

Call to Unity

RESOURCING THE CHURCH FOR ECUMENICAL MINISTRY

Issue 8 • October 2007



Council On
Christian Unity

Seeking Wholeness in a Fragmented World



F R O M T H E E D I T O R

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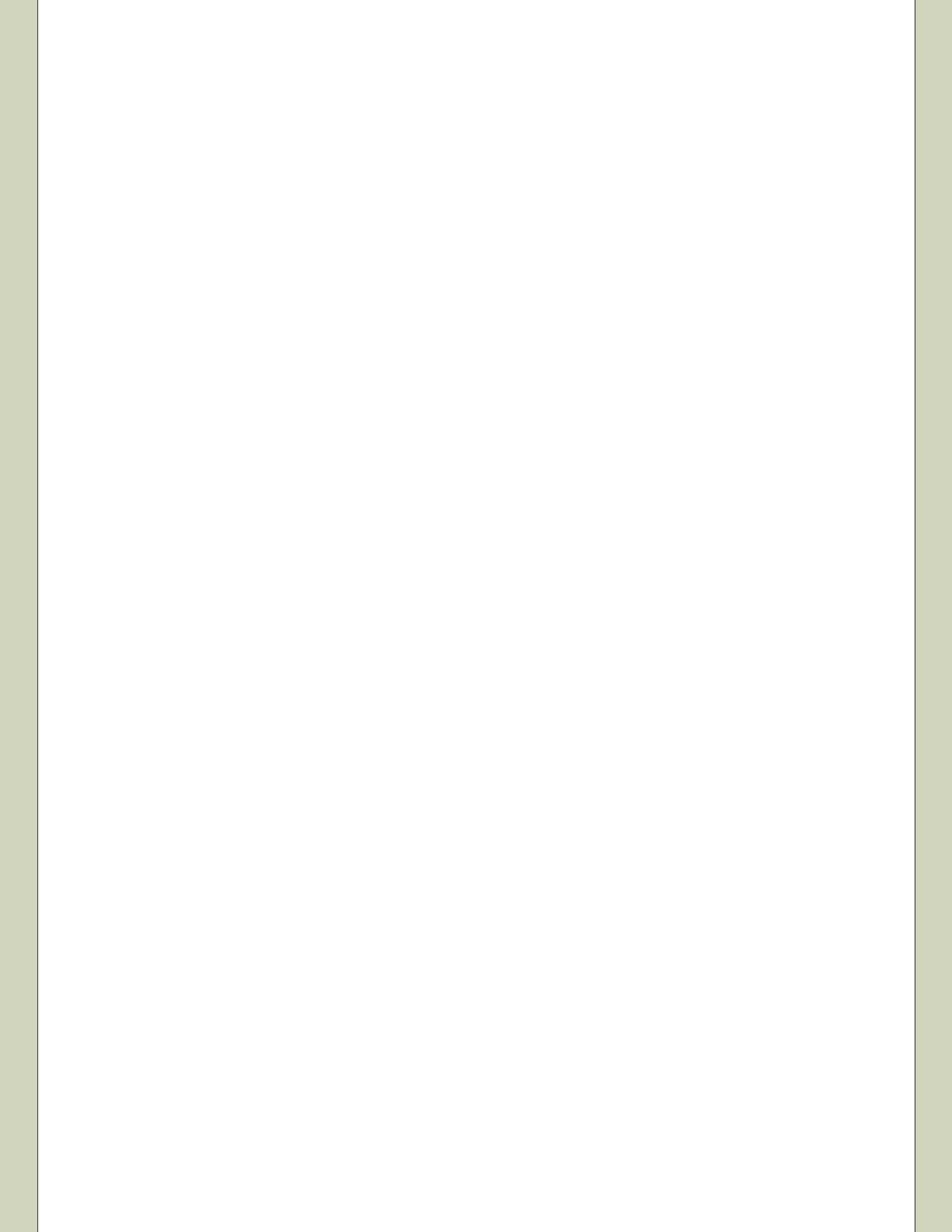
Resourcing the Church for Ecumenical Ministry

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A Movement for Wholeness in a Fragmented World

Recasting the Historic Disciples Plea

Sharon E. Watkins

HAROLD WATKINS LECTURE ON LEADERSHIP



SHARON E. WATKINS, *General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*, delivered this address on April 20, 2007 at National City Christian Church in Washington, D.C. as the Harold Watkins Lecture on Leadership.

Institutionalizing a Movement for Wholeness

In the early 1800's, a new Christian movement swept across the North American continent. In some places the people were called Disciples, in some places Christians. They were an anti-creedal, anti-hierarchical people. They were also a *pro*-restoration of the New Testament church, *pro*-unity, *pro*-kingdom of God people. According to Jesse O. Hale, Jr., (*Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, p. 598) "The basic notion was that . . . (U)nit^y based on the scriptural pattern would lead to the *evangelization* of the world, and this unity could usher in—the *millennium*(!)"

It was Thomas Campbell who first spoke of "the plea"—in his case "for reformation." Later (again according to Hale) Disciples "used 'the plea' as shorthand for the movement's basic message" about unity, evangelism and eschatology all based on a simple reading of the New Testament and restoration of New Testament practice.

It is now commonplace among Disciples to note that eventually the movement for unity split into at least two camps. One was more clearly focused on restoration of the ancient order of things—even if that meant separation from large parts of the Body of Christ. The other camp was more focused on seeking visible unity with the whole Body of Christ—even if it meant giving up some of the movement's cherished conclusions about proper New Testament practice.

The unity group came to be known as Disciples. For Disciples, any remaining echo of the "the plea" has related to unity, unity for the sake of mission, now more than evangelism. Talk of "millennium" has also pretty much fallen off the map. It is replaced now among Disciples by a desire to represent in our communities God's vision of justice and *shalom*.

A consistent mark of our vision has been our practice of gathering weekly—or more—around the communion table where we come freely and without barrier to be forgiven and healed as individuals, where we know again God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ, where we are made whole as community, joined with other followers to become the Body of Christ *for the world*.

Unity, Mission, God's vision of justice and shalom

It was natural that by the mid-20th Century, Disciples were fully involved in the global ecumenical movement that had been active since the early part of the century and had really taken off after World War II. This movement was rooted in a worldwide commitment to mission which was understood as evangelism and service to people everywhere. This ecumenical movement focused attention on issues of ecclesiology—church, ministry, and sacraments—in order to move *beyond* the issues that kept the church divided. It pioneered new forms of cooperation in Christian life and work in the world. It was a twentieth-century reshaping of the same concerns that had created Disciples in the first place: a passion for unity as a manifestation of God's new realm of peace and fullness of life.

In the United States the Consultation on Church Union gave new impetus to these concerns. Major American churches sought to create an American form to the vision of the worldwide ecumenical

movement. COCU strengthened the emphasis on the ethnic, economic, and cultural factors that—as much as traditional ecclesial issues—have kept the church fractured and handicapped in its efforts to make manifest God’s new age.

Disciples have been integral to this process throughout. Of course we were! Through our participation in the ecumenical movement, we were making new the vision of our founders. Using the insights and instrumentalities of the era, we were working to evangelize the world, through a church united, so that God’s *new* world, a world of peace and justice—of *wholeness*—would come into fuller view.

Two thirds of the way through the century, Disciples undertook a process that was intended in part to move us more fully into this twentieth-century form of Christian unity—for the sake of mission—to reveal the underlying wholeness of God’s created world. Culminating in 1968 and unfortunately labeled “restructure,” this process formalized the institutional developments that had been taking place for a long time among Disciples.

In the end, however, another purpose had come to the fore: to bring into consciousness an ecclesiology—a doctrine of the church—and to embody that ecclesial organism in a structure that would work well in the complex world that had developed in North America. Henceforth, Disciples would understand themselves as:

- More than a movement among the churches
- More than a brotherhood of like-minded people
- More than a cooperative network of agencies
- More than (rather than less than) a denomination

Henceforth, Disciples would understand themselves as:

- *More than a movement among the churches*
- *More than a brotherhood of like-minded people*
- *More than a cooperative network of agencies*
- *More than (not less than) a denomination*

In 1964, Ronald Osborn described where the architects of restructure were heading. He said, “It is something far more than a convention, far more than a policy of cooperation, far more than an association of churches; it is the church, as surely as

any congregation is the church. It is not yet the *whole* church, but it is the church.”

What was new to Disciples in 1968 was the way that the reshaping of our life together *broadened* our understanding of the church’s embodiment in the world. We already knew that each congregation was a church. *Now* we realized that the same church is manifested when Disciples worship and work together in regions and in the broader (we call it general) aspects of church life and work.

Disciples, a movement for unity in church and world for the sake of God’s reign of justice and peace was now a covenanted community of congregations and other ministries. They were going to have to learn to function together as “church.”

In fact, 1968 is viewed by many as the watershed year in US culture where the assumptions of the WWII generation and before came unraveled.

And Then the World Moved On

Common wisdom now has it that the minute Disciples fixed their structure into what had been developing for decades—a structure that was pretty well adapted to those decades—the world moved on. In fact, 1968—the very year in which we approved the work of the Commission on Brotherhood Re-structure—is viewed by many as the watershed year in US culture where the assumptions of the WWII generation and before came unraveled.

It took a little while before any of the mainline denominations realized that their own cultural moorings had been loosed as well.

Since then, the process of change has continued at an accelerated rate.

Globalization, under the guise of increasing efficiency so that all people of the world may benefit, is rendering the nation state passé, concentrating wealth in a tight circle of elite citizens of the world, resulting in the impoverishment of an ever increasing portion of the world’s population.

“The clash of civilizations” is how Samuel Huntington graphically describes this time when nation states are no longer the major actors on the world scene. Although nation states still go to war, the

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increasingly dangerous battles are between cultures, ethnicities, religions, and worldviews.

Thomas Friedman, in his popular book, suggests that we describe this rapidly changing world as *flat*—a level playing field for the technologically savvy. With electronic information and communication winning out over print, even transnational corporations have to reckon with loose networks of isolated individuals logging onto computers—or cell phones—to resource each other out of their own experience and to draw from anonymous stores of information and new processes of information manipulation.

This global, flat, clashing world increases the challenge to churches like ours. How do we minister in a world like this? Surely a vision of the wholeness of humanity can be a beacon in today's world.

The lonely person sitting before the computer screen, separated from human contact, seeking community through chat rooms and list servers needs human contact and community.

Masses of isolated individuals need strengthening against their vulnerability to abuse by systems that are organized enough to take advantage of their isolation.

Those for whom the world is not *yet* flat, who are outside the digitized, computerized world of technology, caught in the wake of a global economy forging ahead—victims of war, raids on natural resources, human trafficking and forced migration—need advocacy, accompaniment and justice.

Disciples have much to offer in a time such as this! Our own traditional emphasis on a personal confession of faith, on the responsibility of the believer to study scripture and pursue a lifetime of faithful maturing, adapt well to the new individualized flatness of the day. But we have *value added!* Our ministry to individuals does not take place in an isolated, exclusive manner. We understand that individuals finally mature only in the context of Christian community, and that God's purpose for calling communities of faith into being is to witness to God's vision of one, whole humanity.

We long for individuals to be made whole, to be reconciled with their community, so that together they witness to the wholeness that God has already created into the fabric of the universe.

Our insistence on community is shown by our weekly gathering at the table for reconnection with the risen Christ and with each other. At the table, we understand anew that all of the earth, as Alexander Schmemmann said a good many years ago, that all of the earth is intended to be a means of communion with God.

But the story is not over at the table with the gathered community of individuals. The story continues as we go forth from the table, reconstituted once again as the Body of Christ *for the world*. Disciples don't stop by ministering to individuals. Disciples don't stop by gathering at the table. Disciples go forth to serve God's purposes *in the world*, to represent by their own witness, the zone of hospitality we have experienced at the table, to live already resonating with the wholeness of creation as God has already called it into being.

Disciples go forth to serve God's purposes in the world, to represent by their own witness, the zone of hospitality we have experienced at the table, to live already resonating with the wholeness of creation as God has already called it into being.

So for a world of lonely individuals needing nurture and care, for a world of isolated individuals vulnerable to exploitation in their separateness, for a world of whole communities abandoned and abused and on the move in the wake of globalization, our Disciples insights about the unity of the church as a sign of the wholeness of God's created cosmos are needed more than ever. Our traditional insistence on the value of the individual within communities of faith for the sake of the world makes us a church whose time has come.

Time for Us to Do It Again

As times have changed around us in the past, we have adapted and retooled. It's time for us to do it again. Time for our movement to reclaim a passion for the unity of the church as a sign to the world of the power of God's reconciliation in Christ; time to set a priority in seeking the oneness of all Christians as the framework for our engagement of God's mission in a divided world; time for our movement for wholeness to bloom again.

Our founding vision still brings rich insight to our time. The joining together of the good news, the unity of the church, and the coming of God's new era still makes sense. A word, in today's language, that God is still at work in Christ to reconcile the world is a welcome word. The unity of our church communities can still model how God hopes everyone can live beyond pestilence, disaster, cruelty, hunger, and untimely death, where the morning stars sing their joy to God. In this 21st Century, we can still draw upon our founding vision.

We can also draw upon our ecumenically inspired 1968 renewal of Disciples ecclesiology. The church is decidedly real when we experience it in the congregation.

It is also real when we experience it in other, broader forms—in assemblies, in work-centered organizations, in theological endeavors, in the processes of oversight and pastoral care. The larger settings remind us that we are, each individual, each congregation, each tradition, part of the bedrock of the universal church, one member of the whole Body of Christ. In those larger settings we remember with particular force that the unity of the church is for the sake of the world, a sign to the world of God's intention that we all live in justice and in peace, in wholeness.

Our traditional value for the individual and for the local, work for us in these times. Our respect for the personal spiritual journeys of individuals undertaken responsibly, our insistence on lay leadership within the church, our clarity that the missional rubber hits the road in the congregations where people gather for worship, mutual challenge and nurture and for witness—all of this is consistent with the anti-hierarchical, decentralizing spirit of the age.

But, for Disciples, that individualizing, local leaning spins in energizing tension like the particles of a molecule with our clarity about the oneness of the Body of Christ. The passionate belief that the church is “essentially, intentionally and constitutionally one” remains core to our ongoing identity and mission. The oneness of the church stands as a witness to the wholeness of creation as God has already made it. The oneness of the church calls out as an announcement of God's intention that humanity should live in justice and peace. The church is one, not for the sake of itself, but for the sake of a fragmented and hurting world—so that the world may know the reconciling love of God through Jesus Christ. Our willingness to challenge the conventions of church and society that artificially

divided Christ's followers into separate and conflicting ecclesial groupings was key to our early identity. That same willingness to challenge convention continues as an important part of our witness in a time when civilizations clash, when humanity is artificially divided by national border, race, class and religion.

As we retool/rethink/re-imagine what it means to be Disciples in the 21st Century, our context not only challenges us but also gives

us new tools to use in our witness. A look around us brings into view not only the needs of lonely individuals and isolated communities ripe for exploitation but also the potential resources for building community that go beyond anything we have ever known before. In some ways, now more than ever, we have the means to be the very connected community of individuals and congregations we have imagined theologically.

The original insight and consensus about the church that helped the Disciples plea to spread across the North American frontier was so strong that it could overcome difficulties of mass communication in a pre-industrial era. Today, in a post-industrial time, technology finally allows us to function in our various communities but remain connected: missionaries in Congo email stories to Indianapolis of a new orphanage, and, with a click of a computer key, those stories are spread round the church. Our many communities today can be knit together by amazing, worldwide communication networks.

Our traditional value for the individual and for the local... all of this is consistent with the anti-hierarchical, decentralizing spirit of the age.

Disciples, since the beginning have been many and diverse, but one—"Not the only Christians, but Christians only." Today's world—many in culture, language and creed, but increasingly one in economics, ecology and information—stands in need of just such a vision. In restructure, we envisioned one church in many places—congregations, regions, general ministries—joined by covenant, not hierarchy—a part of the larger Body of Christ. Each one would have the responsibility to carry out its mission as God called it, but all would share common values of oneness in Christ, an inclusive Lord's Table, a ministry of all believers, and a longing to live out God's vision of justice for all the earth.

Our time has come again.

Restating the Plea—Reworking the Structure

As we go forward in this time, a vibrant part of the Body of Christ for a new era, our historic plea for unity, mission and the in-breaking Reign of God continue to inspire. We may need some new language, however.

Half of the 21st Century Vision Team which I called together to work on next steps as church, are younger than I am—way younger. They have helped me identify both the power of our plea and the need to make it sing in our time. The team has created a brief, contemporary statement of who we are as Disciples. It goes like this:

We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.

As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us.

