



Living the Ecumenical Story: Vignettes and Visions

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Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (*1 Cor 1:3*)

Greetings

How good it is to travel across the country to a new place and feel welcomed as part of the same family: God’s family in Christ Jesus! Today we give thanks for God’s faithfulness, for the spiritual gifts that have been given to each of us—for the special leadership of Joe and Nancy Vaughn Stalcup and for the School of Theology for the Laity which have enabled the people of God in this place to gather regularly for the purpose of being renewed in our witness to Christian unity.

I bring the ecumenical community here in Dallas special greetings from the WCC’s President for North America, the Rev. Dr. Bernice Powell Jackson, Executive Minister and Officer for Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ, and the Moderator of the US Conference for the World Council of Churches, Fr. Leonid Kishkovsky, who serves as the Ecumenical Officer for the Orthodox Church in America.

It is a special privilege for me to be introduced by the Rev. Dr. Robert Welsh, President of the Council on Christian Unity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), who serves as a very active member of the Board of the US Conference for the WCC. Robert, who I realize is well known to many of you, is an invaluable gift to the ecumenical movement and to the fellowship and witness of the World Council of Churches. In addition to his service on

our Board here in the United States where he chairs our Fund Development Advisory Group, Robert also chairs the Board of the WCC’s Ecumenical Institute at Bossey where the Graduate School of Ecumenical Studies contributes to the formation of ecumenical leadership, both lay and ordained. Under Robert’s able leadership great strides have taken place in recent years to update the facilities while simultaneously upgrading the depth and scope of ecumenical formation taking place in Bossey’s beautiful setting overlooking Lake Lemman outside of Geneva. If you haven’t had a chance to visit Bossey, yet, I urge you to put it towards the top of your list of unfulfilled dreams to yet be achieved—you won’t be disappointed!

I bring you greetings from my WCC colleagues in Geneva, including Tom Best of our Faith and Order Unit who said he considered himself a “Timothy” of Northway Christian Church as his family had been active members here between 1955 and 1960. I believe the last time he was here was to celebrate his parents’ Golden Wedding Anniversary.

I also bring greetings from my colleagues at the US Office for the World Council of Churches who include, in addition to myself, one full-time staff member who serves as an office manager and program assistant, Gloria Feliciano, (whose husband, Daniel is pastor of an Hispanic Disciples of Christ congregation in Manhattan); two faithful volunteers, both Presbyterian—Edna Palmer and Jean Schmidt—who between them bring over 100 years of ecumenical institutional memory and service background to our office; and three energetic young interns with a passion for the ecumenical movement: Jenny Phillips, a United Methodist from Seattle who staffs the work of the US DOV Committee; Tricia Nolan, a Presbyterian who heads our

ecumenical formation work with young adults, and a WCC Scholar from Indonesia, Lidya Tandirerung studying at Union Theological Seminary.

Living into the Gift of Our Unity

As we pause to consider again what we, as fellow disciples of Christ, have been doing to acknowledge God's gift of unity through Jesus Christ, and as we pray together to be renewed in our calling to *live into that gift* so that the unity of God may be made visible to the world, let us begin in the spirit of Paul's words of affirmation, encouragement and challenge to the family of God at Corinth, as recorded in I Corinthians 1:4-10:

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.

Tsunami Tragedy

This was the Epistle lesson for *Ecumenical Sunday*, which was observed on January 23 of this year. The Gospel lesson for that Sunday was Matthew 4:12-23, "the Call of the First Disciples." I remember preaching on these texts that Sunday against the backdrop of the Tsunami disaster, which was brought home to those of us in the US Office of the World Council of Churches even more powerfully because one of the interns in our office, the Rev. Lidya Tandirerung, our WCC scholar from Indonesia had lost friends and colleagues in the tragedy. I could not avoid making the comparison between the seaside setting of the call of Peter and Andrew, James and John and the images of the tsunami on CNN. As we remember that story recorded in St.

Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is walking by the Sea of Galilee—and there he sees two brothers fishing, casting a net. The image was hauntingly like the images we saw on the seaside of Thailand, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives ... fishermen peacefully going about their work at one moment—and at the next, the unthinkable happens: A tsunami turns their world upside-down!

