

Call to Unity

RESOURCING THE CHURCH FOR ECUMENICAL MINISTRY

Issue 5 • December 2005



Council On
Christian Unity

The Changing Center of Gravity



FROM THE EDITOR

Encountering the Center of the Ecumenical Movement

The theme for this issue of *Call to Unity* is "The Changing Center of Gravity." The articles individually, and taken together, give evidence that the "center of gravity" of the ecumenical movement has shifted: the leadership, the style, the key issues and major challenges are no longer driven by a predominantly North Atlantic context, or a 16th or early 20th century agenda. The center has moved to the Southern hemisphere, and the expanding growth of the church in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. With this shift,

- Pentecostals and Evangelical Christians are bringing a whole new set of challenges, and opportunities, in the quest for a unity that has wider participation of the whole church's life and a mission that claims a passion for gospel witness and evangelism.
- Orthodox Churches are pressing for new understandings in the way we live our life and engage in ecumenical encounter.
- The encounter with persons of other faiths is no longer a side-issue or option, but represents the daily reality that shapes the context of life and religion for many Christians throughout the world.
- The issues of violence, hunger, oppression and poverty are not simply problems to be addressed (and better addressed together than separately!), but form the crucible in which ecumenical life, work and faith are shaped.

As you read the articles by Sam Kobia, Deborah DeWinter and Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, there are two common messages addressed to North American Christians: (1) it is a new day for the ecumenical movement; and, (2) if we can embrace this new day, there is real hope as together we open ourselves to each other, to new partners, and especially to God's grace.

The theme for the 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches this coming February 14-23, 2006, in Porto Alegre, Brazil – the first Assembly of the WCC to take place in a Latin American context – is "*God, in your grace, transform the world.*" It is a theme in the form of a prayer, reflecting the world's need, and our own need, for healing and transformation.

May all of us join in opening ourselves and our churches to God's grace, which is truly the constant center of the ecumenical movement.

Robert K. Welsh

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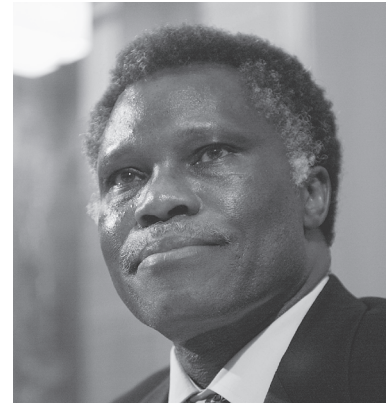
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Global Challenges to North American Christians

Samuel Kobia

23rd Peter Ainslie Lecture, Disciples General Assembly, Portland, Oregon, July 26, 2005



DR. SAMUEL KOBIA is General Secretary of the World Council of Churches.

Thank you so much for your gracious welcome, your many generous expressions of ecumenical hospitality, and your invitation to bring greetings from the World Council of Churches, its member churches and other partners in the worldwide ecumenical movement. I must pause to give special thanks to the Council on Christian Unity of the Disciples of Christ under the guidance of Robert Welsh, someone whose leadership we have truly come to appreciate through his membership in the WCC's central committee and his chairing of the board of the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey. I was pleased that he was able to accompany me on a recent trip to Moscow as we made an official visit to the Russian Orthodox Church.

Robert Welsh is a worthy successor to a remarkable line of North American Disciples who have made significant contributions to the modern ecumenical movement, among them Peter Ainslie, George Beasley, Nadia Lahutsky and Paul Crow. We are deeply grateful for this heritage of commitment to Christian unity in witness and service. And it is only right that I take this opportunity to thank the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) especially for contributing to the World Council of Churches the great gift of the Rev. Dr. Tom Best. We have come to rely on Tom, a Disciples minister from the United States, who has become the longest continuously serving member of the Council's executive staff, and who is currently indispensable to us as director of the WCC Faith and Order Commission.

I have been asked to speak this evening, from the perspective of the global ecumenical movement, on challenges faced today by North American Chris-

tians, and particularly by Christians in the United States of America.