Two phrases in this statement are especially attractive to me. First, "a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world," suggests a way to reconceptualize two of the elements in our classic plea. Wholeness is one way of describing unity. It also evokes the reign of God as an echo of the millennial dream. The text most often used by Disciples then and now is from the Gospel of John (17:20-21), Jesus' high priestly prayer in which he prays,

²⁰ "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

Movement for Wholeness

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, this "oneness" for which Jesus prays takes on a connotation of "wholeness" through the many stories of healings of body and soul wherein wounded, sick, possessed, sinful people are restored to their community. Healing is an integral part of the restoring of community. Jesus, in the synoptics, again and again, restores the individual and the community to "*wholeness*," a oneness or unity which involves healing of the brokenness of spirit *and* body.

In Hebrew Bible tradition, the prophets call for the community to live in justice and peace. The now-familiar concept of *shalom* provides the framework for much of the prophetic voice in scripture. In this tradition, the individual never exists apart from the family whose true head is the living God, and all actions of family, clan and nation are a reflection on the God they serve, a God who desires justice and peace for all of creation. A serviceable rendering of the word *shalom* is *wholeness*. God desires the world to live in wholeness.

In a world such as ours, where alienation and fragmentation are so much a part of the human experience, where we need to be clear that oneness/unity does not connote uniformity but rather a mosaic that is complete only by the inclusion of *all* the varied pieces, where the word *unity* itself in mainline Protestant circles is associated with a particular set of strategies from the mid-20th Century, the word *wholeness* captures the prayer of Jesus, the reconciling/healing touch of Jesus, the voice of the prophets, and the description of creation as God has already created it and invites us to live it.

Table-Centered Church

The second aspect of this contemporary statement is its strong emphasis upon welcoming all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us. Disciples have always been a table-centered church, but the table spread week after week is not our table, it is Christ's. It is a remembrance of Jesus life among the ordinary people of the world and of his giving his life that they—and we—can receive the living water and bread of heaven that will sustain us evermore. This table, to borrow language from Psalm 23, is spread in the face of enemies. It provides a place of refuge for people who are besieged by all of the torments of life in our time. But even more, this table anticipates the great feast in the heavenly realm when we join

with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven singing “Holy, holy, holy.”

We are Disciples of Christ: a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord’s Table as God has welcomed us.

As we get clear on who we are, it begins to be clearer on what we are to do—how we are to carry out our mission of wholeness in this time. With this new clarity, we can see—sometimes to our surprise—that new ways are already emerging to embody our plea.

The rather phenomenal—dare I use the word—*success* of the Disciples new church movement (you know we’re already halfway there!) and the difficult challenge of trying to actually make some progress in dismantling the systems of racism that still have a hold on us—these two disparate priorities actually fit together—not just with each other, but also with who we are as a community of faith from the very beginning. I don’t think it was intentional—at least I didn’t get it back when I was a member of the General Board voting on it, but our pro-reconciliation/anti-racism priority is completely entwined with our new church priority. It is also in perfect alignment with our original vision of moving past artificial human divisions in church and society for the sake of mission and ultimately of the sake of being part of revealing the wholeness of humanity as God created us.

The goal of becoming a pro-reconciling/anti-racism church is huge. The great American sin is racism. But the first step in solving a problem is admitting it. And we have done that and adopted a plan to address it.

Now, some of us may have thought that the anti-racism initiative grew out of a nostalgia for the 60’s or a later political correctness. But look how God has blessed our first goal—the one about new churches—with such a rich harvest of diversity, that we are becoming more and more like the face of 21st Century North America—Hispanic, African American, Asian, Haitian, and Anglo.

The task before us now as church is not so much how to welcome these new brothers and sisters into what is, but how to join with them in becoming together the church that serves God best going forward.

The priorities of welcoming one thousand new congregations and becoming a pro-reconciliation/anti-racist church are integrally linked. They are also linked with our original commitment to render

irrelevant the false divides of humanity, in order to show to the world that God has already reconciled all the world in Christ Jesus, to make clear that God envisions a world of oneness and wholeness and peace.

There are great divides in the human family today—race, culture, language—which threaten the oneness of humanity and of the church. The Disciples passion for unity is needed now more than ever. Our insight that unity is not what we create but what God gives from the beginning of time is surely why we still exist as a church today.

Our insight that unity is not what we create but what God gives from the beginning of time is surely why we still exist as a church today.

In a time of when people are literally killing each other in the name of God, we Disciples need to be true to our original calling, to stand up and say that the human family is one—created as one by God in the first place, reconciled by God through Jesus Christ and heading toward the full expression of that wholeness some day. As a people with this calling, we need to live as one and join hands with whoever will, to show that we mean it. The entwining of our new church movement with our will to be a reconciled church show that our plea for unity, mission and the Reign of God, our longing for wholeness, still drive us.

To be a vibrant part of the Body of Christ today, we need clarity on who we are—a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. We need clarity on what we are to do—join in witness to the wholeness of creation and to the reconciliation of humanity to God and to each other in Jesus Christ.

Re-institutionalizing a Movement for Wholeness

We also need to reach some clarity on *how* we do what we do. How we conduct ourselves within our communities of faith is part of our witness. If we are going to call the world to wholeness, we also need to cultivate habits of wholeness in our own life as church. As we have done again and again, it is time for us now to give attention to the institutional form of our mission.

Since starting to serve as your General Minister and President, I have been surprised to discover that an

important part of my call (and of others in our church) is to get clear for a new era on how we function as church. I have tried to avoid using the word “structure” for this conversation and especially have tried to avoid the word “restructure.” I have talked instead about “reconfiguring” or “reordering” or “streamlining” our life for mission. But eventually it does get down to institutional, structural, procedural issues. Once we have clarified who we are in the larger Body of Christ, once we have identified our mission, we have to get organized to accomplish that mission.

Of late, our structure and our procedures have been inhibiting our witness. We have a set of institutions right now that developed in a church twice the size we are today. This is a commonplace observation. These ministries are loosely configured into the corporate-like structure of 1968, a structure that doesn’t work as well in our flat, digital, mass communication, democratization of information, networking society. Most of us know that many of these beloved institutions in their current structural configuration are not working as well as we wish that they would in helping us be faithful and effective in our mission.

We set our four priorities—but we have no mechanism to direct whole-church resources toward those ends. We’ve been creative. We’ve lodged the new church establishment effort in Church Extension. New church, supported by the Pentecost offering, lodged within that venerable established ministry, does pretty well. Thanks be to God.

Eventually it does get down to institutional, structural, procedural issues.

Another priority—pro-Reconciliation/anti-Racism—lodged in a 100% DMF-funded entity, the OGMP—goes without staff because of a combination of bureaucratic bungling and a poorly timed major natural disaster. (Thanks be to God, we see amazing accomplishments anyway. Regions and educational and general ministries are taking a strong interest in the anti-racism initiative; local congregations are longing to be part. And thanks be to God, the Reconciliation offering was back up this year, so we anticipate being able to hire staff again.)

The other two priorities of transformation and

leadership development make do as they can as various ministries pick up the ball. But, as a whole church, we are not organized in such a way that when we discern priorities, we have a mechanism for directing resources that way.

We have ministries that have been around for years but in this day and age are seeking their reason for being, struggling to stay alive, maintaining their income stream, and we have other ministries in the full flower of their mission starving for resources.

We have ministries that have been around for years but in this day and age are seeking their reason for being, struggling to stay alive, maintaining their income stream, and we have other ministries in the full flower of their mission starving for resources.

This no way to run a church—much less to manifest wholeness in a fragmented world.

We have the tools to do better. As one church, a part of the larger Body of Christ, in many congregations and other ministries joined in three expressions that go forward together in covenant, we do have a mechanism, a perfectly good governance document that describes how we might function together as a whole—if only we would use it.

Governance Document Strengthened

In 2005, that document, the Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), was revised and strengthened in several important ways. The role of congregation as core to our sense of church was reaffirmed. At the same time our covenantal ecclesiology was made more explicit. The role of racial/ethnic constituencies as fully part of one whole church was lifted up clearly for the first time. Issues of accountability within covenant were addressed through a more detailed ministry description for the general minister and president. And the general board and administrative committee—bodies of the General Assembly—were both downsized and reconstituted as bodies representing the church’s many ministries in order to be of a size to effectively carry out their responsibilities on behalf of the whole church as assigned by the Design.

*I think it's time to take our
Design out for a test drive.*

In an effort to get on with our mission, I think it's time to take our Design out for a test drive. In particular, I think it's time to see what the General Board can do.

In Bob Cueni's 2001 address to this same body, Cueni said,

With Restructure the Strategic Planning function was supposed to be done by the General Board. In 1992, Ken Teegarden commented that the General Board had yet to find a way to perform that function . . . [S]pending most of the General Board's time and energy discussing General Assembly Resolutions was a far cry from the "authoritative" leadership/planning envisioned by Restructure.

I couldn't agree more. Our Design assigns church-wide responsibilities to various different ministries and entities. The General Board has responsibilities for planning the ministry and program of the church, for arranging for funding, for seeing to ongoing structural renewal and reform. The General Board represents the fullness of the church (the Disciples part of the church, that is). It is the most basic, most complete body of the church except for the general assembly which it represents. It has never been able or willing to carry out its responsibilities very well—mostly because of past habits that still live on—habits of strong independent ministries responsible to autonomous boards that may or may not pay attention to the church's General Board or to congregations.

It's time to see if we can act like one church made up of many ministries (including congregations) who align ourselves with one common mission and go forth together embodying the wholeness we proclaim about the world.

With the new General Board, we have an opportunity for board members from other ministries to take on a whole church perspective. They will bring the lens of their ministry to their General Board deliberations, but also will develop a whole-church lens to take back to their board. This moment is way over

due. Since every person on that board is also a member of a congregation, including the members who are specifically nominated by the general nominating committee to represent the church at large, the congregations will be well represented on this General Board—as they should be.

In 2007 and beyond, as we seek to fulfill our mission of wholeness in a new global context, it is my hope that in the next period we will refer to our Design as an actual governance document, that we will respect the covenantal theology contained therein and that we will relax into its guidance, stop our fighting over funding and release energy for mission.

In our history so far as Disciples, though we have proclaimed unity as our core witness, we have lived often in division. It's time to get our act together. I think we can do it. It will take some discipline. And it will require us to give new attention to the accountability part of living in covenant. This is the ecclesiology issue of our time.

*It will require us to give new attention to the
accountability part of living in covenant. This
is the ecclesiology issue of our time.*

Often in the past we have talked about the *autonomy* of congregations and persons within Disciples tradition. Sometimes the conversation has been carefully couched in terms of *freedom* and *responsibility*. We have thoroughly outlined the contours of the freedom side of that dichotomy. It is past time to get a handle on the responsibility part. It is time to figure out how to be appropriately accountable to God and to each other in covenant, in ways that honor our individuality, that respect the separate missions of our various ministries, but that acknowledge that, as one community, what one does affects the other and—more importantly—how we act together reflects on the God we serve, the God we claim to be made known most fully in the *reconciling* person of Jesus Christ.

If we are to witness to wholeness, we need to cultivate habits of wholeness in our church life. A decent respect for the governance documents we have devised will help us get on with the work at hand, spending more time on ministry and less time figuring out how to do it.

Leaders for the New Century

One last question to address. What kind of leaders can help us to go forward from here, true to our identity, clear as to our mission, organized as a whole people of God? (This is a leadership address, after all, and I have finally gotten there.)

Leaders for the new century *will be steeped in our calling as Disciples*. They will love God deeply and feel God's pain at the broken world, so different from God's intention made known in the reconciling life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our leaders, out of their love for God and God's children, guided by a vision of shalom as described by the prophets, by the joy of healing and community restored as described in the synoptic gospels, compelled by the words of Jesus' high priestly prayer in the gospel of John, will live out of a vision of wholeness.

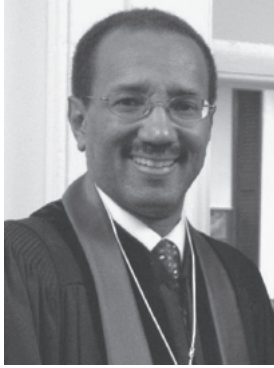
Leaders for the new century *will care about the context*. Their hearts will break over a fragmented church and world, and they will call their congregations and the ministries they lead, to witness to the wholeness that is already in the fabric of creation, just waiting to be revealed in us. Our leaders will challenge their people whose vision is too small, whose horizon is too close, who participate too fully in the isolation and individualism of our age. Our leaders will care, cajole, challenge and confront the people with the realities of our context. Our leaders will call us to mission, to be the active Body of Christ. They will keep the pressure up.

Our leaders *will call us to be the church*—a sign of God's

created wholeness. Every time we gather around the table, when ordinary bread and juice become for us the presence of the living Christ, they will remind us of the extraordinary power of life to win over death. They will remind us that as church, we, too, are ordinary reminders of the extraordinary power of God for reconciliation and wholeness in our lives. As church we are a living sign of the reality of oneness that is already created in the fabric of creation. Our leaders will call us as church to function as a sacrament of the wholeness already worked by God. Our leaders need to call us to be the Body of Christ in the world.

Our leaders *will be people who lead*. They will teach, call and encourage the people to lift their eyes to the vision of a world revealed in its wholeness. They will nudge and empower people to accept their mission of witness to that wholeness in word and deed, from within the church and beyond the church's walls.

Even as leaders rise up where they are, in the myriad of places where the church comes to life, they *will keep an eye toward the whole*. They will help us align our work and witness to a common vision of God's world revealed in its wholeness, reconciled and healed. They will take their cue from Christ's table—where we come as individuals, broken and weary, remembering the death of Jesus, where we find forgiveness and healing and are restored to each other as the Body of Christ for the world. They then will usher us forth in the light of the Risen Christ to be witnesses to fullness of God's desire that we be whole.



Living the Visible Unity of the Church

NINTH JOE A. & NANCY VAUGHN STALCUP
LECTURE ON CHRISTIAN UNITY

Michael E. Livingston

MICHAEL E. LIVINGSTON, *Executive Director of the International Council of Community Churches, has served as the 23rd President of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. This address, the Ninth Joe A. and Nancy Vaughn Stalcup Lecture on Christian Unity, was presented at Northway Christian Church, Dallas, Texas, June 10, 2007.*

I am deeply honored to be with you today for the Ninth Joe A. and Nancy Vaughn Stalcup Lecture. I want to thank the Stalcups for the depth of their ecumenical vision and their generous hospitality. I'd also like to express my gratitude to the Council on Christian Unity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the U.S. and Canada, and The Stalcup School of Theology for the Laity at Brite Divinity School for their joint sponsorship of this lecture.

How dangerous is this? You've given me a wide open space in which I may range freely "reflecting your own experience in the ecumenical movement...from your work with CUIC, and now as President of the National Council of Churches and 'head of a communion' in light of the current challenges and opportunities... in the quest for Christian unity..." I'm quoting Robert Welsh who extended this kind invitation to me well over a year ago.

Mine is a curious journey from a small independent Pentacostal Church on Western Ave. in Los Angeles to the Presbyterian Church, my ecclesiastical home. I've been a pastor, spent 14 years in a theological seminary, serve now a small council of "community" churches, a phrase which today can describe either nothing accurately or just about anything that isn't nailed down by one of our many—now follow me carefully here—churches, communions, denominations, families. The

International Council of Community Churches has long considered itself "post-denominational," a phrase I always found presumptuous until it became clear to me that it describes something that is emerging, if it is not already a confirmed reality—however reluctant those of us in mainstream historic traditions might be to abandon center stage in a rapidly, profoundly altered and continually changing religious landscape.

But to return to my particular journey for a moment: As a seminary student in 1973, I was appointed a member of the Presbyterian delegation to the Consultation on Church Union. My involvement with COCU/CUIC, this ecumenical dimension, has been the longest thread of my ministry, woven throughout every garment of service I've worn. My appointment was by Clinton Marsh, the second African American to serve as moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church—so you see I understand it as part providence/part accident. I'm who I am professionally, and I am here because of that appointment. That is not a boast, but rather a plea for a diligent intentionality in shaping representation at the tables where we talk about who we are in the human family and what it means to be created in the image of God.

I am not a scholar of ecumenism, nor have I been employed in ecumenical service to any organization, though the ICCU comes close. I've spent countless hours as a volunteer in these God-blessed endeavors. I'm the beneficiary of priceless experiences. I cannot thank God enough for the people and the places, the new insights, the struggles, the wisdom of elders, the kindness of persons for whom no one is a stranger, and God's enduring and surprising grace—so very much evident in ecumenical work. So, I have some things

to say. I want to talk about the present context in which we engage in ecumenical ministry, about CUIIC and the NCC, and about my own view of the ecumenical agenda as this new century unfolds.

Our Present Context

Immigration; Southern Christianity

On Friday a conference on “The impact of migration on the church and the ecclesial context” ended in Nairobi, sponsored by the Global Ecumenical Network on Migration and hosted by the All Africa Conference of Churches. The WCC press release that announced the conference said that migration in today’s globalized world “raises questions about inter-faith relations, identity, justice, racism, advocacy and *diakonia* and, inevitably, affects the contexts in which churches live.” While this conference was focused mainly on the effects of global immigration in Africa, the implications for the US ought to be obvious to us with the added dimension of our own cultural, economic, and political struggles with immigration, legal and illegal to the U.S.

