reflections on this relationship varied. We explored the creed in terms of the historic context of Nicaea. Why was it needed? What purposes did it serve?

We heard that in the aftermath of the recent persecution by the Roman empire, when Christian communities were fragmented and divided, the agreement on a common confession of faith was of decisive importance. The Council of Nicaea, convened by the Emperor Constantine, sought to establish peace and reconciliation among conflicting parties within the church. This pursuit of peace was significant not only for the Roman Empire and its social cohesion—the *pax Romana* of the *oikoumene*—but, most importantly, for the unity of the church itself.

At Nicaea, the vision of the universal Church was articulated with new clarity: one and catholic, in the Pauline sense of being the body of Christ (holy), and grounded in the tradition of the faith professed by the apostles (apostolic). The conciliar process—the debate, decision-making, and the representation of the entire Christian *oikoumene*—was central to this vision. While the Council undeniably served imperial interests, its creed and decisions were first and foremost intended as a means to bind the church together in unity of faith and life.

We also acknowledged the complexity of the relationships between empire, council, and creed. Nicaea marked a dramatic turning point: the church, only recently persecuted, was now finding its place at the very heart of imperial society. This shift, together with the long and contested process of reception of the Nicene faith, has continued to shape divergent views of Nicaea through history. For some, the Council remains a providential and holy event that established the true faith and ensured the church's unity. For others, it represents the moment when the church surrendered itself to the empire and became its instrument.

When considering its imperial setting, the Council of Nicaea cannot be simplistically reduced to an episode of imperial management of Christianity. While it took place within the wider Constantinian shift, the council itself bore witness to the church's own agency, theological integrity, and capacity to resist imperial co-optation. Convened on episcopal initiative, which was overtaken by the emperor Constantine, it

made an effort to articulate doctrinal truth rather than imperial compromise, and its legacy was repeatedly opposed or ignored by emperors of the fourth century who sought harmony over orthodoxy. Constantine's pragmatism, his later rehabilitation of Arius, and Constantius II's coercive campaigns against Nicene faith demonstrate that it often stood at odds with imperial strategies.

Further, the memory of Christ's suffering under the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, preserved in the Nicene Creed, hints at the Church's enduring awareness of its vulnerability before—and resistance to—imperial power. Therefore, it could be argued, the idea of Nicaea, as established by the champions of Nicene faith in the second part of the fourth century, did not represent the triumph of empire over the Church but a moment in which the Church defined itself *against* imperial logic. Its confession, rooted in a search for truth rather than expedience, and promoted against imperial interests throughout the fourth century, challenged the empire's attempt to harness Christianity for unity, showing that the authority of faith rests not in the verdict of emperors but in the discernment of the Church.

While this view was shared, there were also those among us who wondered how successful the church really was in positioning itself and its faith in ways which could not be co-opted by the empire. We recognised that the temptations of collusion are strong, that the Nicene Creed itself can be read in different ways, and indeed that it has, in some circumstances, been interpreted to provide support for empires or imperial aims. If a text carries with it the history of its own interpretation, then the Nicene Creed is not simply an innocent text, whatever some of its original or later readers suggest. This we sought to interrogate in a spirit of openness and oneness.

In considering the reception history of the Nicene Creed, though it might be possible to acknowledge that there was radical subversive inclusivity in the Nicene Creed itself (see further for detailed reflections on the theology of the Creed), we cannot help but see that over the centuries and millennia, the powerful managed to subvert the subversive. The faith that was crystallised in Nicaea 'turned' into a colonial and colonizing statement that dehumanized God's people and dismembered God's creation over the years. This paved the way for according superiority and privileged status to select groups that almost succeeded in assigning to themselves a divine status, something that (arguably) was prophetically and in a non-violent way resisted and subverted at Nicaea.