Speaking from the perspective of the World Council of Churches, in particular, it is fitting that my remarks should begin with the theme of gratitude. Just as the world church is grateful for the particular history of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the quest for unity, we are mindful of the many blessings that have been bestowed through the ministries of North American ecumenists of many traditions, lay and clerical, from John R. Mott and Bishop Charles H. Brent, to Margaret Flory and Franklin Clark Fry, to Archbishop Iakovos and Lois Wilson, to Paul Abrecht and Bishop Vinton Anderson.... In the most practical of terms, we recall that the WCC has been enabled to achieve much, and to build an ecumenical legacy of its own, through financial gifts and investments of US churches and individual American benefactors. The Ecumenical Center in Geneva; the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey; the scholarly foundation of our work; the Council's programmes on the ground—all have been influenced and bear the imprint of North American commitment and generosity. From the global perspective, we in the ecumenical movement are profoundly thankful to you and to your predecessors.

Throughout the past 100 years of the modern ecumenical movement, Christians in North America and around the world have discovered together that being in unity, working as one, enhances our service and witness for Christ. As a result of the past century of dialogue, cooperation and growing *koinonia*, the spirit of ecumenism is alive in all our churches. It is essential to the fabric of our conception of what it means to be the church. And because we have experienced the blessing of acting as one in

Jesus Christ, we have also discovered how deeply our tendency toward disunity disappoints. Knowing that unity is God's gift to the church, we feel the pain of division more intensely, are all the more discomfited by ideological infighting, and pray ever more fervently for the Holy Spirit to bring healing to the body of Christ.

Because we have experienced the blessing of acting as one in Jesus Christ, we have also discovered how deeply our tendency toward disunity disappoints.

Over the past several years, *healing* has become a common theme of ecumenical conferences and assemblies. It has been a key concept examined at gatherings of such bodies as the Lutheran World Federation, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the WCC Conference on World Mission and Evangelism, or "CWME." At the CWME in Athens just two months ago, we were called by the first half of the conference's theme to pray for healing: "Come, Holy Spirit, heal and reconcile!" But the second half of the theme recognized the churches' role in providing a space and congenial atmosphere: "Called in Christ to be healing and reconciling communities." Healing is a work of the Holy Spirit, but it is also an aspect of the mission and ministry to which the church is called. In medical mission, we know that a prerequisite for healing is often careful diagnosis. And so, in analyzing the challenges faced by North American Christians, I will now turn to some of the problems that need to be solved.

The World Council of Churches is sometimes portrayed by ideological in-fighters as more a source of disunity than of healing. This is nothing new, but it remains a challenge for ecumenically minded Christians in North America. Many of us are old enough to remember how the WCC was vilified in some quarters after Orthodox churches from Eastern Europe joined the Council at the height of the cold war; how the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA lost support in some communities because of its principled stand during the US civil rights movement; how the *Readers Digest* and "60 Minutes" railed against church contributions in aid of the anti-apartheid struggle and in support of the WCC's Program to Combat Rac-

ism. And most of us recall the recent controversy over the declaration of pre-emptive war by the United States against Iraq and the responses of churches and their councils. What is reassuring is that those vilifications did not succeed then, as they will not succeed now nor in the future, and the ecumenical movement will march on victoriously because it is Jesus Christ who leads our way.

The World Council of Churches is often described as "controversial." And yet, as I say, this is nothing new. In 1965, the year before he became the second general secretary of the World Council of Churches, Eugene Carson Blake observed that "the Ecumenical Movement is trying to reform and transform every church and denomination from a culture club into God's agency for reconciliation" — the reconciliation of humanity to God, and of human beings to one another. Blake insisted to his fellow US citizens that "the church of Jesus Christ," if it is truly "to be the church" in a new world of communications and global awareness, "cannot remain the instrument of American foreign policy. This is essentially why the Ecumenical Movement is controversial. It challenges the basic assumption... that national patriotism and national survival are the highest human values."¹

Eugene Carson Blake observed that "the Ecumenical Movement is trying to reform and transform every church and denomination from a culture club into God's agency for reconciliation."

