

A new Order for a new Day – A call to be one Hush Somebody is calling our Name

26th Peter Ainslie Lecture on Christian Unity

John F. White

Bishop John F. White, the 130th elected and consecrated bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, serves as the Ecumenical and Urban Affairs Officer for the A.M.E. Church.

Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall, and all the King's horses and all kings' men could not put Humpty Dumpty back together again. Poor Humpty Dumpty was an egg and he fell off the wall, and we've been doing him an injustice for years. Folks have concluded that Humpty Dumpty fell off the wall because he was careless. But they haven't taken into account some other considerations. Just maybe Humpty Dumpty was pushed. Maybe the wall gave way. And when the wall gives way there is nothing to hold on to.

We are being called to celebrate God's gift of unity when the walls are giving way. It seems to me that you are called to do ministry when the walls of black men are either disappeared, disabled, dusty or in detention and no one cares that people are becoming rich on an industry that is being built for their incarceration instead of schools being built for our education. You are called to celebrate God's gift of unity in a world where corporate capitalism, mindless materialism and pop culture have helped to unravel the moral fabric of our society. You are called to celebrate God's gift of unity in times when the least, the lost and the left behind, quest for learning has been suffocated in dim corridors and classrooms, where there is no order, no discipline, where the schools are in crisis.

You are called to celebrate God's gift of unity in times of steep profits and shallow relationships; people are looking for world peace, but we still have wars and rumors of war around the world. You are called to celebrate God's gift of unity in times of domestic warfare; more leisure, but less fun; two incomes and more divorce. It is a time when there is much in the show window and nothing in the stockroom; and a time when technology can bring a letter to you in seconds and you can choose either to make a difference or just hit the delete key and it is gone.

You are called to celebrate God's gift of unity with high unemployment, economic meltdown, foreclosures, and to minister to a people who have lost respect for God, the Church and the men and women of God.

We are called to celebrate "Celebrating God's Gift of Unity and Reconciliation when the Ecumenical Landscape is changing. Cardinal Walter Kasper reminds us "Ecumenism is not a human invention, not a political issue of interest and that Ecumenism is founded on the word of our Lord, himself – "may they all be one."¹ (John 17:21)

¹ Walter Cardinal Kasper, "May They All Be One? But How?" *Ecumenical Trends*, April 2011, 40:4, p.1.

Dr. Michael Kinnamon, the General Secretary of the National Council of Churches states, “Christian unity is not something we are working for as the people of God. Rather, a gift that has been given to us from God it is now our job to strive to live into this unity in its fullest and most robust form.”²

The context of world Christianity poses new challenges to Christians and churches seeking to be faithful to God’s gift of unity and reconciliation. How can we be faithful to God’s gift of unity when we belong to so many different denominations, live in such diverse cultures, speak so many different languages, and experience such widely differing socio-economic conditions?³

The 2010 centennial commemoration of the Edinburgh World Mission Conference provides an excellent opportunity to examine the intersection of evangelism and interfaith relations. The churches are by no means united on how to understand the Christian relationship to people of other faiths! However, there is a new openness to engage with interfaith partners, on the part of not only Orthodox, Catholics, Anglicans and mainline Protestants, but on the part of Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians.⁴

The 2010 centennial commemoration of the Edinburgh World Mission Conference made us aware of the new openness to engage with interfaith partners of other faiths; it did not include in the partnership those of the Black Methodists, Black Baptists, and the Black Pentecostals who are often excluded. We as Christians do not enter into dialogue and cooperation with neighbors of other faiths merely on pragmatic grounds, but out of a deep sense of mission as followers of Jesus Christ and who have received the gift of unity from God. “The basis on which Christians enter into and continue their dialogue with others is their faith in Jesus Christ... It is not about more meetings, more things to do, more interreligious conferences, it is a call compelled by Jesus Christ that we should work among all people of all faith and ideologies. Christ draws us out of our isolations into a closer relationship with all.