Because we live in a world where communication is instantaneous—the horror of what happened to tens of thousands of Southeast Asian fishermen on that Sunday morning came right into the living rooms of our homes. First, we paused in disbelief. And then, after the first numbing shock began to wear off, the whole world began to respond in exactly the way God intended for the global community to behave!

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There has probably never been such an outpouring of resources and pledges of financial aid:

On the ground in Indonesia, insurgents and national forces cooperated;

In the temples of Thailand, Buddhist monks were offering refuge and spiritual nurture to Swedish Lutheran tourists;

Christians and Muslims were recognizing their common humanity, their common identity as children created in the image of God;

A boy emptied his piggy bank on the counter of his local Red Cross Chapter;

Two young girls set up a sidewalk shop and sold their Christmas presents so proceeds could be sent to aid the relief efforts;

Humanitarian aid agencies met together to work out strategies for collaboration and cooperation as never before;

A man of modest means walked in to my office in New York and shared his intention to depart the next day for Thailand to invest himself and his financial resources in reconstruction and wanted to be linked to local Councils of Churches in order to do so.

Didn't our conversations—at home, at school and in the workplace—take on an entirely different tone? Didn't we wrestle harder than usual with all the ultimate questions during this time when the whole world was responding with what felt like the “same mind, same purpose?”

Everyone I know offered what they could—time, talents, money, expertise, prayers. People didn't second-guess what they had to offer. Everyone knew there was something they could do—and they just got on and did it.

World Responds: Same Mind, Same Purpose

And for a little while, the whole world seemed to have heard the call of Jesus to those Galilean fishermen, and followed Him—*united with the same mind and the same purpose...as one body with many members!*

As Mathews George, the WCC's Asia Secretary reflected after visiting the sites of devastation, “In spite of the tragic situation, the hopeful and precious signs of human compassion and love touched the hearts of many...Where there once were the signs of intolerance, mistrust, hatred and violence, now there is mutual solidarity, concern and unity. This is an obvious sign of God.”

Today, however, we seem to have returned to business as usual in our world. There is a wide gap between the amounts pledged in the first days and weeks following the tsunami and the actual dollars received by the devastated areas. While the headlines in the evening news in this country have shifted back to the Michael Jackson case, our partners in the local councils of churches faithfully continue to go about the work of restoration and reconciliation in their local contexts.

Is the Ecumenical Movement Taken for Granted?

Perhaps we can draw some parallels to what has happened in the ecumenical movement in the more recent past. Today, some of our member churches take ecumenical dialogue and ecumenical engagement in the world more for granted, while others seem to have moved back to denominational business as usual. The freshness and zeal of the earlier days of the ecumenical movement may be more of a nostalgic memory from the past. Reflecting on this change, the first General Secretary of the WCC, Willem Visser't Hooft, said: “For my generation, the ecumenical movement had all the attraction of something unexpected and extraordinary. For the

present generation it is simply part of the church's design.”¹

Reduced Capacities

More recently the WCC's new General Secretary, The Rev. Dr. Samuel Kobia, a Methodist from Kenya who was elected by the Central Committee as the first African to hold this office, in the fall of 2003, reflected that perhaps “...we have reached a point in time when the institutional churches are not able to support and sustain these structural expressions of ecumenism. These organizations are coming under intense pressure to stay alive and relevant, as they experience dwindling resources and reduced staff capacities. There also seems to be a set pattern of work on certain issues that every organization embraces.” (*Kobia—D.T. Niles, p. 4*)

Changing Global Context and Ecclesial Landscape

But Kobia says that there is far more going on than simply a sense that the ecumenical movement has lost its “edge.” As he noted in his D.T. Niles Memorial Lecture of April 1, 2005, sharing what he has seen and heard in his travels to the churches around the world since taking office, the changing global context and ecclesial landscape has had a dramatic impact on the way in which ecumenism is evolving:

By the middle of this century, there will be more Christians living in the global “south” than in the “north.”