If this was the challenge to US churches in 1965 — to reflect a global perspective rather than that of an ultra-patriotic "culture club" — it remains a principal challenge 40 years later. The question is framed a little differently today than during the cold war: the demarcations are no longer expressed as East versus West, or "pink" versus red-white-and-blue — but as red states versus blue states within the US, Fox News versus National Public Radio, "new" Europe versus "old" Europe, freedom lovers versus French fries. Indeed, political rhetoric has become so heated, in the culture of the 24-hour news cycle, that an important part of meeting the challenge to "speak truth to power" in this context is to find ways to break the bonds of partisan predictability, to shun the bumper-sticker brevity of prefabricated "talking

Outside observers worry that you may become too concerned with institutional survival, too busy looking inward to notice what God is doing — and calling you to do — in the world around you.

points,” to try to open up the potential for genuine dialogue, transforming insights, and the admission of ambiguities. At the same time, speaking truth to power requires us to speak the truth. And if we are to reflect global perspectives on North American cultures and US policies, some of the truths we speak will be unwelcome; in a word, “controversial.” Controversy comes with the territory.

In the year and a half since I became general secretary of the World Council of Churches, I have been systematically visiting each of the world’s populated regions. I have had conversations with church members, government leaders and citizens, listened to organized discussions and sampled local and national media. When I have visited the United States, I have tried to convey some of the unpleasant truths regarding attitudes toward this great country.

Elsewhere, as here, the United States is often called “the sole remaining superpower.” But in most of the rest of the world, this is not necessarily regarded as a good thing. Many people in the world — east and west, north and south, regardless of political or economic conviction — mistrust or openly fear the United States of America. This has become even more true following the declaration of pre-emptive war on Iraq based on a poorly informed belief in the existence there of weapons of mass destruction. People in many nations ask themselves where the doctrine of pre-emptive war may next be employed, and for what stated reason... if any.

Some of the truths we speak will be unwelcome; in a word, “controversial.” Controversy comes with the territory.

The US is seen as the bulwark of economic globalization that forces poorer nations to live according to the dictates of wealthy corporate interests and financial institutions controlled by those interests. In recent years, we have seen a gathering backlash to these policies in Latin America — but this is not the only region in which the United States has suffered a loss of respect and support. Resistance by the US to meeting the Millennium Development Goals or

the aid requests of Prime Minister Blair prior to the G-8 conference have done nothing to improve matters.

Among educated people, the US is resented for its willful disregard of global warming as a threat to the future of our planet. Promises of cleaner technology, sometime in the future, ring hollow as the US refuses to commit itself to measurable reductions in CO₂ emissions. This crisis seems to be treated in the United States as one more political football or shuttlecock, an object for the exercise of rhetorical gamesmanship and power plays in the white marble arenas of Washington DC. Other such objects with which politicians seem to sport are foreign aid, debt relief and international trade policies.

On a positive note, I want you to know that the world church is well aware of the activities of North American ecumenical organizations and coalitions involving churches in providing an alternate voice to that of the US administration. I hope that the World Council of Churches has made it clear that we wish to support you in your efforts to promote the things that make for justice and peace. We are eager to help you, as you act and as you interpret why it is that you do what you do, say what you say, believe as you do. Speaking truth to power must include a proclamation of the gospel as well as an explanation of how the news of God’s love in Jesus Christ applies to the realities of this world. In this vein what is required of us as Christians is to join hands together with all churches in the USA to lead a global coalition of those willing to fight hunger, poverty, HIV and AIDS, racial discrimination and violence

There are, of course, many other challenges faced by North American churches. The tradition often referred to as “mainline Protestantism” has been experiencing a numerical decline for decades, and outside observers worry that you may become too concerned with institutional survival, too busy looking inward to notice what God is doing — and calling you to do — in the world around you.

Para-church organizations, mega-churches and similar expressions of post-denominationalism multiply as mainline membership drops in the US.

Elsewhere in the world, we see many of these organizations spreading from North America to other continents, raising concerns in other countries about proselytism of traditional populations and the conduct of culturally based “crusades,” with all the violently confrontational freight that has been loaded onto that word.