Central to our pursuit of Christian unity is the growing number of issues that divide us at the very core of our oneness. Dr. Douglas John Hall, states that we must recognize that real issues within the church that causes us so much division. These are not the issues of the 16th century but in realities of the 21st. century. He identified the following:

- Issues of personal, institutions and systemic racism.
- Issues around our understanding of human sexuality and relationships – especially those related to homosexuality, the ordination of gay and lesbian persons and gay marriage.
- Division between Christians and churches around the issues of war and violence, support of one’s national policies, and what it means to actively seek peace.

² <http://www.uchristian.org/jamies-thoughts/2010/6/15/gods-gift-of-unity.html>

³ Daryl Balia and Kirsteen Kin, eds., *Edinburgh Volume II 2010* (Oxford, UK: Regnum Book International, 2010), p. 2

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.2

- The urgent issues of stewardship of the earth, the ecological crisis, and care of our environment as a matter of our faith. 5

I raise another issue that is more prevalent than that of division between Christians and churches around war and violence. The issue of *division among and within the churches cut at the heart of our being*.

Many lament the onset of an ‘ecumenical winter’ in which the commitment of the Churches to the unity of Christ’s Church has been put on ice. Ecumenical councils contract as denominational engagement and funding decline. Thin ecumenical agreements preserve the essential self-sufficiency of the churches. Congregations in one denomination engage in cooperative mission with neighboring congregations from other denominations (and other faiths) and call it ecumenism. They wonder what all the institutional and academic fuss over unity is about, even as they continue to believe and worship in mutual isolation. It is often said that 11:00 am Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America.

Subdued dedication to the unity of the church is no longer solely an ecumenical concern. What was an ecumenical issue among the churches is now a denominational issue within the churches as well. Because internal theological and moral diversities are sometimes irreconcilable, many American churches are now coping with the reality of discord, departure, splits, schisms and breaks in communion. Even within particular churches, commitment to ecclesiastical unity wanes as both majorities and minorities assert diverse theological, moral and ecclesial convictions, requiring agreement as their condition for concord.

Discourse about ecclesial unity and diversity has become attached to conflicts within the churches in odd ways. Denominational establishments, which used to be celebrants of diversity, now invoke unity as a means of suppressing diversities that challenge the ecclesiastical institution. Dissidents within the churches, which used to call for unity in faith and practice, now invoke diversity as justification for departure to alternate church bodies. While diversity among denominations can generally be accommodated by expressions of mutual appreciation, diversity within churches may harden into the reality of mutual exclusion. 6

In the midst of it all diminished ecclesial concern for unity is accompanied by a blossoming appreciation for diversity among the churches as well as within churches. Reception of diversity now embraces far more than the gospel-created inclusion of race, gender, class and ethnicity, extending to variety in all aspects of Christian faith and life. As we struggle with the gospel’s call for Christian unity in the current reality of radical diversity we are charged to live out our Lord’s prayer “that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:23). The call for Christian unity is not for the sake of the churches, but for the sake of the world.

⁵ Adapted from Keynote address by Dr. Robert K. Welsh, “The Scandal of our Disunity – it’s personal,” National Workshop on Christian Unity, May 2011.

⁶ NCCUSA, Vision Paper. “Christian Understanding of Unity in an Age of Radical Diversity” Centennial Ecumenical Gathering, 2010, p.7.

The essence of the call for Christian unity is the highlight of the prayer by Jesus Christ in John's Gospel. Jesus prayed, "so that they may all be one, as you Father are in me and I in you that they also may be in us, that the world may believe." Asking for the gift of unity, Christians join in Christ's prayer and commit themselves to work actively for manifesting this unity. This is the very heart of the love of God – it is the very heart of being the Church.