Ecumenism in the past century took shape in response to the challenges and situations of an ideologically divided, bi-polar world dominated by the nations of Europe and North America. There has been a demographic shift in the 21st century as regards the constituency of Christianity. By the middle of this century, there will be more Christians living in the global “south” than in the “north.” ... There is perhaps a need to turn to the new theological explorations “from below” that are emerging in active, critical engagements with the issues of peoples' lives, in order that we conceive our ecumenical vocation in a new way...²

New Trend: Ecumenism in Action

Dr. Kobia goes on to say, however, that he has noted “a significant trend among churches and individuals of coming together in response to human need and suffering.” He calls this trend *ecumenism in action*³ and points to the gathering momentum of the WCC’s *Decade to Overcome Violence: Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace (2001-2010)* as an “instrument that facilitates unity [among the churches] in the common vocation of affirming and safeguarding life [and committing themselves] to the vision of building communities of peace.”⁴

WCC Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV) as Catalytic Force

Certainly in the context of the United States the DOV has served as a catalytic force in promoting cooperation and recognition among the churches in their peacemaking efforts. As you may know, in 2001 the churches meeting for the 8th WCC Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe, at the end of the most violent century in human history, committed themselves to a pilgrimage of peace. The Assembly called the churches, ecumenical organizations, and all people of good will, to work together to overcome violence and to try to imagine, together, what the world would be like if churches worldwide made overcoming violence in all its forms, their top priority.

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Against the backdrop of the WCC’s passionate engagement with the issues of justice, peace, and the integrity of creation through the *Program to Combat Racism*, the *Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women* and the *Program to Overcome Violence*, The WCC’s *Decade to Overcome Violence: Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace* (known as “The DOV”) calls churches to repent for our complicity in violence, and to re-examine our own biblical understanding of God’s call to reconciliation.

DOV Challenges Us to Learn from Each Other and Act Together

The Decade also invites us to learn from one another and to act together to overcome violence. Each

year, an annual regional focus is established in order to express solidarity with local and regional churches around the world, to move beyond stereotypes in our understandings of the forms and root causes of violence, and to highlight and celebrate the work of peacemakers around the world.

I would like to share a vignette with you to demonstrate the power and promise inherent in the ecumenical community’s intentional commitment to overcoming violence. I was very moved by the report of my WCC colleague, Dr. Guillermo Kerber, a Roman Catholic from Uruguay who serves with the WCC’s International Affairs team working in the area of justice and reconciliation processes. He had recently been invited to support capacity building for a truth and reconciliation commission in Sierra Leone involving Christian priests and pastors together with Muslim and indigenous African religious leaders affiliated with the Christian Council of Sierra Leone and the local Inter-religious Council.

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Dr. Kerber shared some of what he heard from these leaders. The leaders confessed to one another:

We always understood ourselves to be a peaceful people, but since the war we have discovered that deep inside ourselves we have the capacity for violence. We abhor this revelation about ourselves, and we want to be reconciled.

Dr. Kerber poignantly described how these religious leaders grappled with the realization that those who were perpetrators of the violence would be living out their lives next door to those who had been their victims in the same communities. How would they find a way to live together in peace? Eventually these interfaith leaders decided that they would need to find a symbol of their commitment to be reconciled with one another. They decided to designate a tree in the center of each community as a place where people could gather to express anger, to question each other, to express feelings of distress or of hope; to diffuse the temptation towards violence—a tree where traditionally the people of Sierra

Leone gather when they are hot and tired and seeking rest.

2004 US Focus for the Decade to Overcome Violence

In 2002 the regional focus for the Decade to Overcome Violence was on Palestine and Israel; in 2003, the Sudan; in 2004, the focus was on the United States under the theme: *“The Power and Promise of Peace.”* (A theme which, incidentally, was coined by Amy Gopp, a dynamic young Disciple who has not only been actively engaged in the Sudan focus for the DOV, but now provides leadership in the fight against poverty in the United States—another form of violence.

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Let me share with you some additional vignettes from our focus year here in the United States:

The ecumenical movement took on a fresh vitality through the engagement of the churches together in the *US DOV Committee*, represented by those with special expertise in peace and justice ministries.

An extensive calendar of DOV-related events and initiatives sponsored by the churches and other peacemaking partners was compiled and highlighted. As the US churches worked together, “their vision expanded, their ownership broadened, and their commitment deepened.”⁵

Grassroots peacemakers in churches and communities were recognized for their leadership through the creation of special *Blessed Are The Peacemaker Awards* in an effort to encourage replication of successful models of peacemaking on the local level.

Letters from heads of churches in the United States connecting Pentecost and Peacemaking were invited and then circulated among church constituents.