From a Wahine Maori perspective we heard how the Nicene Creed is understood not just as a theological statement, but also a vehicle that once served to consolidate colonial power by replacing Maori understandings of the divine (Wahine Maori atua) and Wahine spirituality (Wairua) with western Christian doctrine which rendered non-

patriarchal ways of understanding God, and creation-affirming spiritualities as inferior and subordinate. This helped us to understand how the Nicene Creed has been engaged to progress and impose certain images and characteristics of God that have been damaging to many lives, cultures and spiritualities and mother earth herself.

Questions were raised regarding ways in which creeds have the potential to plaster over fundamental differences in order to present a kind of superficial unity. One example of such plastering can be found in the context of apartheid South Africa, where both the apartheid state, and the black people who it was oppressing, detaining, and killing, claimed the same faith. The following words from the Kairos Document of 1985, whose 40th anniversary we commemorate this year, captures this dilemma, “Both oppressor and oppressed claim loyalty to the same Church. They are both baptized in the same baptism and participate together in the breaking of the same bread, the same body and blood of Christ. There we sit in the same Church while outside Christian policemen and soldiers are beating up and killing Christian children or torturing Christian prisoners to death while yet other Christians stand by and weakly plead for peace.”³ If an acknowledgement of our shared faith does not lead to further interrogation of the violence that was carried out in the name of this faith through collusion and complicity, then it simply plays the role of masking over these injustices.

From an anti-imperial lens, we also questioned whether creeds in general are a means to impose uniformity on an otherwise diverse faith in the name of unity, with the intention of domination and control. The poem below by one of the participants invites us to step back and consider some of the potentially harmful ways that creeds can function within faith traditions, in terms of closing down space for dialogue, questioning, and process.

On Creeds

I've always been suspicious of creeds
Calcified statements of belief
Locked, loaded and recited
Leaving little time or space to breathe
To question
To doubt

³ [The South Africa Kairos Document 1985 | Kairos Southern Africa](#)

To wrestle

To touch the wound and determine whether or not it's real

It all just seems a little too clean and controlled

To claim to be in the name

Of the One who came for freedom.

In a context where empires tend to impose uniformity as a means of control and domination, such suspicions about creeds seem natural.

While acknowledging that a majority of Christian communities continue to pledge allegiance to the Nicene Creed, we recognise that the Nicene faith affirmed in the words of the Creed has often been held alongside increasing instances of inequalities and injustices, violent conflicts, and worrisome indifference to the plight of communities already experiencing the consequences of the climate emergency. In contrast to a positive reading of the Nicene Creed, our context is failing to affirm the equality of all people and continues to violate mother earth. Anger, sorrow and frustration were expressed about the ways in which faith can be distorted and instrumentalised by imperial forces, whether in the third century or in the 21st. Amidst all this we asked – ‘how can we re-receive the Nicene Creed today?’

But Not of the Empire: Re-receiving the Creed Today

Our conversations led us to see that the Nicene faith *may* be lived in a way that is profoundly subversive of empire. And we opened the possibility of choosing to (re)read the Nicene Creed through this lens. From this perspective we point to the following as some ways in which the Nicene Creed might be re-received today.

Embracing Life:

Empires by nature are death-dealing. The creative potential of the Nicene Creed to address any imperial context and designs lies in its central focus on the Triune God, who is the God of Life. Paying attention to the Nicene Creed can reveal an intrinsic narrative of life. God is affirmed in the Creed as ‘maker of heaven and earth’ (maker of all things, visible and invisible in the Creed of Nicaea 325), Jesus is affirmed as the one through whom ‘all things were made’, and the Holy Spirit is affirmed as the ‘giver of life’.

The Triune God that we affirm in trinitarian terms encompasses and embraces the wider web of creation beyond humans and safeguards us from a parochial anthropocentric way of imagining the divine. These faith affirmations attest and point to a view of salvation that is cosmic in scope, which directs our faith both towards life in this world as well as the ‘life of the world to come’.