The confusion of preaching Christ with the proclamation of American cultural values is of particular concern in other cultures. International observers identify such tendencies in success-oriented apostles of the so-called “prosperity gospel,” based on the assumptions of free market economics, as well as in political leaders’ frequent invocation of the name of God in support of US presuppositions and policies. The latter practice, seen by many around the world as taking the Lord’s name in vain, if not hypocrisy, has also raised the spectre of a self-styled American “theocracy” in the making.

In the global perspective from which I have been asked to speak, neither membership statistics nor culturally determined values seem quite as compelling concerns as the honesty and authenticity with which North American churches are called by God to act and speak. As the late North American theologian Paul Lehman taught, the essential thing is to “preach the gospel, and let the chips fall where they may.” Beyond that, the global perspective provides a rather different angle on the direction in which Christianity is moving.

In the world context, Christianity is growing – not shrinking. Its growth is most prodigious in the global South, and particularly on my own continent of Africa. Statisticians now locate Christianity’s demographic centre of gravity near Timbuktu in the Sahara desert, and it continues to shift southward year by year. In addition, traditional forms of Christianity that were shaped in Europe, from Constantinople and Rome to Wittenberg and Geneva, are less and less normative. African initiated churches proliferate, and in all the regions of the globe Pentecostalism expands even as the US mainline churches contract. It is all part of the interplay, the ebb and flow, of the church’s life. Within this exciting and nerve-wracking pattern of global change, each member has its role to play within the unity of the one body. And within the providence of God, prosperity may come again to the North American mainline through the Spirit’s action among Christians of Indonesia or Nigeria or Brazil.

Perhaps this poses the greatest of the contemporary challenges to North American Christians and their churches: the need to adjust to a new position within the wider church of Jesus Christ, the need to give up total control of the missionary enterprise, the need – as has been said – to “let go, and let God...”

Seeking a new position or role within church and world will require the exploration of new relationships. This will require dialogue – with other ecumenically minded Christians, certainly, but also with people of churches that have not been associated with the conciliar ecumenical movement, with people of other faiths, with people of a secular age who may not have an affiliation with any community of faith. Such dialogue, or dialogues, may well be hindered by the ideologically divisive atmosphere of today’s North American culture, in which conservative evangelicals and political progressives are often portrayed as members of different species – and unlikely ever to achieve common ground.

Within this exciting and nerve-wracking pattern of global change, each member has its role to play within the unity of the one body.

But those of us who are ecumenical, who are committed to unity in God’s love, have some experience of initiating dialogue – even difficult dialogue – and of opening our consciousness to the possibility that there may yet be something more that we can learn from listening to others. It is up to us to take the lead; and with your support and solidarity I am confident that ecumenical collective leadership will keep us firmly on course and with God’s grace we shall transform the church, we will transform our lives, and we shall transform the world to the glory of God.

Over the past few years, the World Council of Churches has been exploring new and exciting relationships, and discussing what we have come to call the possible “reconfiguration of the ecumenical movement.” We have become more directly involved with representatives of the Catholic church and other non-member churches of the WCC from Pentecostal and evangelical backgrounds. With member and non-member churches, we have been expanding our activities in Africa, putting a special emphasis on the life and economics of that region and especially on means by which churches can join

the struggle against the pandemic of HIV and AIDS. We have helped to build new peace and justice networks, country by country and region by region, as part of the Ecumenical Decade for Overcoming Violence, whose 2004 regional focus was the USA.

At the recent Athens conference on world mission and evangelism, we were pleased to work with the largest official Roman Catholic delegation ever to attend such an event. We also had a larger contingent of Pentecostal delegates and advisors than we have had previously, as well as a significant number of evangelicals from many countries.

Next February the ninth assembly will convene at Porto Alegre, Brazil. It will be the first of our assemblies to be held in Latin America.