The Historic Black Churches provided special leadership in lifting up Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s legacy in the context of the US DOV Focus by hosting the Annual Meeting of the US Conference for the WCC last October in Atlanta, Georgia under the theme: “The Power and Promise of Peace.”

Twenty different peacemaking workshops were led by local and national experts from the churches on

topics as wide-ranging as: “Preaching on Gender-Based Violence;” “Virtual Violence: Violent Video Games and Corporate Responsibility;” “US Churches, Iraq and the War Against Terrorism;” “The Silent Violence of Suicide;” “Welcoming the Stranger After 9/11: Refugees, Immigrants and Uprooted People;” and “When God Meets Hip Hop: Redemption, Reconciliation, Revolution.”

Workshops were held on the campuses of Spelman and Morehouse Colleges in order to encourage the engagement of young adults in the goals and objectives of the DOV—and to introduce them to the ecumenical movement.

But by far the most powerful dimension of the US Focus year was the visit by a “Living Letters” delegation in the context of the Atlanta meeting comprised of representatives from the WCC’s ecumenical partners from Bethlehem—West Bank; Canada; India; Indonesia; Norway; the Philippines; South Africa, and by a representative of the WCC’s Ecumenical Accompaniment Project in Israel and Palestine. They came to express solidarity with the US churches and to issue challenges.

Excerpts from “Living Letters”: We Need to Win Back Trust in our World

Let me share with you some of what they had to say to us in the United States:

Rev. Dr. Judowibowo Poerwowidagdo, Director of the Centre for Empowering Reconciliation and Peace, Jarkarta, Indonesia:

I do not believe that the way to abolish terrorism is through another form of violence... In times of crisis, people usually say: “Don’t just stand there, do something.” But I want to say that in this time of violence, “Don’t just do something, stand there!” I believe that the power of peace is in your ability and willingness to understand what it means to be in the shoes or the place of your enemies... The promise of peace is in your nation’s ability to accept and to treat other nations as children of God, as people of God and as God’s nations.

Ms. Renemsongla Ozukum, WCC Scholar from the Baptist Church of India:

I feel that peacemaking is a process where everyone is responsible, for we are all called to be peacemakers. In a context where peace is all too often an abstract meaning, a

paradox of violence, a costly word, it is imperative to ask what the Bible says about the children of God. Are we to be peace-keepers or peacemakers?

Professor Maake Masango, WCC Executive Committee Member from the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa:

I come to you from a country that was oppressed for 350 years. As a child I remember being forcibly removed from my own house. The white army demolished my home. They used harsh words, and I began growing with inner hatred towards them. The brokenness I experienced of Apartheid in South Africa was strengthened by faith we had in church and home, which sustained us and told us that we were also created in the image of God. The church nurtured us. And every morning when we were ready to go to school, my father would stand at the door and say to us, "Don't allow them to take Jesus out of you; and you must also not take Jesus out of them."

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Hermina Damons, Local Program Coordinator for the WCC's Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Israel and Palestine:

I am here today, speaking to yourselves very far from my family and home because I am mad as hell. Mad because of the injustices that coexist with us in the world. I am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my hometown, I must constantly respond to the desperate cries for aid, because I am a child of God, because I have a conscience. Can God trust you?

Dr. Marion Best, Vice Moderator, World Council of Churches and Past Moderator of the United Church of Canada:

I come in unity, solidarity and peace through God's grace. Other living letters have come to you from all over the oikumene in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. This witness of hope comes as we all

face new realities of power and insecurity. We have heard and been told by US brothers and sisters that the struggles for global justice and peace go far beyond partisan politics or the policies of any specific administration—at stake is the very self-identity of the United States of America. The voice and prophetic witness of the churches is fundamental as you, our mighty neighbor, struggle to harness its power in response to God's call: "To do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God."

Yesterday I visited the Book Depository here in Dallas—a very powerful memorial to the late President John F. Kennedy. There I saw a quote by President Kennedy about his reasons for initiating the Peace Corps. He said: "We need to win back trust in our world." And today, according to our ecumenical friends from around the world, that statement is even more relevant than it was in Kennedy's time: "We need to win back trust in our world."