In *A Multitude of Blessings: A Christian Approach to Religious Diversity*, Cynthia Campbell reminds us that God’s first covenant with humankind, the covenant with Noah, “. . . precedes the selection of one group to be ‘God’s own people’ and is for *all* creation and *all* humanity, for *all* time. In the biblical view . . . there was a universal covenant before there was a particular relationship with Israel. She quotes the Jewish theologian Irving Greenberg who, based on the covenant with Noah, concludes that, “every religion that works to repair the world—and thus advance the triumph of life—is a valid expression of this divine pact with humanity.” From the New Testament, Jesus says in John (10:16), “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.” And Peter, “our rock” says in Acts: 10:34-35, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”

Christians are not alone in the world, not even in the nation. The U.S. may be the most diverse nation on the earth, though Egypt and Syria may well make the same claim. 9/11 did more to elevate the need for ecumenical and interfaith relations than all the talk and text of the last century strung together in a streaming video on satellite radio.

Europe has over 15 million Muslims today; 3 million in Germany, 2 million in France, a million in Britain. About half of those who attend church

in London are reported to be black. The Kingsway International Christian Centre in London boasts a sanctuary that seats 5,000, double the capacity of Westminster Abbey. The founder and pastor came to London in 1992 as a missionary from Nigeria and began with 300 people. He has suggested that the Anglican Church ought to “die gracefully” and give its property to new and vibrant churches like his own.

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W.E.B. DuBois characterized the problem of the 20th Century as “the problem of the color line.” While it is clear that skin color will continue to play a critical role in this century the issues are entirely more complex, encompassing now the North-South economic divide. It’s clear that in the west we do not understand Islam; we’re ignorant of its basic premises, and this venerable tradition is subjected to gross distortions by those who understand it least and seem determined to exploit their ignorance and the apathy of a silent majority so that the gap between Christianity and Islam is made all the more deep and perilous in a world armed for unlimited chaos and destruction of life.

We are experiencing this, altogether too painfully, in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Israel, to name those places and conflicts that garner the most frequent and chilling headlines. But the effects of this are evident throughout Europe, Asia and the United States. And if that isn’t already considerably more than we can handle, to use a phrase from Philip Jenkins in *The New Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, “. . .perhaps the great political unknown of the new century, the most powerful international wild card, will be that mysterious non-Western ideology called Christianity.”

Jenkins describes the characteristics of this “Southern Christianity,” as “. . .enthusiastic and spontaneous, fundamentalist and supernatural-oriented. . .” As the population in Asian, African, and South American countries explodes while the white west declines, it is this Christianity that may well come

to be predominant. A less objective view of the Christianity of the South would describe it as "...fanatical, superstitious, demagogic...politically reactionary and sexually repressive."

It is growing more common for African Churches, as well as churches from other nations, to evangelize in the United States. There are 80,000 Nigerians in Houston, many of them in thriving Christian churches and part of a denomination. Since 1981, the *Redeemed Christian Church of God*, a Nigerian-based denomination, has started churches in Houston, Tallahassee, New York, Washington, Chicago, Atlanta, Detroit, and right here in Dallas. The website of the Dallas congregation speaks of their global initiative as "...in fulfillment of the vision that had been given to the founder . . . that this church would spread to cover the whole earth,"

In 1960 only 3% of the population of Houston was born on foreign soil, today that figure is 25%. Several years ago at a meeting of the US Conference of the WCC, I was startled hearing Diana Eck say that there are more Muslims in the US than there are Episcopalians. In 2000 there were 35 million Americans counted as Hispanic, (60% Mexican). By 2050 the estimate is there will be 100 million Americans of Hispanic decent. "They will then constitute one of the world's largest Latino societies, more populous than any actual Hispanic nation with the exception of Mexico or Brazil" Such a population will "... very likely have a far more Southern religious complexion than anything we can imagine at present."

Look for a moment at the current crisis in the Episcopal Church, where we see conservative congregations aligning with, joining the non-geographical diocese of an Anglican communion in Nigeria. These trends will only become more pronounced as we move toward the middle of this century. They will command serious attention in our ecumenical deliberations and in our practice of Christian hospitality.

The Economic Divide

Our present context is also characterized by profound economic disparities. In a nation so dominated by a media that sees white Americans as the dominant reality, and of course that is true in all the measures that define power and influence, we think of the typical Christian as a middle class white person of evangelical persuasion. But the fact is, if there is such a thing as a typical Christian

in our world, that would be a poor person, poor beyond the limits of our everyday experience in the United States. And that person would live in Africa, or South America.

Worldwide: 2 billion people live on less than \$2 a day; that is 7 times the population of the United States. 150 million children are malnourished. 10 million children under five die each year. 40 million people are infected with HIV/AIDS

Jenkins quotes a CIA report, "In Sub-Saharan Africa, persistent conflicts and instability, autocratic and corrupt governments, over-dependence on commodities with declining real prices, low levels of education, and widespread infectious diseases will combine to prevent most countries from experiencing rapid economic growth."

The Census Bureau reports that in the U.S. there were 37 million people living below the poverty line in 2005. The poverty rate for whites is 8.3 and for blacks and Hispanics, 24.9% and 21.8%, respectively. Do you know that in Washington, D.C., one in every 20 persons is infected with HIV/AIDS? And that in Harlem, one in seven black males is infected with HIV/AIDS?

What are the Methodists going to do about poverty? The Lutherans about global warming? We're going to solve these global crises together or be overwhelmed by them together.

We can't begin to be serious about ecumenism and interfaith relations if we do not see the world as it is and are not actively engaged in tending to the needs of "the least of these" in whom we encounter the living Christ. And does it need to be said that to confront the problem of the economic disparity that poisons the human family and effects us all, whether or not we acknowledge it, we must act cooperatively—across religious and national borders? What are the Methodists going to do about poverty? The Lutherans about global warming? We're going to solve these global crises together or be overwhelmed by them together.

CUIC

We may either be witnessing the demise of CUIC and the compelling vision that created it 47 years ago or a dramatic revival that could anticipate a

move toward full communion among the now ten. It is ironic that not long after a tenth communion has joined, with still others poised to consider joining formally, there is the threat of internal disintegration around several issues that have not all fully come into public view outside the coordinating committee. We must find ways to rebuild and strengthen the relationships that are so tenuous now in CUIC. I continue to believe that CUIC is an inspired witness to the unity that God wills for Christian community in our nation. It is a circle, grown from 4 to 10 parts that can be widened, like God's mercy. This present crisis is an opportunity to boldly confront again the issue of race—the fault line for division in the fabric of our national and religious life. We have the challenge of trying to address an issue with deep historic dimensions in a time when change so rapidly layers our context with ever greater complexity and urgency.

And while it cannot be denied that race and racism are a factor in the current tensions, the complex issues around episcopacy are prominent as well. That seems utterly obvious, but I mean here, episcopacy related to the African American churches as well as those, Presbyterians for example, we have become accustomed to thinking are most at odds with where CUIC has been committed to going from its very Presbyterian beginning—with thanks to none other than Eugene Carson Blake.

The actions, and theological rationales for those actions, proposed in the several documents that have approached this issue have been perceived as “making right” or “correcting” some flaw in the consecration of African American bishops. When at a recent CUIC meeting hosted by one of the African American churches, the presiding African American bishop was unable to serve as the principal celebrant at the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, in deference to an Episcopal Bishop, a profound wound was inflicted. This weaving of racial and theological dimensions is toxic and profoundly compromises any ability to resolve the issue and move further toward the reconciliation of ministries.

Beyond this, there is the issue of human sexuality. Clearly, the member communions hold starkly different views about homosexuality, and there is the difficult task of living in community with one another with integrity and respect for profound church-dividing differences. Here, once again, race, now woven with issues of biblical authority and

interpretation, challenge the fabric of Christian community. Silence about these matters won't do anymore in the heated climate of today even though there would seem to be some agreement about this in the inclusive language of *Churches in Covenant Communion* (see Chapter 4, The Elements of covenanting). As Michael Kinnamon put it so simply in a dialogue at the Governing Board of the NCC this past February, “Can the ecumenical movement ever become a place where we name our toughest differences?”

How do we move through this difficult moment to the reconciliation of ministries? In our ecumenical organizations, how do we make real progress in the stalled evolution of our ability to deal with the intractable issue of race—America's original sin? You can't believe I could actually answer a question like that. Here's a fresh construction that you might find intriguing.

I was recently introduced to the work of The Rev. Byron Bland, a minister member of the San Jose Presbytery. Rev. Bland is a fellow at the Stanford Center on International Conflict and Negotiation and the Center for Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law at Stanford University. He's been a part of the back channel diplomacy efforts that brought resolution to the “troubles” in Northern Ireland. The texts I'm going to quote refer to the possibilities for peace in the Middle East, but they seem useful to me in the environment of ecumenical conversation as well. He was asked about the possibility of finding a “Palestinian Mandela.”

Israelis need to find a Palestinian Mandela, and Palestinians need to find an Israeli Mandela. However, the Mandela they need to find is not the leader who will make the concessions they seek but the one to whom they can make the concessions they say they cannot offer. Mandela was this kind of leader because his repeated actions and unequivocal words gave witness to a future that Afrikaners could embrace without fear.

Mandela was this kind of leader because his repeated actions and unequivocal words gave witness to a future that Afrikaners could embrace without fear.

Mandela presents leaders today with a twin challenge. First, how do we find the person on the other side to whom we can make the concessions that we

feel we cannot afford to make? Second, and much more important, how can we become the persons to whom the other side can make the concessions they say they cannot make? Both are important, but the second is critical in a time when each, standing back, looks to the other to perform the difficult actions needed to move the peace process forward.

The basic negotiating principle at the heart of this strikes me as in the spirit of Christ. How do we find, how do we become, the person to whom the other side feels they can lose and yet feel safe, respected, and provided for. The intractable ecumenical divides, in CUIC for example, between Episcopalians and Presbyterians suggest themselves as in need of something like this principle. And of course in such a context we may not be talking about an individual—but traditions that offer some sense of security to others that fear the loss of something precious.

Presbyterians followed Eugene Blake into COCU knowing Bishops, in some form, were in the future. In about the mid-nineties, representing the Presbyterian delegation to COCU, Dottie Barnard and I took a proposal for a corporate Bishop to the catholicity committee of the General Assembly. We were very well received, and the proposal very thoroughly defeated. We couldn't get it out of the committee and onto the floor of the assembly. Presbyterians couldn't "lose." Episcopalians can't lose, AME's can't lose. None of us can lose what it is we think makes us who we are. Though our savior lost it all on a cross.

Oh, if we could only value this great sovereign God of all as highly as we value and guard our particular perspectives. Remember Paul's remarks to the Athenians in Acts 17:24ff, "The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands . . . from one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth . . . For 'In him we live and move and have our being;' as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'" There's a fine Christian contribution to ecumenical and interfaith dialogue.

National Council of Churches/Christian Churches Together

Eight years ago many thought the NCC would not survive. Morale was low; the endowment had been depleted. There was tremendous tension between the Governing Board and the Board of Directors of Church World Service, and its sense of mission

was clouded and unclear. Staff was reduced by one half. What has now become Christian Churches Together was conceived in that climate, with some of the leadership of the NCC involved.

I think CCT is a good idea and has potential to become an important ecumenical instrument for the future, but it will take time to build trust and to find an effective voice and witness with the great diversity present among the participating families and individual communions. It is hard to argue against an organization that brings together Roman Catholics with the Church of God in Christ, the Orthodox, and the National Baptist Convention.

But CCT has erred in not taking sufficient care to engage constructively those African American Churches, AME, AMEZ, and CME, that have been so much involved in ecumenical work since the 1970's, and who pleaded for patience and careful deliberation before beginning a bold new thing without their presence and in the context of an agreement made to begin only with the representation of the "families" that constitute the broad sweep of religious life in America.

The NCC has begun to rebuild by living within the new reality—member communions are unable to support the Council at the same levels as before. Internal pressures began to reduce budgets and staff at the national level. Other sources of funding have to be found for programs that are desired by member communions working together in NCC Commissions and on the Governing Board. The Environmental Justice work of the NCC is almost entirely funded by grants from foundations. We will likely see more of this in the future.

The Strategic Plan of the NCC has put front and center the question of the meaning of membership, and the Council will begin the next quadrennium with a focus on communion visits to strengthen relationships among us and encourage our mutual accountability. We must balance a renewed presence and credibility in the arena of social concerns with a renewed passion for the unity of the church: faith and order and life and work.

Bob Edgar has led us in a vigorous engagement of issues at the heart of the biblical message—to use his language, "peace, poverty, and planet earth." The Council has been not just been involved in, but led significant efforts to raise the minimum wage through the *Let Justice Roll* campaign and to secure government benefits due to the poor through the innovative *Benefit Bank* initiative. But the Council

has to address another of Michael Kinnamon's piercing questions in our recent dialogue on ecumenism today, "Do we have the will and energy for unity as we continue to defend denominational perogatives?" And I think I'd want to add—and *defend ourselves from internal disintegration over red state-blue state issues—sexuality chief among them?*

We will need to begin to explore how, through the Council, we can help to revive one another. Here I don't mean simply clinging to one another to offer some remnant of a joint ministry, but to actively and creatively seek renewal in our separate places by confronting together the reasons for our decline and the hope of our renewal.

The Strategic Plan also envisions a coordinated, staff-supported renewal of work in ecumenical networks. With some glaring exceptions—Wisconsin, Massachusetts, to name two of several—state and regional Councils of Churches have either disappeared or are struggling. Scott Anderson, the executive of the Wisconsin Council of Churches has written an intriguing paper on *Departure Points for a New Ecumenism*. One of his points is the shift from regional to local:

Congregations—not denominations—are the new center of the ecumenical universe. As the mainline churches follow their trend lines towards decline and reinvention, the only constant in the shifting ecclesial equation will be the local church. Conciliar organizations which fail to develop new and vital relationships with congregations will not likely survive.

In a meeting to discuss re-entry programs for incarcerated persons returning to society, I was asked if the NCC could identify congregations at 30 sites around the country who could support such programs by providing mentors for men re-entering society. An initiative such as this demonstrates the need for links among national, regional and local partners in the one ecumenical movement—in response to the injunction to care for the least among us.

Who will lead?

Since the selection of Dr. Brian Blount as the next president of Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia, I've had occasion to think again about the leadership our seminaries are preparing for the church in the coming century. It

must be clear that most of us gathered in this room and most of those engaged in leadership of the ecumenical movement in the latter part of the last century will not be among those who will chart the path deep into this century. In an editorial for the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (published July 1st), Dr. Blount wrote that like John on the Isle of Patmos, we know trouble:

. . . war in Iraq and Afghanistan; genocide; terrorism; the working poor; the uninsured; immigration; human rights; human sexuality; secularization; high cost of living; ethnic tensions; racial strife; economic disenfranchisement; impoverished inner cities; perilous lack of involvement in a political process that tallies more votes for an American Idol than for an American president We are not a place where people come for a period of years to find sanctuary from the storms; we do not whisk students away from the world, we inspire them to follow the lead of God's Holy Spirit in changing the world. And then we give them the tools to go do it. We simulate theological, social, and political storms even as we equip them with the biblical, theological, historical, ethical, practical, and spiritual resources to confront them, contain them, and convert their destructive reality into reconstructive opportunity.

Formal study of key ecumenical texts or of the ecumenical movement was in short supply when I was in seminary. Not one single professor worked primarily in ecumenics. A position in Ecumenics and Mission was a revolving door for academic talent, and the occupant of the position seemed always to have expertise in mission rather than ecumenism. Our seminaries need desperately to participate in equipping church leadership for ministry with the ability to lead in the ecumenical and interfaith context that awaits them.

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Scott Anderson also suggests that leadership for our ecumenical future cannot be expected to come

from professional ecumenists whose numbers are shrinking as rapidly as denominational budgets that support ecumenical work. We will have to look, he thinks, to the passion of the laity for the emergence of a new cadre of leadership for the future.

The search for people with passion inevitably leads us away from denominational structures and leaders and towards the grassroots church, to search out and equip those who are gifted for ecumenical witness.

The modern ecumenical movement began as a lay-led phenomenon. The development of Sunday Schools in the United States and the expansion of foreign mission work in the 19th and 20th centuries were instituted, grown and underwritten by lay leaders. Since the passion for the church's ecumenical witness has left the denominational structures, the emerging paradigm may be leading the conciliar movement back to lay leadership as the primary locus of authority.

At the Table

I was in a bible study group at the 9th assembly of the WCC with a young lay African man inexperienced in ecumenical settings. There was a Greek Orthodox bishop in our group. The young man could not understand our discussion about the problems related to a common table. "What do you mean we can't have communion together? Why aren't we celebrating the Lord's Supper here? It's the Lord's table." He just didn't get it.