Next February the ninth assembly since the founding of the World Council of Churches in 1948 will convene at Porto Alegre, Brazil. It will be the first of our assemblies to be held in Latin America, and in our preparations we are already experiencing the wealth of opportunities for dialogue and insights that this new geographical perspective may bring. Shifting demography and economic realities are two topics I have touched on that will be examined from this new point of view, as will the growth of Pentecostalism. We will be meeting on the campus of the Pontifical Catholic University in Porto Alegre, and the Catholic church is one of the members of our host council of churches in the southern cone of the Americas. I encourage each of you to come to the ninth assembly if you can, or at least to follow the proceedings there on the web and through other media.

Of course, relationships among Christians — as important as they are — do not exhaust the scope of the dialogue we seek. We have recognized this era as a “critical moment” for the expansion of interfaith dialogue in pursuit of world community. Just last

month in Geneva, the WCC hosted a conference on inter-religious relationships that has been hailed as one of the most inclusive such gatherings to date. We continue to work in this field, and we look to the ninth assembly to guide us into the next phase of this dialogue. The question we will continue to address, in conversation with all our partners, is that raised at the “critical moment conference” in Geneva: how can we advance our dialogue so that it becomes a truly relevant tool in encounters between people of different faiths?

There are many ecumenical possibilities on the horizon — new configurations, new partners, new qualities of relationships. Meanwhile, our most fundamental task as a movement, as ecumenical churches and ecumenical Christians, is to continue to extend hospitality to one another and to the strangers who venture into our midst. We continue to act as stewards of an ecumenical space that is welcoming to all and that allows for open, honest and productive dialogue. Dialogue is the path we follow that will lead us to those promising horizons.

The churches of North America have a rich ecumenical history. And the ecumenical movement continues to offer them a way forward. As I conclude, let me reiterate that personally and as WCC, we are profoundly grateful to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) for your unmitigated commitment to the unity of the church and oneness among all Christians *ecumenical movement*. With a church such as yours, and with Christians such as yourselves, the future of ecumenism is surely in good hands. Together, let us seek God’s strength and guidance in the renewal of all our churches’ life, witness, service and ministry.

Notes

- ¹ Eugene Carson Blake, *The Church in the Next Decade* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 103f.

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).



Living the Ecumenical Story: Vignettes and Visions

Deborah DeWinter

Eighth Joe A. and Nancy Vaughn Stalcup Lecture on Christian
Unity, Northway Christian Church, Dallas, June 12, 2005

*The Reverend Debora DeWinter is Program Executive for the
World Council of Churches in the United States.*

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!

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!

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.

The Assembly called the churches to work together to overcome violence and to try to imagine what the world would be like.

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.

“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.”

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.

They decided to designate a tree in the center of each community as a place where people could gather to express anger

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."

"My father would stand at the door and say to us, 'Don't allow them to take Jesus out of you.'"

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.

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.

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

*“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.”*

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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of repentance, because the way we live
as church is such a visible denial
of the word we proclaim.”*

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 revision 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

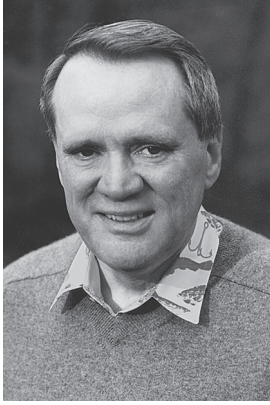
In the meanwhile, as we continue to discern the shape of our ecumenical calling in the 21st Century, we can join together with the delegates at the WCC's First Assembly (1948) in Amsterdam in their pledge of faith some 57 years ago, and affirm that no matter what: "We intend to stay together."

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

the margins, or in the hallway, or looking through the windows.

All this becomes even more alarming when we recognize the global trends that are shaping the life of Christianity. These are some of the “brutal facts” that many ecumenists seem often to ignore or dismiss. One of the ironies, in fact, is that our ecumenical institutions today spend considerable effort analyzing the global trends shaping political and economic life, but virtually no time analyzing the ways in which the life of the churches themselves are changing! And outside observers often expect that’s one area where a council of churches would have some particular expertise.