In a world marked by a culture and “politics of death” (“necropolitics”), this life-centric thrust in the creed offers a counter-narrative to the dominant narrative of capitalism and consumerism that exploits the poor and the marginalised and their environment. How we let our faith in this God of life shape our engagement with a world which continues to face the onslaught of ‘empire’ – where religion is instrumentalised for usurping power, undermining plurality and consolidating privilege is a challenge for Christian discipleship today.

Enhancing Faith:

Empires thrive through the imposition of uniformity and domination. Affirming the trinitarian nature of God as expressed in the Nicene Creed safeguards us from imagining and relating to the divine in monolithic ways. Rather, it frees us to acknowledge and embrace multiplicity and plurality in our speaking with and about God, in ways which can challenge cultural, conceptual and linguistic bias.

From this perspective, deepening our Christian faith in conversation with Indigenous spirituality and wisdom, which have often been suppressed under colonialism, is important. Deepening our faith in a spirit of dialogue can (re)orient us to the Christian gospel in unexpected ways. In the course of our conversations in Türkiye, we learnt how indigenous wisdom opens up possibilities for understanding God as both Father and Mother, and as being in balance and interconnected with the whole of creation and of theologies that are liberating, lifegiving and prophetically challenging to any culture in which empire continues to flourish in any of its many forms.

We heard, how for the Guna people of Panama, for example, this divinity is manifested in the unity of *Nana* (God the Mother) and *Baba* (God the Father), whose *Nabgwana* (shared heart) is Mother Earth. The Nicene Creed’s assertion of one God, the almighty father and creator, is further illuminated by the Guna understanding of the Spirit’s role in creation. This divine duality reflects the complementarity and interdependence of all things in the universe, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, who resides in every corner of creation. The Spirit’s indwelling thus transforms creation into a sacred tapestry, revealing the inherent divine nature of all things. It opens a fresh way of understanding God and God’s creation pneumatologically – through the Holy Spirit. From this perspective one of our participants shared the following Guna affirmation of faith in a God of life whose very being is interwoven with creation:

Credo of Interwoven Life (English)

We believe in the Life that emanates from Mother Earth, *Nabgwana*, a source of ancestral wisdom that unites us. In community, communion, reciprocity, mutuality, and solidarity, we manifest the living fabric of our faith.

We believe that the Breath of the Spirit resides within every living being, the sacred breath of the Creator, revealing the inherent divinity that dwells in every corner of the cosmos.

We believe in the *Nega*, our sacred home, where the divine Presence persists, a beacon of hope and renewal, even in the shadow of sin.

We believe in the promise of a future where life flourishes in harmony, guided by *Nana* and *Baba*, where the wisdom of the Earth intertwines with the justice that emanates from the life and teachings of Jesus, a path toward fullness.

In a complementary manner, another participant highlighted how returning to the original Greek of the Creed (the then language of the common people) may also provide readings rather different from some dominant imperial translations and therefore help us to re-read dominant images of God against the grain. One example is how the word ‘pantocrator’ may be understood as ‘the one who holds all things’ (as someone might hold a baby), which offers a vision of God not as an almighty emperor, but God as tender Mother/Father. To be open to such theological promptings, is one way of moving beyond long-entrenched ways of imagining the divine, which has often been used to reinforce and replicate existing inequalities and divisions.

Embodying Justice:

Another important way of re-receiving Nicaea today would be to seek to enact the praxis of Jesus – the justice of God – in our Christian witness. The Jesus who emerges in the Nicene Creed is one who holds subversive potential for overcoming empire.

The Nicene Creed affirmed that it is Jesus who is “of the very being of God” and, in so doing, challenged the image of the Emperor as a deity. Defining the relationship of the first and second person of the Trinity (God and Jesus Christ) as “being of the same substance” (*homoousios*) deserves special attention. While imperial interests would conceive of the second person (Jesus) in terms of dominant images of the first (the Father/Creator), a closer look at the second person can challenge and reshape dominant images of God.