Ecumenical Formation of Young Adults

Through the US Conference for the World Council of Churches, we have also been engaged in a process of ecumenical formation with youth and young adults. As I mentioned in my opening greetings, the US Office of the WCC has been re-energized through the gifts and the passionate engagement of young interns, who in turn, have been mentored by our older volunteers. We say, in the WCC, that one of the special gifts we bring to the churches is the creation of *ecumenical space* in which to exchange perspectives, to hold each other accountable, and to challenge each other to grow into the gift of our unity in Christ.

I can't resist sharing with you a vignette about how it happened that a young member of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Ms. Jessica Ralph, a senior studying in the Alvin Ailey/Fordham University BFA program with concentration in dance, took on the leadership in developing a series of *Decade To Overcome Violence* "Hip Hop" workshops at our Annual Meeting in Atlanta last fall. Through the "ecumenical space" of her internship in our office, 21-year-old Jessica developed a close relationship with 88-year-old Edna Palmer, a lifelong ecumenist and former staff member of both the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. Edna was able to mentor Jessica's ecumenical formation

over the course of several months. In the context of their conversations, Edna planted a seed: why not use the vehicle of Hip Hop to engage youth in the goals and objectives of the *Decade to Overcome Violence*. Jessica trusted her mentor and set to work developing an amazing program that drew nationally known Hip Hop artists to the campuses of Spelman and Morehouse Colleges in Atlanta to explore ways in which this art form could become an instrument of peacemaking in our society. And front and center in her audience was Jessica's strongest supporter: Edna Palmer.

In Jessica's own words:

The goal of these Hip-Hop activities was to demonstrate how Hip-Hop, a musical genre often associated with violence, could be used as a tool to overcome violence. Hip-Hop can be an effective tool for promoting peace and inspiring social consciousness and spiritual activism. These Hip-hop artists who were applying the principles of the Gospel to life situations in a way that effectively communicated their concerns and thoughts inspired and rallied a very receptive audience.⁶

Creating Ecumenical Space

All around the world, member churches and ecumenical partners of the World Council of Churches are engaged in creating the ecumenical space for peacemaking and restorative justice to take place. I invite you to visit the WCC's website and read some of the first hand accounts of those who right now are serving as *Ecumenical Accompaniers* in various capacities with local churches, Palestinian and Israeli NGOs, as well as Palestinian communities to try to reduce the brutality of the occupation and improve the daily lives of both peoples.

Read about the WCC's *Ecumenical Women's Solidarity Fund*, which has just marked its tenth anniversary of creating ecumenical space for women who survived the brutal act of rape used as a weapon of war in the former Yugoslavia, and who asked for help to "create places and spaces where life could go on."⁷

Learn about the *Ecumenical HIV/AIDS Initiative in Africa* established in 2003 as a joint undertaking of African churches, Northern churches and agencies and the World Council of Churches—an initiative that is reducing stigma and discrimination through the introduction of special seminary curricula as well as the development of other resources and structures

to provide care, counseling and support to those affected. Pray for those engaged in EHAIA who are right now wrestling with what the ecumenical response must be to the terrible challenge facing us of the anticipated 20 million children that will be orphaned by the end of the century as a result of the AIDS pandemic.

Look for the WCC scholars—the future leaders of sister churches around the globe—that are studying in your area seminaries and get to know more about their lives and ministries back home.

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There is so much that we are doing—but so much more that we still ought to be doing to live out the gift and calling of our unity in Christ.

The World Does Not Have Capacity to Hear Groans, Only Big Noises

One of the WCC scholars from Kenya who is completing his graduate studies at Eden Theological Seminary said in a recent gathering of the IO scholars currently studying in the United States:

The world does not have the capacity to listen to groans—only big noises. The Church has the mandate to identify with the poor, oppressed and voiceless. We as the Church have to be prepared all the time to call people in to new community that says things differently—to be visible in the midst of all that is happening; a community able to hear groans over the roar of big noises, and respond as One Body in Christ.

Of the 1.6 million people who die from violence every year in our world today—that is 4,400 each day:

- 20% of these deaths are due to armed conflict, wars, etc.;
- 30% result from interpersonal conflict, such as domestic violence;
- and 50% are suicides.