The picture can be summarized simply: the churches around the world that are growing the fastest, with the most vitality, are not connected to the institutional or relational fabric of the ecumenical movement. Look at it another way. As ecumenical institutions continue operating in present patterns, they become increasingly more marginal in the global Christian community despite whatever activities they are carrying out.

The churches around the world that are growing the fastest, with the most vitality, are not connected to the ecumenical movement.

For many years we’ve been familiar with the shift in concentration of the global church from the North to the South. But within this movement is also a shift in numbers and spiritual momentum from those “historic Protestant churches” to churches that are more evangelical, or Pentecostal, and/or indigenously rooted in the cultures of former colonial countries, rather than the descendents of colonial missionary churches.

The statistics are stunning. The modern Pentecostal movement, for instance, which is only about one century old, now accounts for nearly one quarter of the global Christian community. Plus, an estimated 19 million Pentecostals are added each year. This astonishing growth is one of the most dramatic stories of modern Christianity. In Rio de Janeiro, for instance, 40 new Pentecostal congregations are started every week, and at least two countries in Latin America have a virtual Pentecostal political majority.

Take, for example, the Church of Pentecost in Gha-

na, whose leader I met at a meeting Africa last August. It has grown rapidly to 1.3 million members and 9,300 congregations, with only 700 full time pastors, but 50,000 ordained lay leaders. 10 new churches are planted each week, and 70,000 new converts join the church in a year. It now is present as well in 60 countries throughout the world, and sends out missionaries. Stories of churches like these are multiplied throughout the world.

Pentecostal bodies are increasingly building South to South partnerships, and Pentecostal bodies from the South build bonds with their members in immigrant communities in the North, especially in Europe. But relationships ecumenically with other church traditions are scarce.

However, they are not impossible, and there are examples that demonstrate what can happen. Pentecostal groups have joined councils of churches in countries including Korea, South Africa, Cuba, and France, to name examples. Often these churches have departed from the anti-ecumenical stance of their North American parent bodies. And at the 8th Assembly of the WCC in Harare, (joint Consultative Group on Pentecostals was established. It has done modest, quiet work, and some relationships have been built.

Dr. David Daniels, church historian with the Church of God in Christ, the major Pentecostal African-American denomination in the US (and also present in 30 other countries), describes Pentecostals as “explicitly individualistic and implicitly communal or social.” The patient, relational work needed to build ecumenical links between Pentecostal and mainline Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox churches requires a massive undertaking of intentional outreach prayer, mutual risk, and opportunities for building trust. This is an absolute imperative for ecumenism in the 21st Century. Yet, it is barely on our agenda. All too often, ecumenical bodies have been content to keep Pentecostals on the margins, relating to them with less intentionality and interest than, say, to Buddhists.

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The frequent critique of ecumenists is that Pentecostal groups bring an individualistic understanding of Christian faith that is politically reactionary and socially repressive. Therefore, why should we want them in the room with us? But this analysis, at best, is only partially true. In many cases, it is a misleading and disrespectful stereotype.

Certainly one can find many examples of Pentecostal churches preaching a “prosperity gospel” and echoing politically conservative rhetoric. Some of these are shaped by direct ties to similar groups in the United States. But one can find many other examples of Pentecostal churches indigenously rooted in their societies, growing amidst the poor and the marginalized, providing communal support in situations of social disintegration, and living as a true “church of the poor” seeking both spiritual and physical empowerment to free themselves through God’s power from oppression.

Some Pentecostal leaders have told me how much ecumenical relationships have come to mean to them. They are challenged, enriched, and changed by the work of the Spirit in the wider body of Christ, as should we all be. But ecumenical institutions cannot hope to build fruitful relationships with Pentecostal groups unless there is a genuine willingness to make changes ecumenical style, culture, and practical priorities. That’s as it should be, but I see little evidence of a readiness to do so.