Read from an anti-imperial lens one can reread the Creed in the following manner:

The simple but powerful phrase “one Lord transfers ultimate allegiance from Caesar to the crucified and risen *Kyrios*;

homoousios abolishes any ladder of lesser divinities modelled on imperial hierarchy;

“came down...was incarnate...was crucified under Pontius Pilate” inscribes vulnerability and state violence at the Creed’s core;

the endless kingdom relativises every regime;

the Spirit “who spoke through the prophets” installs within the Creed a perpetual criterion for critiquing idolatrous power, including ecclesial forms.

What matters in the Nicene Creed is that it is *Jesus* who is of the same being as God, and that in him, in his living, dying and rising to life, we see the very nature of God. Jesus lived among us in solidarity with the multitudes as someone exploited by the empire, reclaiming the subversive power of washing feet as an enslaved woman might, proclaiming good news to the poor rather than charity, challenging the wealthy and calling them to repentance, and dying the tortured death of those who dared to contradict the Roman Empire. Risen and ascended, he still bears wounds of his suffering that symbolise his resistance, taking all human life into the deepest presence of God, in joyful hope.

The one who saves us, by assuming *all* humanity, engages and ends the power of empire and draws the majority of humanity, those longing for alternatives from the margins, to a renewed and redeemed realm. This understanding of Nicene faith has never been the dominant one, but there have always been those among the faithful, from Nicaea onwards, who have recognised the very subversive, and indeed anti-imperial, and therefore life-giving potential of the statement of faith as it began to take shape at Nicaea.

Understanding the life and witness of Christ and the solidarity of the incarnation as something that deconstructs imperial conceptualisations of God as almighty, immutable, and impassible is even more critical today. The ‘original’ story of the incarnation, the story of a vulnerable God crucified by a brutal empire calls us to take sides with the oppressed and colonised people. It shows that solidarity with the marginalised is not an option for the Christian community but a call to proclaim and embody the hope of resurrection and life in solidarity with all those who are exploited and silenced today. The challenge perhaps is to embrace Christian witness as ‘with-ness’ in a spirit of solidarity following the example of Jesus Christ.

In Conclusion:

As we commemorate the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea this year, our gathering helped us to acknowledge that the invitation to reaffirm our common faith for these uncommon times is one which cannot bypass the question of empire – both past and present. Reflecting on the Council of Nicaea, the Nicene Creed and the Nicene faith through the lens of empire, we cannot but lament that aspects of our Christian faith have sometimes been co-opted by the powerful to serve their interests. Our current world order might be one such moment, where it might seem that we live in a context where:

affirmation of faith in God as creator seems to go hand in hand with the temptation to play God in plundering the planet and its peoples,

affirmation that Jesus was crucified by the empire does not prevent us from resisting enough those empires that crucify the innocent, and

affirmation that the Holy Spirit has spoken through the prophets does in no way turn us to pay heed to the prophetic voices of protest in our midst.

Nevertheless, times such as these invite us to re-discover and re-receive the promise that the Nicene Creed offers in fresh ways – the promise of life, that is interwoven into the very being of God, whose nature is solidarity.

As we reflect on re-receiving the Nicene Creed, it may be helpful to remember that often the Nicene Creed is heard within the liturgy as the people's work, as a moment when it is the voices of the baptised that are heard, and not the church leaders alone, nor the rulers of this world. When faith is truly shared among the whole community, the saying of it together may become an inspiring expression of confident, courageous and common faith – which has the potential to bind us in solidarity and free us for justice. Such solidarity can enable us to dream and work towards a world where steadfast love and faithfulness will meet, and justice and peace will kiss each other. (cf. Psalm 85:10) Confident in this hope we all can truly affirm that though the Nicene Creed (and we ourselves), may be caught in the empire, yet we are not of the empire.