"What do you mean we can't have communion together? Why aren't we celebrating the Lord's Supper here? It's the Lord's table." He just didn't get it.

I know you do understand the issues involved here. I wouldn't want to minimize them for religious traditions that have been divided for centuries now and where wars have been fought and lives lost over what were considered life and death issues. But I hope a kind of holy and troubled wonder accompanies the deep understanding: the wonder a typical layperson, a young person with quite normal interests and experiences, brings to this stone wall of division, this so far impenetrable boundary that guards access to the table of our Lord, like the 360 or

700 miles of fencing our government contemplates erecting on our southern border with Mexico.

What kind of witness can we make to the world if we cannot break bread together at the Lord's table? The whole truth is, ecumenism and interfaith dialogue, understanding and cooperative action in local communities and hot spots around the globe don't just matter, they are essential to our present and future. The highly technical dialogues that are the mainstay of the last half of the 20th Century make no sense to the younger generation in this country and around the world. While those kinds of discussions in the ecumenical arena must continue, they are only, now, a part of the basic understanding and respect that must define our practice of religion today in cities like Dallas.

Pope Benedict XVI entered and perhaps prayed in a Mosque in Turkey! That's the kind of barrier breaking move our churches need more of. We ought to at least give one another signs now and then that we truly see in one another God's image.

We ought to at least give one another signs now and then that we truly see in one another God's image.

Well beyond the rarified air of intellectual wrestling with ancient doctrinal disputes that continue to divide today are the down-the-block and around-the-corner mosques, temples, ashrams that share the neighborhood with the First Baptist and Second Presbyterian, St. Mark's Lutheran or Episcopal, or the storefront independent Christian congregation as vital as any. And of course there are the mega-churches, the Home Depots of the religious landscape that are playing an increasingly visible role in American religious life. How can we expand our speaking and acting in this direction?

A Final Word

After the tragic events that took place on the Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama when many Blacks were beaten and James Reeb was murdered, Civil Rights demonstrators, not the mobs attacking them, were accused by some of undermining American society. Rabbi Abraham Heschel said that they were trivializing piety. Heschel said, "To act in the spirit of religion is to unite what lies apart, to remember that humanity as a whole is God's beloved child."

Ecumenism is our future, however reconceived in light of present circumstances in our existing organizations and the inevitable pressures exerted by our volatile society and world. Ecumenism is our future, or our future, or we, will not be able to make much sense of the future. Interfaith work is an essential and inescapable facet of an enlightened ecumenical agenda.

In a study conducted out of Hartford Seminary, 22% of congregations reported participating in interfaith worship in the past year (2005), and 37% reported joining in interfaith community service—both up dramatically since a similar study done in 2000 when only 7% had participated in interfaith worship and 8% in interfaith community service activities during that year. These numbers need to grow.

I want to see a muscular ecumenism for the 21st Century; an ecumenism that continues the dialogues that have largely characterized the movement since early in the last century and that now builds upon the vibrant local manifestations of hands on, on-the-ground ecumenical and interfaith cooperation and action. We need an ecumenism that speaks and acts. We need an ecumenism that speaks around

the conference tables as scholars continue to reconcile the theological divides of earlier centuries and that tragically settled into walled and warring religious communities through centuries of open hostility and absent of a compelling desire for dialogue and reconciliation.

We need an ecumenism that acts in the world to reconcile our broken humanity and halt the creeping hatred that is devouring human life like the flow of a molten stream of lava.

We need an ecumenism that acts in the world to reconcile our broken humanity and halt the creeping hatred that is devouring human life like the flow of a molten stream of lava. We need an ecumenism that sees all of humanity as a child of God and that unites what now, so tragically, lies apart. We need an ecumenism that will help us gather at the Lord's table for that sacred meal, and that helps to end the poverty that leaves cupboards bare all over the world. Paul tells us in Corinthians that "...in Christ, God was reconciling *the world* to himself..." (2 Corinthians 5:19)

The Joe A. and Nancy Vaughn Stalcup Lecture on Christian Unity is a biennial event that takes place in the North Texas Area, bringing together the challenge of Christian unity in today's world with the commitment to the theological education of the laity. The lecture, jointly sponsored by the Council on Christian Unity and the School of Theology for the Laity, was inaugurated in 1989, and has continued to provide a meeting place for the local, regional, national and international witness to the oneness of the Church and the interconnectedness of the ecumenical movement. This lecture is made possible through the generosity of Joe A. and Nancy Vaughn Stalcup.

Speaking of Faith

A New Imagination for a New Century

Krista Tippett

24th Peter Ainslie Lecture on Christian Unity



KRISTA TIPPETT is the creator and host of *National Public Radio's* weekly show "Speaking of Faith." She presented the 24th Peter Ainslie Lecture on Christian Unity at a dinner celebration jointly sponsored by the Council on Christian Unity and *DisciplesWorld* magazine during the General Assembly of the Christian Church (*Disciples of Christ*) in Ft. Worth, Texas, July 25, 2007.

It has been a great adventure creating *Speaking of Faith*—and creating it during years in which religion has moved from the sidelines to the forefront of American life and world affairs. Though in 1998, when I first proposed that public radio should have an intelligent, in-depth program about religion, I encountered a nearly overwhelming skepticism. At that time—as you will all remember, I suspect—a few strident voices had galvanized American media's imagination about who Christians are, and what they sound like and advocate.

In those years many people who heard my idea couldn't really imagine such a thing as "intelligent" religious discussion. They couldn't imagine that we could invite people to speak from their deepest places without proselytizing or excluding or making lots of listeners angry. Then September 11 happened. Bitter moral values debates escalated in U.S. politics and religion. In the circles in which I work, it was *now* arguable that religion was at the root of all of the world's worst problems.

Why this chasm between the essence and purpose of religion in general and Christianity in particular—and their effect on our public life? This is a question

that has driven me and shaped my work these past years. It is a great Christian and ecumenical challenge I believe—and a source of great confusion and longing for the Next Generation, which is the theme you've chosen for this year.

We can of course fault some of those strident religious voices for the disrepute into which religious speech has fallen in our lifetimes. But at a deeper level, I think, we simply haven't had adequate models for bringing the fullness of religious ideas and questions into our common spaces. Traditional journalistic approaches and political formats are especially poorly suited to drawing out the intellectual and spiritual content of faith. They make the humble sound trivial, and deliver inordinate play to strident voices who are willing to squeeze themselves into political boxes of adversarial debate. It is very hard for people of faith

to express their ideas in an adversarial forum without betraying the very spirit of what motivates them. Of course every idea of substance—political as well as religious—is simplified by an opinion-poll driven, pro and con, crossfire mentality. But the content and effect of religious faith is especially distorted—and sometimes rendered dangerous—when it is reduced to positions

and soundbites delivered by people who are set to speak for all Christians, for all Muslims, for God.

On *Speaking of Faith*, I insist that my guests—however influential and devout they may be—speak only for themselves. This is a discipline I learned at the Ecumenical Institute in Collegetown. They call it "the first person approach" to ecumenical dialogue, and I've adapted it for radio conversation

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across the world's traditions. This sounds simple, but it has the effect of defusing predictable minefields. There is a profound difference between hearing someone say, this is *the* truth, and hearing someone say, this is my truth. I can disagree with your opinions; I can disagree with your doctrines. I can't disagree with your experience. The more we can put human faces and stories and voices to our religious claims, the better we will be able to stay in conversation and relationship—even with those at a very different place on the spectrum of beliefs. My guests are theologians and scientists, poets and activists, parents and police officers. We trace a powerful and humbling and creative line between religious ideas and human experience—theology and real life. These kinds of conversation illustrate—rather than arguing—that religious voices can reframe and nourish and deepen our public discernment on all the important issues before us.

On Speaking of Faith, I insist that my guests, however influential and devout they may be, speak only for themselves... I can disagree with your opinions; I can disagree with your doctrines. I can't disagree with your experience.

So—a few examples. I think of John Polkinghorne. He is a physicist who also became a theologian in mid-life. Some of my favorite interviews are with scientists. Over these past years they have opened up for me a world of conversation—a give and take—between science and religion, that is fascinating and far more generous than, for example, an either/or choice between evolution and creation—that has even made its way into this year's presidential debates. John Polkinghorne looks to the cutting edge insights of quantum physics and chaos theory to illuminate his understanding of Christian truths. He sees a universe that is “supple” and “subtle” and imagines these as qualities of God. Polkinghorne says this: “God did something more clever than create a readymade world; God made a world that can continually create itself.”

I think also of a conversation I had with Major John Morris, a chaplain in the U.S. Army, who told me about his experience in Iraq, of standing before a bridge across the Euphrates where the charred body parts of four American contractors

had been hung for display. Fury consumed him, along with a certainty that the people who did this did not deserve to live. They were animals. He would be the agent of God, the wrath of God. As that conviction seized him, he understood that he was at an abyss that would render him capable of the very actions he hated. “God help me and have mercy on me,” he prayed. “Save me from becoming a debased, immoral human being, and save my soldiers as well.” Prayers like this, theology like this, belong in our common life.

One of the phrases that recurs most often in my interviews—from Jewish as well as non-Jewish voices—is the moral longing and commandment to “repair the world,” *Tikkun Olam*. In the beginning, Hasidic legend goes, something happened to shatter the light of the universe into countless pieces. They lodged as sparks inside every part of the creation. The highest human calling is to look for this original light from where we sit, to point to it and gather it up, and in so doing to repair the world. This can sound like an idealistic and fanciful tale. But Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, who told it to me as her Hasidic grandfather told it to her, calls it an important and empowering story for our time. It insists that each one of us, flawed and inadequate as we may feel, has exactly what's needed to help repair the part of the world that we can see and touch. Religious traditions offer up stories like this as practical tools to a world longing to address images of suffering that can otherwise overwhelm us. Our public life needs moral vocabulary like this, just as seriously as it needs sophisticated language for political and military and economic analysis.

In some sense, I think, the vast religious energy and curiosity of our age—the religious energy and curiosity of this next generation—is about putting politics and the news into perspective; about acknowledging that the facts and the headlines always only tell us partial truths. We can construct factual accounts and systems from DNA, gross national product, legal code—but they don't begin to tell us how to order our astonishments, what matters in a life, what matters in a death, how to love, how we can be of service to one another.

And for every strident and violent religious voice that throws itself in front of microphones and cameras, there are countless lives of gentleness and integrity and service who will not. That simply reflects another natural shortcoming of politics and its bearers, the news. The issues and headlines of the

I believe that some of our most critical and overlooked tools are among the lived virtues that underpin our words and beliefs and give them their force in human life.

day are usually the *problems* of the day. Reporters focus on what is wrong; they don't shed sustained light on what is good and right. We all of us have to find new ways in and beyond journalism to edify and embolden ourselves and others—to bridge that chasm between the spirit of faith and its effect on our common life. I believe that some of our most critical and overlooked tools are among the lived virtues that underpin our words and beliefs and give them their force in human life.

In the few minutes before I close, I'd like to name a few *practices and sensibilities* that emerge across my conversations. I've come to associate these with the most hopeful contribution religious and spiritual traditions and people can make to our common life—while staying deeply rooted in our own identities and witnessing to those alongside religious others.

The first virtue I'd name is hospitality. A few years ago I conducted a live interview in Washington D.C., at the National Cathedral, with the Croatian-American theologian, Miroslav Volf. His theology has been formed in the crucible of his homeland in which, in his lifetime as in the past, different Christians have waged war in the name of God. He's studied the role of religion both in creating and in redressing not just division but violence all over the world. He calls such violence the result of an "ethic of exclusion" which emerges from a shallow reading of Christian tradition. He says that the cure for religious zealotry of all kinds in our world is not less religion, but more religion—or rather, stronger and more intelligent practices of faith.

In a question and answer period that followed our public conversation, someone asked Miroslav Volf a question that I hear a great deal; it's on many people's minds: "What can people of the three monotheistic traditions—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—find in common to heal the rifts between their peoples?"

I think we all expected Miroslav Volf to speak about how three monotheistic traditions can come together around their common belief in one God, or a shared reverence for sacred text. But the truth is, as he reminded us, trying to reconcile these

commonalities is excruciatingly hard. What is most obvious is also most impossible—like, why can't Christians just celebrate communion and baptism together? Here was Volf's alternative suggestion: we couldn't do better than to start in our approach to each other by way of our shared virtue of *hospitality*. Think about that. Hospitality is hard to politicize or even to theologize. It is a hands-on, human extension of deep ethical commitments of our great traditions. It doesn't require us to agree with each other. It requires us to be kind, and generous. It requires us to go beyond the civic virtue of tolerance, and take seriously the more exacting commandments of Christianity in particular, of practical love of neighbor and of enemy. Listen to this verse of the Qur'an—a seminal textual passage that's been quoted to me by a number of Muslims in different contexts. "In humankind," Qur'an says, "God has created you male and female and made you into diverse nations and tribes so that you may come to know each other."

Humility. The second virtue I'd name for our common good is both a precursor and an effect of hospitality: It is *humility*. I've heard this word and seen it embodied in such intriguing ways. For many, it is a litmus test of spiritual integrity. A Pentecostal sociologist said to me that an attitude of humility is a sign she's come to trust, in determining whether it is really the voice of God someone is hearing and heeding. Former Senator John Danforth told me that a sense of humility could make all the difference to whether the continued expression of religion in American politics grows more divisive or more constructive.

On the subject of gay marriage, I interviewed two evangelical Christians who love the same Bible and have come to very different theologies. But Richard Mouw and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott agreed with one voice that the measure of our Christianity on this issue has as much to do with how we treat each other as with the positions we take. Richard Mouw—who believes the church should not sanction same-sex marriages—nevertheless calls for a sense of "sexual humility" among conservatives and liberals as we discuss this aspect of human life that is complex beyond measure for all of us.

Now I need to clarify that the Christian notion of humility has very different connotations for me from the way this word has come into the 21st Century American culture. I grew up dismissing humility as a sure route to being ineffective. As a woman, it holds a particular resonance of subservience and invisibility. Even when I studied theology and learned to value the great nuances of the New Testament, I was frankly puzzled by the teachings of Jesus that his disciples should become humble like a little child. And then I gave birth to a little child. I became a mother. I passionately believe that we are all theologians and that the raw material for our theology is given to us in the basic experiences of our lives. And I know of no richer source of theological enlightenment than parenting. As I watched my daughter move through the world, I began to imagine what Jesus was talking about. The humility of a child, moving through the world discovering everything anew, is closely linked with delight. Spiritual humility is not about debasing oneself; it is about approaching everything and everyone with a sense of curiosity and wonder. Spiritual humility has a quality of fearlessness, too, that I first recognized in monastics who inspired me. I've since experienced spiritual humility in a vast far-flung communion of saints of many faiths, and no faiths at all.

Respect for Mystery. Spiritual humility makes room for *mystery*. And a respect for mystery is the final religious insight I'd like to name this evening as a potentially vital contribution to our public life. At their orthodox cores, most religious traditions themselves ask us to hold a sense of earthly certainties and transcendent mystery in a creative tension.

But a sense of mystery is the crux of religion that is almost always missing in our public expressions of religion. Mystery evaporates beneath debates and sound bites and entrenched positions. Mystery resists arguments and absolutes; it can hold truth, compassion, and possibility in relationship. This relationship could redeem our literalistic, triumphalist civic and religious debates. We could disagree passionately with each other and also be tempered by an awareness that there are limits to our own understanding. If mystery is a fact of human existence, uncertainty and ambivalence are blessed. And I believe that uncertainty and ambivalence are what many of us hold as we ponder some

of the deep and contentious issues that our age is called to address.

I find that mystery is a word people of every tradition love, whether they speak it often or not. It is a word many agnostics hold in higher regard perhaps than some religious people. Introduce mystery into any conversation and the conversation gentles; reality doesn't lose its sharp edges, but we remember that the sharp edges are not the whole story. Some would say that a sense of mystery is precisely the engine of religious violence—that religious people can claim to answer only to transcendent truths and be released from earthly norms of justice. But fanaticism is more flagrantly dismissive of mystery than any degree of non-belief.

We couldn't do better than to start in our approach to each other by way of our shared virtue of hospitality... It doesn't require us to agree with each other.

Others might say that I'm proposing mystery as a cover for relativism: that if we treat mystery as a primary value, we might suggest all truths are equal and all convictions relative, and that's not good for our common life either. But I know in myself and in my conversation partners that we are all driven to discern truths, each of us with the raw materials of the life that we've been given. I need to discern my tenets of truth constantly, to cleave to their assurances as keenly as I feel how they change and expand as I grow older. But I know that this truth I seek is ultimate; I exist in time and space.