When we think about it, there’s another curious feature about the typical response of many ecumenical activists to Pentecostal groups. Our first impulse is to check out their political agenda, and their theology, before deciding whether we can invite them fully into our room. What if, in 1961, we had taken the same stance toward the Orthodox? What if we would have, in effect, made our fellowship with them in the WCC or the NCCC conditional on their particular political stance, or the social/political consequences of their theology? Obviously, we never would have made the breakthrough that broadened modern ecumenism at least beyond the boundaries of historic Protestantism to include the Orthodox tradition of Christian faith. So why is it that there seems to be so little energy, commitment, imagination, and faith to work for a similar breakthrough in ecumenical life in the 21st Century?

I have spoken here thus far only about the Pentecostals missing from the ecumenical space, and not the evangelicals and Catholics. Further, all this is nec-

essarily brief, inviting further clarification from those more closely familiar with these developments. But we can add a few more observations about those missing from the room.

Another curious feature about the typical response to Pentecostal groups: to check out their political agenda and theology before deciding if we can invite them in.

“Evangelical” is a more elastic term than “Pentecostal,” and therefore discussion about the presence or absence of evangelicals in ecumenical arenas is more complex. More damaging is the public perception generally promoted by the media that at least in North America, the category of “evangelical” refers automatically to Christians whose social views and political muscle is synonymous with the Religious Right. Again, this is a stereotype that seriously misrepresents the realities on the ground and inhibits ecumenical engagement.

Following World War II, a network of evangelical institutional structures emerged that were formed generally in reaction against emerging ecumenical bodies. Thus, in the U.S. the National Association of Evangelicals was formed as an alternative to the perceived *liberalism* of the National Council of Churches. That pattern became an unfortunate American religious *export* around the world. When the World Evangelical Fellowship was established, it provided a global fellowship to evangelical churches and bodies not willing to trust the opportunities and agenda offered by the World Council of Churches.

The passage of 50 years has brought changes in a generation of leadership and new understandings of the whole message of the gospel to both evangelical and ecumenical communities. Many evangelical bodies today are far more ready to define themselves according to what they are for, instead of who they are against. A growing theological maturity and self-confidence is expressed in a strong missional commitment that embraces a wholistic gospel, seeks to integrate evangelism and social action in a unified witness, explores creatively how to contextualize faith in Christ, and engages issues such as poverty, HIV and AIDS, and environmental destruction as expressions of biblical faithfulness.

As with the Pentecostal community, there is a diversity of evangelical voices on these questions. Some remain far more “reactive,” and the media’s addiction to sound-bites has given prominence to voices on the Religious Right and their followers. But any sense of evangelical unity around such views has long since disappeared. The evangelical community has become more diverse and divided, and many evangelicals are articulating a fresh and compelling witness on issues once thought to be only on the ecumenical agenda.

Consider a few examples:

Last June a group of American church leaders traveled to Great Britain for a forum on global poverty with church leaders in the UK in order to lobby the G8 meeting on the commitments to be made addressing the U.N. Millennium Development Goals. This was part of the overall ONE campaign to make poverty history. Archbishop of Canterbury Rev. Rowan Williams hosted the meeting at Lambeth Palace. The U.S. delegation included Rev. Rich Cizik, Vice President of Governmental Affairs for the National Association of Evangelicals, Rev. George McKinney, from the Presidium of the Church of God in Christ, Dr. Glenn Palmberg, President of the Evangelical Covenant Church, Ron Sider, President of Evangelicals for Social Action, Rich Stearns, President of World Vision, and Geoff Tunnicliffe, International Coordinator of the World Evangelical Alliance, along with Jim Wallis, who as instrumental in convening the group, David Beckman, President of Bread for the World, and representatives of “mainline” Protestant churches. The group met with leaders of denominations, ecumenical bodies, and relief and development groups in the U.K. including Christian Aid. Their public witness to the media and private lobbying to government leaders was clear, strong, and had some effect.

Moreover, a letter to President George Bush prior to the EB and organized by the ONE Campaign urged leaders at the summit to:

- Help the poorest people of the world fight poverty, AIDS, and hunger at a cost equal to just ONE percent more of the US budget on a clear timetable;
- Cancel 100% of the debts owed by the poorest countries;
- Reform trade rules so poor countries can earn sustainable incomes.