There are so many groans that are unheard in our

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Together and in dialogue at the deepest level, we can make a difference.”*

world today; we need to build relationships that bring hope to those who are in despair; that bring unity, where there is division. *The Gospel’s call to unity is not an option, but a mandate.*

God, in Your Grace, Transform the World

Today, the World Council of Churches brings together 347 churches, denominations and church fellowships in over 100 countries throughout the world, representing over 550 million Christians. Depending on your perspective, that fact can sound encouraging—or down right embarrassing.

We confess that our divisions are a scandal in the sight of God.

And so, as Michael Kinnamon says in his recent book on the vision of the Ecumenical Movement, “Ecumenism is also a movement of repentance, because the way we live as church is such a visible denial of the word we proclaim.”⁸

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How appropriate that the theme of the 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2006 is: *God, in your grace, transform the World.*

Is There Hope? Absolutely!

As with the first disciples, the results of our efforts to live into the gift of our unity in Christ, have been mixed. But is there hope? Absolutely! There is so much hope and inspiration to be found in the stories of those who have been led by God’s spirit to “...see how the edges can be stretched and [the] barriers removed, so that God’s reign can be honored in the whole universe.”⁹

So how do we continue to live the ecumenical story in the 21st Century? Sister Elizabeth Mackie, a Dominican Sister who has worked within the ecumenical movement in Aotearoa, New Zealand, for the past 20 years puts it better than I in her contribution to the collection of reflections the WCC

published last year entitled: *Reflections on Ecumenism in the 21st Century*:

This, then, is my ecumenical dream; a space, an opportunity for the different and the divided to come together in mutual respect, openness to new expressions of truth, joyful celebration and passion for justice... As I reflect on the questions and issues facing the world and human communities at this time, I believe that such a vision is not merely appropriate but essential. We live in such a divided world, where the powerful control and suppress the weak, where difficulties are managed by violence rather than by dialogue, where resources are sucked from the poor to feed the excessively rich. And where systems and structures, which go beyond international agreements or national sovereignties, operate in unaccountable ways to maintain the power of the powerful... The ecumenical vision that has developed over the years has an important contribution to make to such a world. It can still stand with the poor and powerless, encourage sharing and dialogue, offer creative and peaceful ways to handle disputes within and between countries, ensure that humans become increasingly accountable to one another and to the environment and bring the Word of God into the analysis of all that confuses or seeks to destroy. This is a task that no one church and no one Christian can do alone. Together and in dialogue at the deepest level, we can make a difference.¹⁰

Let me end with just one more story of transformation:

A colleague at chapel during our recent week of meetings in Geneva told of a church he had been assigned to visit periodically over the course of a number of years, which was located in an extremely remote region of Africa. When his bishop first assigned him to this location, my colleague had to undertake a long and dangerous journey of several days every few months to reach the church and the little school that was attached to it. Once he arrived, there was no form of communication possible with

the outside world. A short time ago, however, steps were taken by the government to build a road to that area, and to undertake the building of a dam to generate electricity to help connect that remote area with the modern world. However, this project necessitated the flooding of the village where the church and school were located. My colleague attended the final service in that church and told the moving story of how the members of that remote and impoverished congregation put their whole hearts into a culminating worship service of praise and thanksgiving for all the blessings they had known in that place. They called out the names of those who had founded the congregation and inspired them in their walks of faith to this point in time. And then they concluded by literally taking apart the church and school buildings piece by piece and carrying the salvageable bits to much higher ground, where they asked God's blessing on their future community and immediately began rebuilding their church and school from the bottom up.

“But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you...Do not fear, for I am with you...I am about to do a new thing: now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. (Isaiah 43:1-2a,5a,19)

The Future of the Ecumenical Movement and of the WCC Post-9th Assembly?

What form will the ecumenical movement take in the future? What will happen to the structures and programmatic priorities of the World Council of Churches after the 9th Assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil in February 2006? What will your role, and mine, be in the days to come as we pray for the Spirit's guidance in continuing our ecumenical journeys in obedience to the call of Jesus Christ?

We're not sure. But God's transforming grace will surely lead us forward and show us how we should revise the structures and processes of our ecumenical

lives, together. Because, as fellow Disciple Dr. Tom Best of the WCC's Faith and Order unit has affirmed, “Unity is not something which we have to create, but is a reality given already by God.”¹¹

In the meanwhile, as we continue to discern the shape of our ecumenical calling in the 21st Century, we can join together with the delegates at the WCC's First Assembly (1948) in Amsterdam in their pledge of faith some 57 years ago, and affirm that no matter what: “We intend to stay together.”