Again it's a scientist who gave me my best analogy for living this way. The geneticist Lyndon Eaves is also an Anglican priest. Juggling these two sides of himself, he says he's come to the conclusion that the spirituality of the scientist is akin to that of a mystic. It is a constant endeavor to discern truth while staying open to everything we do not yet, can not yet, know. It is to live boldly and assertively with the discoveries we've made and the truths we've formed, all the while anticipating greater wisdom still to come—and wanting to hear how others might enlarge our perspective. I often have a sense that my conversation partners and I are standing before the same mystery. At the very least, we are asking the same large questions of meaning.

I'd like to leave you this evening with a sense of challenge: that the 21st Century is calling each of us to more creative expression and application of the fullness of our humanity and belief, in

private as well as our public spaces. We can, I believe, embrace this boldly—as a great adventure—with our intelligence *and* faith intact.

The Peter Ainslie Lecture on Christian Unity is delivered annually by an internationally recognized ecumenical scholar, and is intended to witness to the vision of Christian unity, which inspired the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Rev. Dr. Peter Ainslie, III. Dr. Ainslie (1867-1934), a distinguished ecumenist, was the minister of Christian Temple, the Disciples congregation in Baltimore, Maryland, and the first president of the Council on Christian Unity. This lecture, inaugurated in 1982, is endowed by the Peter Ainslie Fund and sponsored by the Council on Christian Unity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).



Nature and Goals of the Ecumenical Movement

WIDER ECUMENISM – SOME THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

S. Wesley Ariarajah

S. WESLEY ARIARAJAH, *Professor of Ecumenical Theology at Drew University Graduate and Theological School, Madison, New Jersey, delivered this address at the Ecumenical Institute of the World Council of Churches at Bossey, Switzerland in June 2003.*

Ecumenical – Who Owns the Term?

Shortly before the WCC assembly in Harare (1998) I was invited to write an article on “Wider Ecumenism” for the *Ecumenical Review*. It was one of the contributions to a special volume brought out to facilitate the discussions on the “Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches” at the assembly. At Harare, one of the veterans of the ecumenical movements stopped me to say how much he had appreciated my contribution in the *Review*. Then he added, with clear mark of disapproval, that he only wished that I had not used the phrase “wider ecumenism” for what I had to say. “It creates unnecessary confusion,” he claimed, “I would reserve the word ‘ecumenism’ to the search for the unity of churches.” I recall similar sentiment expressed by Visser’t Hooft, the first General Secretary of the WCC, when he once participated in a Bossey seminar in which he heard me mention the phrase “the new, wider, mega, or interfaith ecumenism.” He expressed his disapproval in no uncertain terms, claiming that “flirting with this idea” would prove to be “a danger to the Ecumenical Movement.”

We have, of course, heard and read a thousand times that the Greek word *oikoumene* means, “the whole inhabited earth”; we are aware that “the world is God’s first love” – God created it, loves it (“God so loved the world...”), and intends to bring it to perfection; we confess that God is in the world and that we are partners with God in God’s

mission in the world; we have spoken of the unity of the church as the *sign* of the unity and renewal of whole humankind. And yet, the concept of “wider ecumenism” creates some disquiet among many in the Christian ecumenical movement. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, claiming that the word *ecumenical* should, in fact, point to the wider movements that are bringing humankind together, complained that it is “unfortunate” that the word *ecumenical* has “been appropriated lately to designate rather an internal development within the on-going church.”

Happily, like many other words and phrases that meet with initial resistance but eventual acceptance, “wider ecumenism” has also begun to have currency in ecumenical discussions. But, “Why a *wider* ecumenism?” some would ask, “What does it involve? What relationship does it have to Christian ecumenism? What place does it have in a discussion of the nature and goals of the ecumenical movement?”

These are difficult questions to deal with. All I hope to do is to point some directions for our common exploration of the issue.

The need for a wider ecumenism and a theological rationale for it, however, cannot be understood unless it is presented in the context of an assessment of the adequacy or otherwise of the Christian ecumenism for our day. I hope, therefore, to first discuss Christian ecumenism as the background for the larger discussion.

The Legacy of Christian Ecumenism

As we are aware, the institution of “ecumenical councils” as such developed in the context of the Roman-Byzantine Empire. The emperors feared that the divisions within the church on matters of

doctrine and church order would affect the unity of the empire and were determined to facilitate *universal* or *ecumenical* councils to preserve the unity of the *oikoumene* – the Roman world. The equation of the unity of the church with universal (or ecumenical) search for unity was possible because the Roman Empire had made Christianity the only official religion of the empire, brutally suppressing, eliminating or marginalizing all other forms of belief. Thus, there was a coincidence between the search for the unity of the church and the unity of the “whole inhabited earth.”

Even though empires have gone, the church had splintered despite all the efforts of the emperors, and the *oikoumene* itself remains richly diverse with plurality of religious traditions, the equation of “unity of the church” with “unity of humankind” has been etched into the social psyche of the church. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, it believes that the unity of humankind somehow hangs on its own elusive unity.

Despite all the evidence to the contrary, the church believes that the unity of humankind somehow hangs on its own elusive unity.

The Modern Ecumenical Movement perpetuated the self-image of the church as the preserver and harbinger of the unity and renewal of humankind. The old “Christian” empires that forcefully maintained Christianity as the religion of unity of the known world had gone, but the “Christian” west was now imposing its colonial rule over much of the world. There was now a new opportunity, not so much to *maintain* the unity of the world, but to *bring about* the unity of humankind through the preaching of the Gospel to all nations. John R. Mott’s call in 1910 for “the evangelization of the world in his generation” was based on the confidence that if all the mission societies and agencies were to coordinate their efforts, pool their resources, and develop common strategies, they would indeed bring about the “unity” of humankind under the “Lordship of Christ.” Thus was born the “Christ-centered universalism” of the ecumenical movement.

Christ-centered universalism (also referred to as “Christocentric” universalism) is the attempt to understand the predicament and the destiny of the

whole created order almost exclusively in terms of the Person and the Work of Christ. The Christ Event is seen as the key to the unity, renewal and eventual redemption of the whole universe. Even though the Trinitarian faith is affirmed within the Protestant tradition, in reality, much of its theology and practice is based on Christ-centered universalism.

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This Protestant paradigm of God’s relation to the world formed the basis of the Life and Work movement as well. The church, as the bearer of the Gospel message, was believed to have the key both to the understanding of the true nature of the issues that faced the world and to their resolution. Since Christ has confronted the powers of evil on the cross, and overcome them, the desired changes in the world are to be brought about by the prophetic ministry of the church in the world.

This approach had much to do also with the way the search for the unity of the church was framed. Visser’t Hooft, who along with Oldham prepared the first volume of the Oxford series, *The Church and its Function in Society*, described the place of the church in the world in these words:

Over against false conceptions of state and community, the church needs to affirm the existence of a God-given community *which transcends all human divisions, and that as a reality and not merely as an ideal*; and that therefore the Conference should not only speak about the church, but manifest the actuality of the church and its relevance to the world.²
(Italics mine)

It is significant that the text claims that the church, as the body of Christ, not only holds a message about a community that can transcend all human divisions, but in reality *embodies* such a community. The implication of such a claim is that human community can also transcend its painful divisions by being incorporated into the Church. The second and related implication was that the *visible unity of the church is fundamental to the witness of the church*. In this respect it was close to the ecclesio-centric ecu-

menism of the Second Vatican Council, which also saw the sacramental presence of the church in the world, its vocation, and its expansion, as the primary means of God's own salvific mission in the world.

The birth of the Faith and Order agenda

Given this claim for the church, the task of the Faith and Order Movement was to give credibility to the assertion made for the church as the "community that transcends all human divisions and that in *reality* and not merely as an ideal." Such a claim, however, could not be made as long as the church remained deeply divided over doctrines and church order. Therefore, the divisions within the church were understood as a "scandal" and a "hindrance" to the mission of the church. Thus, within the ideal of Christ-centered universalism, the search for the *visible unity* of the church became the primary pre-occupation of Faith and Order. The hope held out was "that they all may be one *so that the world may believe*," a goal that was later to become the unofficial motto of the World Council of Churches.

In his book *Ecumenism in Transition – A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement?* Konrad Raiser clearly portrays "Christocentric Universalism" as the basis of the "classical self-understanding" and the "paradigm" that have been at the heart of the modern ecumenical movement. He also argues that it is the Christocentric universalism, and the ecclesiology it entailed, that made it possible for the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches to enter ecumenical discussions and to see themselves as part of "the one ecumenical movement."³ What have been the implications of this to the nature and goals of the ecumenical movement?

Positive aspects

Christ-centered universalism, which has provided the motivation and goals for the modern ecumenical movement, has had its own positive elements. The missionary zeal and commitment that came out of the 1910 World Mission Conference provided a new optimism and dynamism to the missionary endeavour. While the old colonial model of mission was still strongly in place, the ecumenical context, and especially the participation of the Orthodox and "Third World" churches in the ecumenical fellowship, enabled the missionary movement to make many shifts in its thinking. Thus, understanding of mission within the move-

ment moved from "conquering the non-Christian lands for Christ" to incorporating into its missiology concepts like "mission in the six continents," "partnership in mission," "missionary structure of the congregation," "God's preferential option for the poor," "mission of God," "mission in Christ's way" and so on. Each of these concepts brought new and radically challenging perspectives into the understanding of mission, even though the movement neither had the theological courage, nor the political will, to draw its implications to the overall purpose and goals of mission.

Similarly Christ-centered universalism, and the ecclesiology it entailed, made it possible for churches that had for centuries seen themselves as mutually exclusive entities to come together in search of "visible unity." However, the Roman Catholic Church's hesitance to be full member of the WCC, and the Orthodox desire to protect its classical ecclesial self-understanding through the Toronto Statement already placed formidable obstacles to finding ways of effectively implementing the results of this search. The Faith and Order was further weakened by the introduction of the Bilateral Dialogues. Even though Bilateral Conversations gave focus to issues discussed, they, in practice, undermined the Faith and Order methodology of seeking overall consensus among the churches based on common study of *all* the traditions of the Church universal in the light of scripture and contemporary challenges.

Yet, the Faith and Order movement has been successful in bringing the churches together for conversation, facilitating consensus on certain issues, and in some cases, enabling the churches to draw the consequences of the emerging consensus for their life together.

The concept of the universal presence of Christ in the world also enabled the Life and Work movement to engage in prophetic ministries in the world, challenging unjust socio-economic structures, oppression of women, racial discrimination, abuse of human rights, apartheid and so on.

In fact, the commitment, courage, and passion, as well as the ecumenical achievements over the past seventy years are quite impressive and there is much cause for celebration. The past ecumenical decades have left an enormous impact on the church, especially at the local levels. Assisted also by contemporary forces of globalization, Chris-

tians of all denominations and confessions have learned to be at ease with each other, to respect their differences, and to collaborate in a number of areas of life.

Assisted also by contemporary forces of globalization, Christians of all denominations and confessions have learned to be at ease with each other, to respect their differences, and to collaborate in a number of areas of life.

Uncertainty within Christian ecumenism

However, there appears to be general feeling that the institutional ecumenism itself is in crisis. There are different assessments about the nature, extent, and seriousness of the *crisis*. Some say that the crisis is by no means new, and that all points of change and growth in an institution necessarily involve an experience of crisis. Others see crisis as the opportunity for new beginnings. It is not my intension to survey or summarize these perspectives here. I would, however, give my own assessment of the current situation with the view to make my case for a “wider ecumenism.”

While there are many reasons for what is experienced as crisis, in my opinion, one of the important reasons, at the global level, is the uncertainty about the direction and purpose that has gripped the three main branches of the ecumenical movement. There appears to be a loss of the sense of vocation, a loss of relevance, and uncertainty about the adequacy of the theological basis on which the three movements had been built thus far.

Disquiet over the pace of Faith and Order

First, there is growing disillusionment with the Faith and Order Movement over its incapacity to bring the fruits that it had hoped for when it set out to foster the visible unity of the churches. As mentioned earlier, there are of course success stories. Many United, Uniting and Covenanting churches have been established, and there are several other conversations and negotiations towards forms of visible unity within Protestant denominations.⁴ Eastern and Oriental Orthodox traditions are in conversations. The Roman Catholic Church after the Vatican II has made significant moves in advancing the ecumenical

fellowship, becoming members of national and regional councils. There has been great improvement in the ecumenical atmosphere and greater mutual hospitality and collaboration at the level of national and regional councils. Ecumenism is a reality in many local contexts.

But if one were to measure the progress made in moving towards visible expressions of unity among the major branches of the church, the results are indeed quite disappointing. The Roman Catholic Church, for all intents and purposes, has indefinitely suspended the question of its membership in the global fellowship; the question is no longer on the agenda of the Joint Working Group. Many of the encyclicals and documents emanating from the Holy See begin with very positive ecumenical affirmations. But at the end, paragraphs are introduced that reaffirm its ecclesial self-understanding in ways that undermine what had been said in previous paragraphs.

From the very beginning of their participation in ecumenical conversations, the Orthodox family of churches has “protected” their ecclesial self-understanding though the Toronto Statement which required no church to abandon its ecclesiology or to accept ecclesial self-understanding of the others. The Statement, which was intended to facilitate the initial coming together for dialogue, has in reality become the *basis* of inter-church relationships. There has been little or no discernible movement among the main branches of the church on ecclesiology. The recent controversy over “ecumenical worship” events, and the Orthodox claim that there can only be “confessional” and “inter-confessional” worship events, “so that there is no confusion over ecclesiology” only reinforces the impression that all the seventy years of Faith and Order conversations have not led the main branches of the church to opening up of the ecclesiologies of the churches towards a broader and a more inclusive consensus on the reality of being the Body of Christ in the world.

The Protestant scene too, despite what has been achieved, is equally disquieting. There is growing lack of commitment to institutional ecumenism, growing confessionalism, and lack of enthusiasm for the “ecumenical” in the way resources are apportioned. Much of its search for unity appears to be moves towards “consolidation” inspired by non-theological factors. While there is ecumenical enthusiasm locally, ecumenism has become the

optional extra to the ongoing lives of the denominations.

What I have said above is not intended as criticism but as my observations on the current reality. Much can, of course, be said in defense of the movement and of the specific constituencies within it. The most common defense of the movement itself is that there has been much progress and that such deep divisions among the churches need even more time to overcome. However, increasing number of people are disenchanted with indefinite progress without tangible fruits, and agreements without firm commitment to draw their consequences to church life.

I have myself been a member and a Vice Moderator of the Faith and Order Commission, staff of the Joint Working Group between the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church, and have participated in the Forum on Bilateral Dialogues. I am personally aware of the high caliber, strong commitment, and the vision of unity that inspires many who work within the Faith and Order Movement. My own instinct is, therefore, not to criticize the movement for lack of expertise or effort, but to ask whether the movement has not set for itself an impossible, unattainable, and perhaps an unnecessary agenda, by aligning itself with the missionary movement's grand vision for the world based on its Christocentric universalism.

My own instinct is not to criticize the movement for lack of expertise or effort, but to ask whether the movement has not set for itself an impossible, unattainable, and perhaps an unnecessary agenda.

The search for the unity of the churches has its own legitimacy and urgency, and one would agree that part of that search has to do with the overcoming of the historical disagreements on doctrinal matters. Faith and Order's search has a legitimate place within the internal life of the institutional church. There is no doubt that greater unity among churches would also make Christian witness more credible. Search for unity needs to go on.

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By claiming the visible unity of the church as the historical "model," the "sign," and "guarantee" of the unity that God intends for all humankind, did the movement idealize the church and undermined the ambiguities, vicissitudes, and frailties of being the church in the real world?

and undermined the ambiguities, vicissitudes, and frailties of being the church in the real world? Did the modern ecumenical movement, by separating out the visible unity of the church from the wider search for the reconciliation of human communities, and by making it an end in itself, place on the Faith and Order Movement a burden it could not carry? By conceiving an overly romantic, abstract, and theoretical conception of the church and its unity, did the movement fail to take serious account of the human and non-theological factors that divided the church then, and keep them divided now, and the political and cultural dimensions of being a church in the world? In other words, have we been made victims of the rhetoric of Christocentric universalism?

I do not intend to answer these questions here, but they are important when we turn to the discussion on a theological basis for "wider ecumenism."

Disorientation over mission priorities

As a third generation Christian from Sri Lanka, I am myself a product of the missionary movement. Having studied in a Christian boarding school and worked with several foreign missionaries as co-worker, I can testify to the profound commitment, genuine compassion, and untiring effort on the part of many missionaries. We should also give enormous credit to the humanization of life brought about by the missionary movement, especially of women, children, and socioeconomically depressed communities in all parts of the world. Despite all the legitimate and necessary criticism made of the triumphalism and insensitivities that were part of the mission history, its close association with the brutalities that went with the colonization of the word, and its own colonial instinct in the way it defines mission, mission history is also full of moving stories of faith, hope, courage, and love.