This prayer is both an expression of a wish, and a call for action, action by those who share the unity that is in Christ. Jesus brings us into fellowship and then puts the fellowship into movement. The whole of our celebration of the God's gift of Christian Unity flows from this prayer. Our starting point is not any human endeavor but the divine compulsion.

Given all the issues that cause division within the church it is this prayer that renews and recommit us to the divine gift that calls us to be one. I am convicted that Christian unity is a gift of God to be received and expressed in all aspect of the life of the church.

The New Testament is replete with exhortations on Christian unity. The Scripture exhorts us to "live life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" and to be of "one mind for the faith of the gospel" (Phil 1:27). We are urged to unity in faith and unity in the character of our living – faith and life, theology and morality, doctrine and ethics, evangelism and justice. Of course, these are precisely what divide the body of Christ, separating churches from one another and creating factions within churches. Moreover, these are precisely the matters that receive superficial attention in too many ecumenical proposals and too many attempts to resolve intra-church conflicts. Ecumenical and denominational discussions are often constrained by anxiety that attempts at theological precision will uncover divergences, and that attention to moral issues will expose oppositions.

Ephesians 4:1-16 presents us with a marvelously modulated insight into unity/diversity, moving from one to all to each to some and then back to the unity of the whole that requires the working of each. The one body is to lead a life worthy of its calling in one faith and one hope because there is one Spirit, one Lord, one God and Father of all. Yet each was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift so that some have one calling and some others have different yet complementary callings. The purpose for all is building up the body of Christ. It is as each part is working properly that the body is whole. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit are evidenced in a diversity of gifts that are to be exercised for the health and maturity of the whole body.⁷

All of this suggests that the unity of the church resides in the faith of the gospel that is lived out by persons, groups and denominations 'side by side' in a manner worthy of the gospel. What an incredible challenge that has been given to us by the New Testament.

I am reminded of Sonya Vaughn Herring, a black female I meet at my Mother-in-law funeral a month ago in Tallahassee, Florida. Sonya grew up in Monticello, Fl a member of Bethel AME Church, but now is a church leader, in a United Methodist, UCC and Disciple of Christ Church

⁷ Ibid. p.5

Congregation in VA. This only confirm our celebration of Christian unity that is lived out by persons, side by side who are committed to a new order for a new day that is worthy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For me this is an answer to the Lord's prayer that we might be one. So by the Power vested in me from God the father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. By the power that rests, rules, reigns and abides, by the power that resurrects and redeems, by the power that converts and comforts, by the power that loves and liberates, by the power that saves and soothes, by the power that gives and guides, by the power that delivers and directs by the power given to me in the name of Jesus, I declare that somebody is calling our name and it sound like Jesus.

Hush, hush somebody's calling our name
Hush, hush somebody's calling our name
Hush, hush somebody's calling our name
Oh my Lord, Oh my Lord what shall I do, what shall I do?

Sounds like Jesus, somebody's calling our name
Sounds like Jesus, somebody's calling our name
Sounds like Jesus, somebody's calling our name
Oh my Lord, Oh my Lord what shall I do, what shall I do?⁸

We should now seek every opportunity to facilitate deep conversations among various churches, inviting them to engage in the hard task of giving a candid account of the relation of their own faith so that we can live in the spirit of "Called to Be the One Church."

Hush, hush somebody's calling our name, and it sound like Jesus, who is calling us to provide the forum in which each church can articulate the judgments that shape, and even qualify, its relationship to the others so that honest sharing of commonalities, divergences and differences will help all churches to pursue the things that we share in common.

Hush, hush somebody's calling our name and it sound like Jesus who is calling us to commit ourselves publicly to pray for peace and goodwill among the various faith communities in the United States and around the world.

Hush, hush somebody's calling our name and it sound like Jesus.

May God bless each of you as we continue to Celebrate God's gift of Christian Unity in challenging times like these.

⁸ http://www.gospelsonglyrics/songs/hush_hush_somebodys_callin_mah_name.html.

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