Amen!

Notes

- 1 Kessler, Diane and Kinnamon, Michael, *Councils of Churches and the Ecumenical Vision*, (Risk Book Series, WCC Publications, Geneva, 2000), p. 2-3.
- 2 Kobia, Samuel, “Listening to the Voice of God, New Trends in the Ecumenical Movement,” (D.T. Niles Memorial Lecture, General Assembly of the Christian Conference of Asia, Chiang Mai, Thailand, April 1, 2005).
- 3 *Ibid*, p. 6
- 4 *Ibid*.
- 5 WCC DOV Coordinator Rev. Hansulrich Gerber, quoted in “The Ecumenical Courier,” Spring 2005, Volume 65, Number 1, p. 20.
- 6 “The Ecumenical Courier,” Spring 2005, Volume 65, Number 1, p. 11.
- 7 “Women: Witnesses of Hope,” WCC Ecumenical Women's Solidarity Fund in Former Yugoslavia 1993-2003.
- 8 Kinnamon, Michael, *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and how it has been Impoverished by its Friends*, (Chalice Press, St. Louis, MO 2003), p. 118.
- 9 Taken from “A Movement of Pilgrims in the Twenty-first Century” a reflection by Elizabeth Mackie, a Dominican Sister who has worked within the ecumenical movement in Aotearoa, New Zealand, for the past 20 years, in *Reflections on Ecumenism in the 21st Century*, WCC, Geneva (2004).
- 10 *Ibid*, pp. 58-59.
- 11 Kinnamon, p. 21.

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.



The Future of Ecumenism in the 21st Century

Wesley Granberg-Michaelson

DR. WESLEY GRANBERG-MICHAELSON is *General Secretary of the Reformed Church in America*. This address was originally given to the leadership of the WCC and the NCC at a symposium, *The Future of Ecumenism in the 21st Century*, in October 2005, New York City. The symposium was hosted by His Holiness, Aram I, Moderator of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches.

In the popular American book titled *Good to Great*, author Jim Collins finds that successful organizations are characterized, first of all, by a willingness to confront the “brutal facts” that shape their life and define the challenges of their mission. That also, it seems to me, is where any reflection of the future of ecumenism must begin. But such honest analysis alone is never enough. In the face of those realities, we who follow the Risen Lord are claimed by the power of a spiritual vision that portrays a transforming picture of God’s intended future, and beckons us to offer our service and our lives in faithfulness to that end.

But those of us whose lives are committed to the ecumenical movement often fail on both accounts. We don’t look honestly at the patterns, trends, and developments in the actual life of today’s churches that so obviously inhibit attempts to express the unity of Christ’s body. Nor do we articulate a vibrant spiritual passion, and biblical vision, that has the power to break down those barriers and create new realities. Instead, we seem tempted to be content within ecumenism defined externally by repeated prophetic utterance, and internally perpetual institutional malaise. Ecumenism in this, the 21st Century must find fresh forms of expression, new avenues to overcome divisions, and inspiring vision that spiritually engages the churches and its members in this calling. That can happen, in my

judgment, only by confronting our “brutal facts” and rediscovering the power of God.

I’ll offer three questions—certainly among many others—that I believe we must honestly face in order to seek a future for ecumenism in this century that will be filled with hope and promise.

1. Will we be ecumenically inclusive or institutionally protective?
2. Will we be driven fundamentally by spiritual vision or organizational momentum?
3. Will we seek “incremental change” or “deep change” in pursuing this future? Ecumenically inclusive or institutionally protective?

During my time with the World Council of Churches, one of the fundamental questions I learned to ask was simply this: Who is in the room? Deep in the organizational culture of ecumenical institutions is the value of inclusivity. We always are asking, whose voices are being heard? That, of course, is why the participation of women and youth, as well as others whose voices have been neglected, are given special standing.

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But as I have kept asking that same question as I look at those in the rooms of ecumenical meetings, another factor has become clear. Pentecostals, evangelicals, and often Roman Catholics are nowhere to be found. Or maybe, once in a while, a few are on