However, when compared with the high standards it set for itself in 1910 to “conquer the world for Christ” in that generation, the missionary movement has been a *failure* in Asia. Even though the Gospel made an enormous impact on the Asian ethos, not even 3% of India, 1% of China, 1% of Thailand, 1% of Japan, etc., has accepted the “Lordship of Christ.” On the contrary, most of the Asian religious traditions have revitalized themselves and have, in fact, begun their own rather successful missionary outreach into lands that have traditionally been “Christian.” Some point to the significant growth of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in many parts of the world, and the apparent growth of Christianity in Africa and parts of Asia as indicators that the mission, as it was understood in the 18th, 19th Centuries, still has its validity. But these realities in themselves do not appear to mitigate the overall despair within the missionary movement. While Christianity may be making progress in some parts of the world, it is receding in others. In the United States, for instance, the fastest growing religion among the African Americans is Islam and among the Caucasians, Buddhism.

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It is not an exaggeration to say that the mainline missionary movement is yet to recover from the shock of the realization that large sections of the human community would hear the Gospel, would accept the compassionate service rendered in Christ’s name, and yet would choose to remain in their own religious traditions. This was not part of the equation of the mission based on Christ-centered universalism. Several shifts in mission thinking have not resolved the problem because of the attempt to fit them into the universalism which the movement refused to compromise. If the unity, renewal and indeed the salvation of the world is in accepting Christ, what would mission do when a majority of those who had heard the word had not responded in the way they were expected to? Writing on “History’s Lessons for Tomorrow’s Mission,” Tracy K. Jones, Jr., says that Christian mission around the world today is in “colossal confusion.”

There is no agreement as to priorities. There are those who give first priority to church growth. Others would give priority to the poor. Still others would see the priority as one of confronting the “principalities and powers” of racism, militarism, repression of human rights, and economic exploitation. Then there are those who focus on the needs of women and children. Finally, there are those who argue that the most important priority of all is a fresh approach on the part of Christians to people of other faiths.⁵

David Bosch, in his *Transforming Mission – Paradigm Shifts in the Missionary Movement*, perhaps the most scholarly and comprehensive study of these developments, shows how elusive the search for a mission paradigm for our day has been. Rodger C. Bassham, examining the mission theology from the 1940s to the 70s, comes to the conclusion that “...the question of God’s activity in the world raises one of the most acute points of tension in the contemporary discussion of mission” and that the question of other religions, “which has such broad ramifications for mission theology remains the key issue in the current debate.”⁶

The implications of the “confusion” within mission theology and strategy to wider ecumenism are rather obvious. We would return to this.

Life and Work – in search of an appropriate methodology

The assumption that Christ is already active in transforming the whole world meant that the responsibility of the Christian in the world is to be partners in Christ’s work of transformation. This of course took many forms – compassionate service in the world, solidarity with the poor and the oppressed, advocacy on social issues, struggle against all forms of discrimination, prophetic voice in international affairs and so on. Here again much has been achieved and the Life and Work has as impressive a record as Faith and Order and the Missionary Movement.

Yet, the Christ-centered universalism, which saw the world exclusively from the work of Christ, effectively prevented the Christian community *from entering into any meaningful collaboration and partnership with others*, especially those of other religious traditions, in the task of humanizing the world. This was also partly due to the fact that when Movement came into existence, the churches in the West, with large

sections of the populations behind them, had significant influence on the Western governments on social, economic and political issues. Colonization meant that the “collaboration” between the church and state was guaranteed in other parts of the world as well. In other words, humanization, westernization, and evangelization were seen to be in a continuum.

But today, because of the waning influence of the churches on general population, the Western governments do not necessarily listen to the churches. It is of interest that George W. Bush simply refused to meet with his own United Methodist Bishop over the issue of war and took no notice of the voice of the United Methodist Bishops on the question of the invasion of Iraq. Similarly, the voices of the WCC, of other ecumenical bodies, of Pope John Paul II, the Archbishop of Canterbury and other Christian leaders had no effect on the American and British misadventure in Iraq. This is only the latest and most glaring example of the loss of church’s direct influence on states in the Western Hemisphere.

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Even though positions taken by the churches are meant primarily to express churches’ own judgment on issues, and to challenge the decisions of the state whenever they are deemed to be morally wrong, the growing marginalization of the voice of the churches in international affairs call for an examination of the theological and practical assumptions that have undergirded the Life and Work Movement and its allies in the field of International Affairs. In other words, an era had come to an end in the West. In the rest of the world, the end of the colonial era effectively marginalized the churches into insignificant minorities. If we continue to work on the assumptions of Christ-centered universalism the result will be frustration. We need new theological convictions about what we do, why we do it, and with whom we partner for our action.

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Persons like P.D. Devanandan and M.M. Thomas, in India, for instance, saw the emerging reality in post-colonial societies and strongly advocated close collaboration of Christians with people of other religious traditions and with progressive secular forces in the humanization of Indian society. Their call had little effect on the churches both in India as also in other parts of the world.

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin’s nostalgia for the “Christian West” on his return to Britain from India, and his advocacy that the West, despite the fact that it had become multi-religious and multi-cultural in his absence, must return to the Bible to look for its economic and social foundations, is illustrative of the churches’ general reluctance to face reality – that there is now a new playing field where the old rules do not count. But to this day ecumenical social involvements continue to be sectarian both locally and globally.

And yet churches today are faced with enormous global challenges arising from economic globalization, exploitation of the environment, rampant violence, return to the use of brutal military power to resolve conflicts, and attempts to recolonize the world. At the personal level there is continued search for meaning of life and for an appropriate spirituality for our day.

Most of the Non-Governmental Organizations, even if they have had sectarian origins, have begun to draw their human resources from a variety of groups and have found rationale for their activities that do not necessarily depend on any one religious view of the world. They are gradually displacing the churches’ monopoly on compassion and service that was based on the missionary movement’s theological view of the world. In other words, The Life and Work heritage of the ecumenical movement needs a new rationale, a new methodology, and new partners for social engagement. Here too the concept of “wider ecumenism” might provide the clues for a new beginning.

At the heart of the paradigm on which the ecumenical

movement had operated is a sharp distinction between the Gospel and the Church on the one hand, and the world which God intends to redeem on the other. For all its sincere efforts, the missionary movement has not been able to convert the world to Christ. The Life and Work movement has not only been able to adequately deal the problems of the world, partly because it has been marginalized, but also because global issues are too complex for any one community to deal with. And the Faith and Order movement, after working for seventy years on issues that divide the church, has not been able to show the world the unity that Christ brings that transcends all human-made divisions. Is this what the crisis of the ecumenical movement all about? Does it have to do with the premises and presuppositions on which it has been working? Do we need a theological re-orientation that would give us a vocation that is large, relevant, and meaningful for our day?

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These are the questions that bring us to the issue of “wider ecumenism.” In other words, “wider ecumenism” is not a sociological necessity but a theological category to seek new theological bases for the ecumenical movement.

Theological Perspectives on Wider Ecumenism

It is, however, rather tempting to argue for a wider ecumenism solely on a sociological platform, and there is much ground to do so. Since the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement, much has changed in the world around us. We are all aware of the features of these changes. Therefore, I would simply list them without elaborating on them:

- Christendom is no more, and the Christian institutional hold on public life in the Western Hemisphere has steadily been on the decline. The center of gravity of Christianity has moved to the South.

- Massive population movements have made almost all the major cities and suburban areas of world religiously pluralistic. This pluralism is no longer a passive plurality but an active one in which each of the religious communities has begun, despite being minorities, to assert their right to build their places of worship, to preserve their cultural heritage, and to participate fully in socio-political life on their own terms.
- There has been a return of religion into public life and discourse, in which some of the modernist conceptions about religion and its role in public life are radically challenged.
- Human interdependence in the areas of economic and social life has increased by a thousand fold because of the globalization of the economic and financial markets and dramatic advances in travel, communication, and pooling of intellectual resources.
- The immediate post war emergencies and Cold War tensions that precipitated the need for churches to get together and serve the world have given way to extremely complex global economic, social and political problems that the churches are no longer able to address by themselves.
- Much of the work of service, advocacy, solidarity, and concerted action that were the preserve of the churches and the ecumenical movement, has been taken over by tens of thousands of Non-Governmental Organizations that are often better equipped and funded.
- All the problems of the world – the widespread poverty, the ecological crisis, rise of a culture of violence, militarism, etc., and the effort to address them, call for collaboration of many partners across religious and other barriers. There are no longer any problems that face the human community that can be addressed effectively by Christians alone or by any other religion acting on its own.
- There has been a massive “spiritual revolution” as well, that has begun to radically change the religious consciousness of many. On the one hand, religious institutions still strive to preserve the lines that separate one religion from other, and there has been the rise of fundamentalist and extremist tendencies within

some of them. But, on the other hand, barriers separating one religion from another have begun to erode. Many have begun to see other religious traditions as parallel spiritual paths that they should respect; others have begun to use spiritual disciplines of religious traditions other than their own to enhance their spiritual lives; multi-religious belonging is on the increase; interfaith dialogue has come into vogue; thinkers in the Christian Theology of Religions have begun to challenge some of the traditional Christian perceptions on other religious traditions.

There are no longer any problems that face the human community that can be addressed effectively by Christians alone or by any other religion acting on its own.

Much more could be said, but the implications of these are obvious. Christians today are only one of the forces that are at work in the task of bringing healing and wholeness to the world. At a certain point in history we recognized that the task was too enormous for any one confession or denomination to undertake; today we realize that it is too complex for anyone religion or for religions alone to venture into. Konrad Raiser's vision of ecumenical ministry as a poly-centered loose network of collaboration and common action which cuts across the traditional markers that divide us, speaks to the point, and is one of the essential elements of wider ecumenism.

Ecumenical ministry as a poly-centered loose network of collaboration and common action which cuts across the traditional markers that divide us, speaks to the point.

We also recognize that Christian ecumenism does not have the resources needed to meet the global challenges. All the spiritual, moral, and intellectual resources available within the human community need to be mustered to meet the challenge of the "axis of evil" – endemic poverty, ecological crisis, and weapons of mass destruction.⁷ Unity achieved within any one religion is not going to change the world situation. No one religion can hope to bring

the whole world into its fold to be able to give it a united vision. There is an irreducible plurality about being human; plurality seems to be the essence of reality.

Many persons and groups are deeply committed to the struggle for justice and peace, to make life more humane, and give purpose and meaning to individual lives. But they are not all Christians. There are many that are not part of the church who are confronting the demons of our world and are engaged in ministries of healing and reconciliation. What do we make of this reality? Should people be part of our inner group to be able act justly and rightly?

The same question troubled Jesus' own disciples. There were even people who were using Jesus' name to do acts of mercy that were not explicitly part of their group. When Jesus was posed with the problem, his answer was simple: "Those who are not against us are with us." And every time he saw affirmation and recognition of the Reign of God by those outside his community, his response was: "I tell you, many will come from the east and the west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven..." (Matt. 8.11) The question we face is whether "wider ecumenism" is consistent with our faith.

Some theological perspectives

Many reasons have been given to the crisis facing the ecumenical movement in general and of its primary instrument, the World Council of Churches, in particular. Some point to the radical change of culture in our day, and the individuation of human life in which there is growing disinterest and even suspicion of multilateralism. Others see the problem in the gradual loss of the youth and lay constituency of the churches for the movement and the separation of the movement from the Academy in the 60s. Still others place the blame on over institutionalization and clericalization of the movement that robbed it of its constituency in immediate touch with the world. Then there are those who hold that by losing its "frontier movement" character it lost its relevance and dynamism and became captive to the past in the ways it selects, defines, approaches, and deals with contemporary issues. Again, much more can be said, and there are elements of truth in all these statements.

My own sense is that behind all this lies a far more disturbing reality—namely, that the movement does

not have adequate theological bases to be an effective instrument in the hand of God in the profoundly complex world we live in.

Each generation must, of course, walk in its own light, and, therefore, what one has to say here is not necessarily a harsh judgment on the faith or the faithfulness of past generations. But how does the theology that inspired the 18th and 19th century missionary outreach look these days?

I would say that, from the perspective of challenges of our own day, its God is too small, its perception of the Gospel, too narrow, its understanding of mission, too limited, its theology, too tribal, and its concept of community, sectarian. Let me elaborate what lies behind what appears to be a rather harsh and over generalized criticism of the theology of the missionary movement that fed its theological basis into the ecumenical movement as a whole.

Is our God too small?

The Missionary Movement, and its predominantly Protestant leadership of the early 20th Century, gave to the modern ecumenical movement an exclusively christological focus. This christological focus eventually inspired all the streams of the ecumenical movement. This is very evident in the original *basis* of the WCC that spoke of itself as “a fellowship of churches that confess Jesus Christ as God and saviour according to the scriptures.” Unfortunately, the Orthodox insistence, at a later stage, for a Trinitarian basis did not result in a radical rethinking of the basis. Rather, the phrase “...for the glory of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” was tagged on to the original basis to satisfy the Orthodox constituency. But in so doing, the doctrine of God was short changed, and this deficiency continues to plague our perception of what is ecumenical.

To believe in God as the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of the *whole creation* of necessity demands that we take the activity of God in the world with the seriousness it deserves. Such a belief means that all religious quests, all movements that bring about healing and wholeness to the world, all efforts that set up the signs of the Reign of God, etc., *despite the ambiguities*, in spite of their not being part of our own community, are of interest to us.

The Jewish people were first tempted to consider Yahweh as *their* God, as against other gods. But soon they came to the realization that such a belief

amounted to apostasy, for it allowed for, and believed in, the existence of other gods. It made nonsense of their claim that the “Earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it” (Ps.24.1). They had to develop the doctrine that Yahweh, despite the fact of challenging them to enter into a covenant relationship, was still the “God of the nations.” Nothing less would do justice to what they believed God to be. Once this was allowed for, the logical next step was to allow for Yahweh to have relationship with other nations both in judgment and in mercy.

The opening chapters of Amos were a striking reminder to the people of both Israel and Judah that God will deal in judgment both with them and with all the surrounding Gentile nations for their transgressions (Amos 1-3). Once Amos had made this claim, he also had to affirm God’s ongoing life with other nations, and the other nations’ life with God: “Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O People of Israel?” says the Lord. “Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?” (9.7). In all eschatological visions in the Hebrew Scriptures the primary emphasis is the restoration of the whole creation and reconciliation between nations: “On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed be Egypt, my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage” (Isa.19.24-25).

The church developed the doctrine the Trinity precisely to guard against Christomonism and to affirm God’s presence and activity in the world at all times, in all places, and in manifold ways.

The Bible can, of course, be quoted selectively to support any argument. I can myself quote many other parts of the Bible to argue an exclusive view that appears to reject all other ways of believing. But then, what of our theology of God? Was not God active in the world before our experience of God in Christ? Does our affirmation of the reality of the risen Christ require us to believe that God has abrogated God’s ongoing relationship with the world? The church developed the doctrine the Trinity precisely to guard against Christomonism

and to affirm God's presence and activity in the world at all times, in all places, and in manifold ways. If God's concern is to gather up the whole creation without everyone required becoming part of the covenant community, should the ecumenical movement have lesser goals? If we believe God to be active in the world, can we refuse to cooperate with God or refuse to discern God's activity in the lives of people, despite the different ways in which they respond to God's presence with them? Wider Ecumenism militates against the *tribal* conception of God and recognizes God for who God is. The case for a wider ecumenism is not just sociological; it is profoundly theological.

Is our perception of the Gospel too narrow?

Here we have a difficult problem because there is no agreement among Christians on what we mean by the word *Gospel*. For some, the Gospel is the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For others, the Gospel is what they believe God to have done through the life, death and resurrection of Christ, namely the forgiveness of sins and our acceptance as the children of God. To still others, the Gospel is what Jesus himself announced as the Gospel (Good News): That the Reign of God has broken into human life challenging people to a radically new orientation to themselves, their neighbors, and to God. In his sermon at Nazareth, Jesus, appearing to apply the Isaiah passage to himself, reads that he has been anointed to bring good news (Gospel) to the poor, which is spelt out in terms of release to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free, and announcing the acceptable year of the Lord (Lk 4.18-19). Some of the divisions in the church persist because of what we choose to emphasize within this variety of perceptions of the Gospel.

Within the missionary movement a theologically narrow understanding of the Gospel was introduced, primarily by two concepts: First, the concept of *salvation history*, which isolated the history of Israel as an exclusive preserve of God's salvific action. Later, Israel too was abandoned, and the church was seen as both the locus and the servant of that salvation history.

The second impetus for narrowness came from Karl Barth's disenchantment with cultures and religions. By relegating cultures and religions to the realm of "unbelief" and by characterizing them as part of "the human rebellion against God," Barth managed to

marginalize whole civilizations, cultural heritages, religious traditions, and spiritual histories as having little or no significance before God. By marginalizing religion and culture that had hopelessly failed Europe during the two devastating Wars in Europe, and by isolating the Gospel from the Christian religion, Barth gave new purpose and meaning to the Christian faith to European Christians. In so doing he made an enormous theological impact on the church as a whole. European Protestant Christianity is in debt to Barth for the recovery of faith.

Even though Barth's theology, in universalizing the European experience to judge all other cultures and religions, was both unjust and unsound, many of the pioneers of the ecumenical movement, (Visser't Hooft, Lesslie Newbigin, etc., and many Third World ecumenical leaders of that time) remained unrepentant Barthians to the end. Hendrik Kraemer, at Tambaram (1938), interpreted Barth for Missiology through his concept of "Biblical Realism," and in so doing, ruled out any meaningful presence of God in the religious experience of others.

Thus, God was made prisoner of God's own actions in Jesus Christ. The result was the division of the world into the *saved* and the *unsaved*. Christian missions became the only channel for God's salvific relation to the world. God's love for, and identification with, the world through incarnation was reduced to propositions and belief statements. Roman Catholic theology, building on natural theology, attempted after the Vatican II to come up with a more inclusive theology of religions (Karl Rahner, Raimundo Panikkar, Paul Knitter, Jacques Dupuis, Michael Amaladoss and others), but is yet to translate such inclusivism, which is still ecclesio-centric, for committed wider ecumenism.

Wider Ecumenism is based on the conviction of God's unconditional and generous love has embraced all of human life; that the Spirit of God is active in the world.

Wider Ecumenism takes the doctrine of the immanence of God, the belief in the incarnation, and the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in the world with the seriousness it deserves. It is based on the conviction of God's unconditional and generous love has embraced all of human life; that the Spirit of God is active in the world. The cross is both

a specific participation of God in human history and the proof of God's continuous solidarity and identity with the sufferings of the world. It is based on the confidence that the Reign of God has in fact broken into human life and that we, along with all others, should participate in setting up the signs of the Kingdom.

The Gospel orientation of wider ecumenism is best expressed in one of the lines in Fred Kaan's hymn, "The love of God is broad like beach and meadow":

Take as far as your compassion wanders
Among the children of the human race...

We, however, need not wander along by ourselves. There are many in other religious traditions that are already on the journey. They are our partners and copilgrims. *Narrowness* and the *Gospel* are opposites. They don't belong together.

Is our mission too limited, and our concept of community too sectarian?

The original vision of the missionary movement, which resulted in the worldwide outreach to make Christians of other religious traditions, saw the proclamation of the Gospel, with the invitation to become part of the church, as the core of the missionary enterprise. This was considered the *evangelization* aspect of the broader mission of bringing healing and wholeness to life. Combining the broader understanding of mission as humanization of life with efforts at evangelization sent mixed messages to peoples of other religious traditions. And the fact that Christians, as a religious community, were unwilling to collaborate with others in the humanization of life confirmed such suspicions. The church, in the view of others, was *sectarian* in that it saw itself, in theology and in life, as an exclusive community. One might join the church only through an elaborate process of intellectual assent to certain beliefs and through the ritual of the right kind of baptism. Christians inherited this from the mainline Jewish tradition, where the keeping of the Law and circumcision went with being Jewish.

The church, in the view of others, was sectarian in that it saw itself, in theology and in life, as an exclusive community.

When one reads the Gospel accounts, it appears that

Jesus, while remaining committed to the Jewish tradition, was also in profound disagreement with the way important sections within his community was interpreting and practicing it at his time. If keeping of the Torah in its details was the hallmark of being a Jew, Jesus insisted on universalizing it by highlighting its essence, already summarized in Deuteronomy: love of God and of one's neighbor. The Golden Rule, like the Lord's Prayer, removed the exclusive dimensions of particularity in being religious. While coming out of a thoroughly Jewish context, there is nothing particularly sectarian about them.

In the same manner, the temple was a protected sacred space; no Gentile was allowed to get in, and it had become primarily the place for the religious ritual of offering animal sacrifices to God. Jesus appears to suggest that privatization of sacred space, wherever it happens, is to make it into a "den of robbers": "Is it not written that my house shall be called a house of prayer for *all nations*" (Mark II.17).

Jesus used images of salt, the leaven in the dough, the light on the candle stand, and the seed that is sown as images for those that are to become partners with him in healing the world.

"Chosenness" for his tradition had come to mean that they have to be separated from the larger community. Jesus used images of salt, the leaven in the dough, the light on the candle stand, and the seed that is sown as images for those that are to become partners with him in healing the world. It must be noted that Jesus did not see these as anti-Jewish teachings or to claim that Judaism had *failed*, requiring a new *chosen* community. This is an unfortunate distortion that developed later within Christianity with such unfortunate consequences. Jesus appears to point to the dimensions of religion that needs to be at the heart of all religions.

These dimensions of Jesus' own teaching and ministry influence the call to a wider ecumenism. It is an attempt to define a place for the Christian community within the human community, not as *outsiders* bringing in a message or rendering a service, but as *insiders* who are well aware of their own specific identity, who see themselves as partners and co-workers with all others in seeking the reconciliation

and renewal of the whole human community. It seeks to establish the meaning of Christian witness not as an isolated activity but as something that happens in our common life as we seek to bring healing to individual lives and seek to build, along with others, a more humane, just, and peaceful world for all.

It is for this reason that our theology also needs to move away from its tribal moorings. Wilfred Cantwell Smith reminds us that if theology is "Speaking the truth about God," then we should speak the "whole truth."⁸ In Smith's view, when our Hindu, Muslim and other neighbors talk about God, or their difficulty in conceiving a personal God (as Buddhists do), what we have is additional and *new data* about God and God's dealings with humankind. A theology that takes no account of it leaves too much of the data out and is not speaking the whole truth about God. Our own *window* into God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is a unique experience that we celebrate. Our knowledge of other windows into the unfathomable mystery of the Divine can only enrich and enhance our understanding and speaking about God. It can also be the basis for a legitimate wider ecumenism. Thus, dialogue and collaboration which are at the heart of wider ecumenism, are not only to know others, but also to know more about ourselves and the One in whom we have put our trust. For we know where God is; but we do not know where God is not.

*We know where God is,
but we do not know where God is not.*

Trinitarian Faith. The Trinitarian faith of the church is intended to enable us to maintain this balance between the particularity of our God-experience in Christ and the reality of the presence of God in the world. And the conception of God as Holy Spirit was intended to preserve the freedom and mystery of the Godhead so that it would not be reduced to Christomonism. If the concept of the Trinity is not just a *doctrine* but our understanding of who God is and how God relates to the world, then we cannot be *outsiders* to the world theologically and spiritually. Incarnation is the reversal of the alienation between God and the world. But is the ecumenical movement ready for a truly Trinitarian basis for the way it looks at and acts in the world?

At the brink of an opportunity

At the beginning of a new millennium the ecumenical movement is faced with an unprecedented challenge. Thanks to the forces at work in the world, we are faced with the opportunity to rethink the theological bases of our ecumenical commitment. Would we see ourselves as a separated community or an inalienable part of the human community *with our own particular insights in Christ on how God relates to the world, and what God requires of us all?* Would we see mission simply as a message that we bring to, or activities we do in the world, or mission as participation with God *and all others* in bringing healing and wholeness, justice and peace, and reconciliation and renewal in the world? Would the unity and reconciliation that we strive for only be about the church and its internal divisions, or also about *all the brokenness of the world around us?* Would we continue to build only a movement that is internal to the life and mission of the churches, however turned towards the world it might be, or would we participate along with others in striving for a human community?

One of the problems in arguing for wider ecumenism is that most people immediately see this as an alternative to Christian ecumenism. Such an outlook comes out of the *either/or* mentality that so pervades much of Christian thinking. The search for unity of the church, and to do whatever is needed to bring the churches together, is a necessary and legitimate activity. And greater unity would certainly give more credibility to the witness of the church. There is a place for inner Christian ecumenism. But such an ecumenism would have no purpose unless it is part of a wider ecumenism that seeks to heal the world from the inside. The Christian and wider ecumenism are two concentric circles with God at its center. Christians do not participate in wider ecumenism on the basis of some vague notion of *common humanity*. Rather they participate in wider ecumenism as people who have been touch by the grace of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. But we are in the world because God is there bringing about its healing with and without us. Wider ecumenism is participation with God in God's mission in the world.

Difficult, complex, ambiguous and even alienating as the world and its affairs are, our movement is supposed to be about the oikoumene – the whole inhabited earth. Wider Ecumenism is both a biblical and theological vision, and it is also a calling. What is perhaps more important is to

recognize that wider ecumenism is already in process with and without us. The signs are all around us. The only question is whether we have the courage and faith to include it also as our agenda and to do the necessary theological homework to make sense of it.

D.T. Niles, my compatriot and one of my mentors, was chosen to preach the opening sermon at the first and founding assembly of the WCC in Amsterdam (1948). It was a momentous occasion; the ecumenical task ahead held out so much promise and yet looked so complex and difficult, fraught with many problems and uncertainties. Could we ever hope that the churches that had been divided so deeply over centuries could be truly gathered into an ecumenical fellowship?

Which biblical text would he choose for a sermon on

such an occasion? Niles chose Exodus 3.11, which wrapped up in one question all the impossibilities, ambiguities, fears and doubts that went with that calling:

“Who am I that I should go unto Pharaoh?”

“Sorry, wrong person for the wrong job” was in essence Moses’ answer to God, “The task is too difficult, fraught with too many difficulties and ambiguities.”

God disagreed. Moses wanted God to at least reveal God’s true name so that he might go forward with confidence. But all that God would say was, “I am who I am” or “I will be to you who I will be to you!”

It was not much to go by, but Moses decided to go. Such is the nature and scale of the new ecumenical adventure to which we are being called.

Notes

- 1 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “The Christian in a Religiously Plural World” in: John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (eds.), *Christianity and Other Religions* (Glasgow: Collins, 1980) p.87.
- 2 *The Church and its Function in Society*, p.97, 99. Quoted in: W. A. Visser’t Hooft, *Memoirs* (Geneva: wee Publications, 1973) p.71.
- 3 Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition – A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement?* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994 – 2nd Printing) p. 31-53.
- 4 For the latest report see: Thomas F. Best and Union Correspondents, *Survey of Church Union Negotiations*. 1999-2002, Faith and Order Paper No. 192, WCC, Geneva. (Also in: *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 54, July 2002.)
- 5 Tracy K. Jones, Jr., “History’s Lessons for Tomorrow’s Mission,” in: *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. X, No. 2 (April 1986) p.50
- 6 Rodger C. Bassham, “Mission Theology 1948 – 1975” in: *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*. Vol. IV, No.2 (April 1980), p.57.
- 7 I heard Robert Edgar, General Secretary of the NCCC, USA, use this formulation to counter George W. Bush’s “axis of evil.” Original source unknown.
- 8 See chapter on: “Theology is Speaking the Truth about God” in: Kenneth Cracknell (Ed.), *Wilfred Cantwell Smith – A Reader* (Oxford: One World Publications, 2001) p.220 f.

Ecclesia Semper Reformanda Whether We Like it or Not

Nancy Jo Kemper



NANCY JO KEMPER, an ordained Disciples pastor, became the fifth Executive Director of the Kentucky Council of Churches in 1991. This article represents a shortened version of presentation at Lexington Theological Seminary, March 1, 2007.

After 40 years of ministry, 16 of which have been in the “cat-bird seat” as the executive director of a state council of churches, I am convinced that the American church is in the midst of a major transformation. Contemporary American culture may be sounding the death knell to many of our mainline Protestant denominations unless we face up to the operant dynamics and make radical changes.

Change, Drastic Change

I find that there are ten critical dynamics impinging on American Christianity, forcing radical and very rapid changes:

1. A major realignment within and between American denominations moving like a tsunami across our religious landscape. Based in convictions about the authority of scripture and the nature of truth, denominations are experiencing internal conflicts over issues related to human sexuality and human reproduction, gender roles, and the mission of the church in society. These internal conflicts are driving the realignment.

2. Denominations are becoming increasingly post-denominational. What denominational distinctions remain are blurring. This is both a signal of our ecumenical successes over the past 60 years and also a sign of the dying importance of

ideas and systematic theological thought, in favor of powerful, transformative personal religious experience. Congregations may drop a denominational label from their names in favor of more generic and inviting names.

a. One cannot assume that this is purely a Protestant phenomenon. Catholics who once stayed in a neighborhood parish are now likely to seek out a congregation and priest whose style matches their own perceptions of what it means to be a Roman Catholic parish. Moreover, parish councils in Catholic congregations have gained great power over the past 25 years. If they don't like their priest for some reason, they can usually put enough pressure on the Bishop to find them a new priest more to their liking.

b. Roman Catholics, whose liturgy has been borrowed by many Protestants in the previous era of liturgical renewal, now often borrow from Protestants; e.g., baptism by immersion is increasingly practiced in Roman Catholic churches. This is a sign of our ecumenical successes, but such adaptations also signal less rigidity in praxis that allows for the subjective dimension to find satisfaction.

3. The *post-modern* intellectual attitudes surrender the possibility of certitude and absolute truth to a more subjective apprehension of “truth for me” and a willingness to allow others to have similar or even different “truths” for themselves. Post-modern attitudes undermine the possibility of authority

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If denominations continue trying to maintain all their previous programs and functions with declining financial resources, they will continue to lose congregations into the great maw of indistinct, amorphous, locally-centered American spiritual eclecticism.

residing in an ecclesial office or in any historic documents, much less scripture.

4. Post-modernism, and post-denominationalism have not led to Christian unity, and result not in “creeping congregationalism,” but in a more American populist syndrome that can be deemed localism. People no longer have trust in institutions that they cannot see and do not control. The absence of trust in distant hierarchical forms of institutional life pervades much of American society whether it be government or denominational offices.

5. People are spiritually hungry, but that hunger expresses itself not so much in a desire to understand theologically or intellectually, and not in a desire to apply aspects of theological understanding to other complex areas of human life such as economics and national security. Rather, their spiritual hunger desires religious experience and religious security. Given a post-modern attitude, an individual may be able to accept a wide array of doctrines so long as the experience meets the essential needs of the individual at a particular point in his life. When the experiences no longer feed the individual, they may move on to a new context in search of meeting their spiritual needs.

6. Denominations face declining financial support from local congregations due to the absence of knowledge about what functions are carried out by the denomination’s structures, and due to the absence of trust for institutions beyond local control. The more denominations downsize their staffs and programs at both the regional and national levels, the more irrelevant they become to more localized and populist expressions of American Christianity.

7. Denominational life is changing so radically and so fast that denominational executives and administrators can barely handle all the changes. For the most part, these institutional representatives are trying to do all that they formerly did with about half the financial resources, and half the staff, and maybe less personal charisma than their predecessors possessed. The problem is not that people are giving less money to their churches. In fact, studies show that people are giving more than ever before, but

more and more of that money is staying home within the local congregation. This satisfies the very American consumer attitude of immediate gratification, even if it is, in this case, the gratification of one’s charitable impulses.

8. American cultural populism tends to resist long-term institutionalization of any dynamic. Added to a growing disinterest in history, everything must be new, and rarely are people who participate in the “new dynamic” aware that they may be repeating history.

9. The American cultural desire for immediate gratification may also be blamed, in part, for the attitude of keeping “money at home,” rather than sending it to a collaborative organization.

10. Organizations or organizational structures whose work is not immediately visible become less attractive recipients of individual and congregational financial support, and thereby tend not to be funded or understood as part of their inherent mission.

Consequences

The consequences of these ten dynamics severely hamper the capacity of the local church to see the forest for the trees; i.e., to have a truly global understanding of the body of Christ, and may yield a situation in which the denominations themselves will collapse from fatigue and lack of funds. The perpetual down-sizing, staff reductions, and narrowing of educational and missional goals leads to greater and greater inability to impact the local congregation and its members.

Further, despite the obvious practicality that shared ministries and mutual planning might offer, through life together in conciliar organizations, more and more denominational executives have less and less time to engage in ecumenical activities. They are too busy to participate. What the denominations at the regional and national levels are in danger of losing are the insights of peers in the ecumenical community, the possibility of fresh vision and imagination, and the exponential increase in clout through joint actions in the public policy arena. We in the ecumenical movement know that councils of churches and similar

ecumenical ventures are the last to be funded, the first to have financial support reduced or cut, and always on the list of luxury items to do if the denominational executive has the time (which, given the increase of their responsibilities, they do not have).

If denominations continue trying to maintain all their previous programs and functions with declining financial resources, they will continue to lose congregations into the great maw of indistinct, amorphous, locally-centered American spiritual eclecticism. Crucial for denominations—perhaps working with the ecumenical bodies that they are so drastically under-funding—will be working together to imagine a new future and new ways of serving the local church to keep it accountable to the Gospel of Jesus, to offer mutual support, mutual discernment of what, where, and how God’s Holy Spirit is leading the church, and to keep each other honest.

Without such imagination and prophetic leadership, eventual collapse of the American Protestant enterprise is possible. I have a friend in the Netherlands, a theologian of some repute there, who says quite frankly, based on what he has witnessed of these same dynamics over the past 40 years in western Europe, that we may be in the last century of the Christian religion.

Always Reforming

I am not quite so hopeless yet. The theologian Miroslav Volf said in a *Christian Century* article several years ago: “Our hopes are a measure of our greatness. When they shrink, we are ourselves diminished.”¹ Christianity is a religion of hope above all. Here are a couple of places where I find hope these days:

There is yet another post-denominational phenomenon emerging that I believe has the capacity to reform the church, in order that churches will become authentic institutions where people are nurtured and formed in faith, where hospitality and grace are experienced, and where mission is seen holistically rather than in little episodes of putting band-aids on problems. I’m speaking of the *missional church*.

A somewhat more populist expression of the missional church might be found in the movement known as the *emergent church*. The principle emergent church salesman these days is Brian McLaren, who has written a book called *A Generous Orthodoxy*. He calls

himself “a missional, evangelical, post/protestant, liberal/conservative, mystical/poetic, biblical, charismatic/contemplative, fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, catholic, green incarnational, depressed yet hopeful, emergent, unfinished Christian.”

There is yet another post-denominational phenomenon emerging that I believe has the capacity to reform the church: the emergent church.

I went to a workshop that Brian McLaren led at Asbury Seminary in early 2007. What struck me about his descriptions of his ideas, and of the experience of his movement, is how similar it is to other such movements of past generations. To go back only 40 years, I began my ministry in the house church movement, which aimed to recreate the form and dynamism of The Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, there were house church movements springing up all across America. Mr. McLaren seemed unaware of that small piece of American church history. The emergent church is not new. We can trace the emergent church from the first days in Jerusalem after the death of Jesus: from a Jewish reform movement, to a new religious sect, to a new religion. When the religion and state became so intertwined that the vitality disappeared and religion became a tool to control the people, the monastic movement was born. Later came the reformation. Later still, on this continent, came the First Great Revival, and then the Second Great Revival. And on and on. *Ecclesia semper reformanda*, whether we like it or not.

The emergent churches are characterized by humility; there is little or no judging whether someone is saved and someone else is not. They are driven by the ideals of charity, courage, and diligence. Emergent churches *may* have a central worship place, but their life is characterized by the intimacy offered in small groups who gather for study, fellowship, support, and mission. These emergent churches are also committed to live and serve among the poor—to a simple lifestyle, abdicating the consumerist chase of wealth of most of America.

In Lexington, Kentucky where I live, we have a

group known as Communality, with over 90 people active in it. The members defy the old liberal/conservative splits. They don't care what denomination you may have been at some time in your life, if any. Some of the participants are Catholic; some are Pentecostal; all are just trying to be followers of Jesus. Their life together focuses on hospitality to all, prayer, and charity—but a charity that includes a deep commitment to work for justice and peace in the world.

Boundary leadership ignores lines and moves beyond, across, and among vital emergent zones. Boundary leaders may function in and amid structure and organizations, but they never confuse them as being ultimate or even lasting.

Emergent churches are a startling contrast to the feel-good coliseums of entertainment and service to whatever ills of modern life might befall you that may be found in the mega-churches. They represent a conscientious effort to live the “simple way of Jesus.” As such, they have a powerful reforming dynamic as a kind of new monastic movement, and they serve as a kind of yeast that will ferment and foment change that will challenge the churches who are making their members comfortable with our affluent American lifestyles. They too are becoming a “new denomination,” if you will.

Meanwhile, some of the old mainline congregations of various denominational stripes are finding renewal as they become more missional churches—*intentional* communities of and for mission: communities that have small group opportunities for intimacy; communities that provide people with a chance to participate in hands-on mission, yet also see the importance of denominational distinctions and denominational structures to aid and assist with long-term, consistent acts of charity. Denominational identity, rather than being glossed over, is intentionally presented. The marks of identity enable a local church to give participants a cognitive way to understand their lives and a historical grounding that gives them a sense of continuity and connection with both past and future.

The most important characteristic of these newly reforming denominational congregations is the conviction, as stated by Darrell Guder in his book *The Missional Church*, that “...mission is not just a

program of the church. It defines the church as God's sent people. Either we are defined by mission, or we reduce the scope of the gospel and the mandate of the church. Thus our challenge today is to move from church *with* mission to *missional church*.”²

The historic Protestant denominations in America desperately need people who are, and who are freed and paid to be, *boundary leaders*. The concept originated with the Rev. Dr. Gary R. Gunderson, who is now with a United Methodist Health Ministry in Memphis. Dr. Gunderson defines it this way: “Boundary leadership ignores lines and moves beyond, across, and among vital emergent zones. Boundary leaders may function in and amid structure and organizations, but they never confuse them as being ultimate or even lasting. Boundary leaders focus on what endures and what matters, relationships and the values and commitments that shape and sustain relationships. A boundary leader hopes for the whole system, not just his or her own sphere. Boundary leaders have unpredictable careers, but rewarding lives that nurture the life of their whole communities.”

Moreover, there are progressive religious people who want to engage with progressives from other religions to advance peace and justice. There are many parachurch organizations, from Sojourners to The Interfaith Alliance, who have such an intentional mission base, and who are committed to inclusivity, to humility, and to justice and charity.

When at last the 19th and 20th century structures collapse in upon themselves, and I believe that they are slowly falling in on themselves, the always emergent Church may be there, along with the intentional congregations of historic Protestant traditions that have survived the tsunami now washing over denominations, plus the Orthodox and Roman Catholic communions, and together they will enable the Church to continue to be a reformed and reforming power in the world. *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*. As my adopted denomination, the United Church of Christ, states it: “God is still speaking. Let's not put a period where God may have placed only a comma.”

Notes

¹ Miroslav Volf, *The Christian Century*, 8/16-23/2000, p. 837.

² Guder, Darrell L. (ed.). *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.) 1998, p. 6.



Disciples, People of Unity

John 17:20-25

Andy Mangum

ANDY MANGUM, senior minister at First Christian Church in Arlington, Texas, delivered this sermon on July 8, 2007, as part of a series of sermons presenting basic beliefs of the Christian Church (*Disciples of Christ*).

Each of the four gospels describes Jesus praying before his arrest, trial, crucifixion, and burial. Matthew, Mark, and Luke describe his prayer as agonizing. Jesus prays, “Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet, not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36). But, in John’s gospel, the prayer appears quite differently. In John’s gospel, Jesus does not agonize—he magnifies. He is not reluctant—he is willing. For John, crucifixion and resurrection are molded together. And from the beginning, Jesus anticipates the crucifixion as a moment of victory—not of defeat (Käsemann).

The entire chapter of John 17 relates the prayer Jesus prayed from this vantage point. Jesus prays that he would accomplish God’s purpose for him (John 17:1-5). He prays that the disciples would accomplish God’s purpose for them. He prays for their protection and that they might know joy (John 17:6-19). Finally, Jesus turns his eyes toward the future and looks beyond the arrest, the trial, the crucifixion, and even beyond the resurrection. He looks beyond Pentecost, beyond the early church, beyond the patriarchs. Jesus looks beyond Teresa of Avila, John Calvin, and Alexander Campbell. Jesus looks beyond Ida Wells, Albert Schweitzer and Billy Graham. Jesus looks past all that has taken place, all those pastors and Sunday School teachers who faithfully entrusted the message of the gospel to us. In this prayer, Jesus looks past all that and sees this day. He sees the faces of those gathered in this room—people with whom you will soon take communion, these faces people with whom you

have laughed and cried and sung and prayed. Jesus looks at your face this morning. And he prays, “May they be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. 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” (John 17:20-23, paraphrase mine).

In this prayer, Jesus looks past all that and sees this day. He sees the faces of those gathered in this room.

In this prayer several themes from the gospel of John come together. We hear Jesus pray for those who will believe in Christ, and we remember what Jesus said at Lazarus’s grave: “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though that one dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe?” (11:25-26). We hear Jesus speak of the unity he has with the Father, and we remember how Jesus said to his disciples, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9b). We hear Jesus speak of glory, and we recall the words from the opening poem of John, “And the word became flesh, dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of God’s only son” (1:14). We hear Jesus speak of God’s love for the whole world and remember his words to Nicodemus, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes should have eternal life” (John 3:16). If we to work our way through the gospel of John, we would see how these four themes are developed throughout the whole gospel—the importance of belief, the unity of the Father and Son, the glory of God revealed in Christ Jesus, the love God has for the

world. These four major themes in John's gospel come together at this point in Jesus's prayer, and Jesus's prayer comes to a point right here in this room as Jesus looks into the faces of this congregation and entrusts the continuation of these trajectories to the whole body of believers. The essential component for fulfilling these themes is the complete unity of the church.

From our beginning to today, Disciples have been committed to the unity of the church. At our beginning, Barton Stone, a Disciples founder, declared, "Unity is our polar star." Today, the opening theological affirmation made by our most recent 21st Century Vision Team declares, "We are the Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. We invite others to the table of the Lord just as the Lord has invited us." This effort to enable churches to come together across denominational lines, this movement to bring unity to the church that has been divided, is what we call ecumenism, or the ecumenical movement. Since 1910—since the inception of the Council on Christian Unity—that has meant that we have participated in global, national, and local ecumenical movements.

Like a grandmother who loves all of her grandchildren with unique intensity and yet also loves to see them gathered together around her table as a single family, so God loves you with a unique intensity, yet longs to see you sitting at her table with sisters and brothers, and cousins in faith.

When we open up the folder of ecumenism, it's easy to get lost in a swirl of overlapping histories, similar sounding abbreviations, and unfamiliar characters. Before muddying the water, I hope you take the image of Jesus praying specifically for you—not just the part of you that likes to be the center of attention nor the you that likes to fade into the woodwork, not the you that likes knowing that God knows your name nor the you that feels God's receptivity to your every prayer. Jesus thinks of you in this prayer, but Jesus prays for the *you* that belongs to the whole congregation. Jesus prays for the role you play in making all the parts come together to become unified. Like a grandmother who loves all of her grandchildren with unique intensity and yet also

loves to see them gathered together around her table as a single family, so God loves you with a unique intensity, yet longs to see you sitting at her table with sisters and brothers, and cousins in faith.

We have to admit that we Christian cousins have been unwilling to sit down together. In the church's 2000-year history, we have moved a long way away from Jesus' prayer for vision of unity. Palestinian Jewish Christians and Diaspora Christian missionaries to the gentiles divided before the completion of the Book of Acts. East and West excommunicated each other after hundreds of years of drifting apart. The Protestant Reformation is one name we give to dozens of splits in the Western church, from the formation of the Church of England, to the Magisterial Reformation of the Lutherans, Calvinists and Zwingli sects, to the radical reformation of the Anabaptists. During the Civil War, many Christian denominations split North and South, abolitionist and slave-holding. In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. declared that the eleven o'clock hour on Sunday morning was still the most segregated hour in America, and 40 years later this status has not changed. In the mid-1980's, conservative Christians declared a culture war between liberals and conservatives that still, for many, lingers today. Our history as a Christian people is littered with example after example of divisions.

Even so, every time Christianity has divided, God has called Christ's followers to unite, and a faithful remnant of God's people has answered the call. But we never have gotten it completely right. If we had, the church of Jesus Christ upon this earth would be in reality one church and not divided into however many hundreds or thousands of Christian denominations we have.

The 20th Century century was a time of particular growth in the ecumenical movement. The ecumenical movement essentially has had three strands. First, the evangelical effort says in order for us to meet the needs of sharing the Gospel with the world, we must give up our turf wars and work together. In the 19th and 20th centuries, foreign missionaries cooperated, and their cooperation sparked ecumenical movements within western Christianity. A second stream of ecumenism has been the mission effort which works to assist people in meeting their real human needs—particularly in rebuilding society after WWI and WWII. Finally, we have the stream that seeks a visible oneness coming

together to agree on basic beliefs. This effort asked what it would take for us to recognize each other's baptisms, acknowledge one another's ordinations, and embrace one another at the table of the Lord. Our ecumenical officer, Robert Welsh, president of the Council on Christian Unity, said that the distinctive witness of the Disciples of Christ has been our insistence that these three streams cannot be separate. Rather they belong together. Just as many of John's themes are woven into this prayer for Christian unity, so the three streams of modern ecumenism are woven together within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Most Disciples know that we are an ecumenical people. Yet I see time and time again people shrugging their shoulders and saying, "What's the big deal? We're open to other denominations. We don't run into many people who aren't. What do we really have left to accomplish?" Many Disciples are content with an oxymoronic "privatized ecumenism." We say that "as long as I myself am accepting of other's denominations, as long as I do not exclude people from the table, and as long as I am involved in a sufficient number of ecumenical efforts, then I have done my part." This stems from privatized morality where we only accept responsibility for those things which that we ourselves have done.

What's wrong with that? Why can't we be content with simply participating in an open fellowship? Why do we need to worry about the Church's lack of unity? Simply, contentment with privatized ecumenism doesn't respond to Jesus' prayer that we would all be one in order that the gospel might be more faithfully proclaimed. In fact, our own openness can actually work against us as we seek to witness to others. It can come off as condescending—we don't exclude people, *like some other Christians do*. We don't require re-baptism, *like some other Christians do*. Our table is open, *not like some other Christians' tables*. When we think and talk like that, who receives the glory for our ecumenism? We do. But the ultimate goal of ecumenism isn't the glory received by the church but the glory of God revealed through the church.

God will receive the glory when the whole church is unified, and until that time comes, our work is not done. Until every baptized Christian recognizes every Christian baptism, our work is not done. Until the whole church recognizes every ordained Christian as ordained by the whole church, our work is not done. Until every table of Christ is open

to every follower of Christ, our work is not done. And, friends, our work is not done. As Robert Welsh is fond of saying, "What part of 'all' do we not understand?"

We cannot force, but we can influence.
We cannot mandate, but we can advocate.
We cannot require, but we can inspire.

How then might we participate in the complete unity of the church? Apparently, this week in one of our neighboring towns, three young men decided that the best thing to do for the glory of God and the elimination of Christian denominations was to detonate an explosive device in a church building. If the journalist's reports are correct, the three young men—teenagers just into adulthood—who tried to blow up Victory Family Church in Burleson, said they did so because they believed that American religion no longer glorifies God (Smith).

As I read this story, I had a mixture of reactions. I found myself condemning their actions, even though I believe fiercely that one should be assumed innocent until proven guilty. I had the reaction of fear, wondering if the fires in our recycling bins and the break-ins from the past year were carried out by like-minded people. I also thought of a few good jokes to make at their expense. Yet as troublesome and wrong as their actions were, they are reminders to us of the urgency of the ecumenical movement. Their efforts at terrorism are born of a real frustration with a church that seems content to celebrate a journey that is at best half over. I do not approve of acts of violence, and I take acts of violence against places of worship very personally. But we must also remember that Jesus does not approve of a Church which delays unity.

Our work is not done. Our participation in Ulster Project and Arlington Ministerial Association is good, but it is not enough. Our contributions to Tarrant Area Community of Churches, Texas Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches, and the World Council of Churches are good, but they are not enough. Our work in Christian Churches Together, Churches Uniting in Christ, and the Campbell-Stone Dialogue, is all good, but it is not enough. It's not enough that a handful of people gathered here this morning know

about the exciting work being done by these ecumenical groups. All of us need to know about, and pray for, our ecumenical work. It's not enough that a handful of us can *describe* what it means to have an ecumenical call and mission. All of us need that call and mission.

This is our witness as Disciples of Christ to the rest of the Church. We say to them, "Won't you join us at the table, in the baptismal waters, in the laying-on of hands and commissioning of ministers? Won't you join us in our witness to frustrated, angry teenagers turning to violence rather than to grace? Won't you join us as we seek to meet the real human needs in this world?" We cannot force, but we can influence. We cannot mandate, but we can advocate. We cannot require, but we can inspire. We cannot demand, but we can persuade. We cannot push, but we can draw. We cannot steer, but we can invite. We cannot terrorize, but we can witness.

Sometimes people ask me, "Andy, you're not naïve enough to believe that all these different denominations will actually come together and be one, are you?" The answer quite simply is, "Yes." They say, "Andy, that's impossible." I say, "I don't know who you are following as Lord and Savior, but the Lord and Savior I follow specializes in the impossible." They say, "It's not going to happen in your lifetime." No, probably not. But it's amazing how far we've come. Four hundred years ago, Protestants and

Catholics were killing each other. Two hundred and fifty years ago, states were still naming their official denominations. A hundred years ago, Christians were still condemning other Christians to hell. With some notable exceptions, we're not doing those things anymore. We never know how much closer the church can come to that unity until we try. I believe that one day the church will be visibly, palpably, and authentically one and that God will receive the glory. I believe it because Jesus prayed a prayer, and I don't think God will leave that prayer unanswered. After all, when Jesus prayed that prayer, he looked into this room, and he saw you.

Notes

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