This was signed not only by those U.S. leaders attending the Forum, but many more, including from the evangelical community these leaders: Rick Warren, Brian McLaren, Max Lucado, Bill Hybels, Tony Compolo, and Leighton Ford. They were joined by Bob Edgar, Jim Winkler, John McCullough, Bishop Philip Cousin, and many others.

To those familiar with the evangelical community in the U.S., the breadth of these names and the constituencies they represent quickly turns peoples’ heads and shatters old assumptions. Take just one dramatic example, Rick Warren. His book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, has been selling up to 1 million copies a month and has been the best-selling new book in the world since 2003. A couple of years ago, through an article his wife, Kay, read on the HIV/AIDS crisis, Warren’s heart was awakened to the realities of global poverty. “I found those 2,000 verses (in the Bible) on the poor. How could I have missed that? I was not seeing all the purposes of God.” He has now launched a new effort, with a focus in Rwanda, to plant and equip congregations as they address poverty, disease, and illiteracy. His approaches may be entrepreneurial, creative, and controversial, but his commitment to combating global poverty as a central part of Christian witness is undeniable.

Comprised of 260 community development organizations organized by evangelical churches and groups, the purpose of the Micah Network is to provide a means of multi-country, international advocacy around the issues of global poverty.

But even more striking are developments outside the U.S. in the global evangelical community, driven particularly by the growth of the church in the South. Remember that today, 70% of the world’s evangelical community is in the South, a dramatic change in the last 34 decades. The Micah Challenge is a prime example of the changing global evangelical community. And I wonder how many in this audience have even heard of this? Here’s the story. Hundreds of locally-based community development organizations throughout the South, organized by evangelical churches and groups, began to form and join the Micah Network. Comprised now of 260 such community development

organizations, its purpose is to provide a means of multi-country, international advocacy around the issues of global poverty.

The Micah Challenge has emerged as joint project of the Micah Network and the World Evangelical Alliance. The WEA, which evolved and renamed itself from the World Evangelical Fellowship, is a global network of 120 national and regional evangelical alliances, and 104 organizations, embracing about 2 million local churches. Obviously, a majority are from the South. At its 2001 General Assembly, the WEA adopted this declaration:

As a global Christian community seeking to live in obedience to Scripture, we recognize the challenge of poverty across God's world. We welcome the international initiative to halve world poverty by 2015, and pledge ourselves to do all we can, through our organisations and churches, to back this with prayerful, practical action in our nations and communities. We believe...if the poverty targets are to be met:

- There needs to be a commitment to achieve growing justice in world trade in the light of globalisation; this must recognise the role of trade, particularly in arms, that fuels conflict and causes widespread poverty and suffering
- It is vital that a new deal on international debt is agreed by the G7 leaders as a matter of urgency and carried through by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank...we urge governments and financial institutions of both North and South to act decisively, transparently and with integrity to combat corruption...taking the necessary steps to break the chains of debt and give a new start to the world's poorest nations.

This became a cornerstone of *The Micah Challenge*, which was launched last year as a major global campaign to mobilize Christians against poverty. Its strong advocacy agenda is linked to the Millennium Development Goals, with campaigns both at the international level and in various countries.

Sometimes I wonder, and worry, that promising initiatives like these are passing under the parochial radar of the ecumenical community. We're too familiar with predictable partners, and too protective of institutional, and perhaps ideological, boundaries. In December of last year, I had dinner

in New York with a WCC intern who was finishing a rich year of work in international advocacy. But she told me that WCC staff colleagues engaged in this work had never heard of *The Micah Challenge* until that group's leadership met with Kofi Annan.

This much is clear. The 21st Century offers new possibilities for a more inclusive ecumenical effort that can seek common witness with strong and emerging evangelical voices, churches, and alliances. But to do so, ecumenical institutions and agencies will have to confront their formal boundaries, their informal biases, and even their subconscious prejudices that stand as barriers to these possibilities.

The ecumenical participation of the Catholic Church has been enhanced by many new avenues opened since Vatican II. Few in the U.S., at least, realize that in over 70 national councils or associations of churches throughout the world, as well as three of the "REO's" (regional ecumenical organizations) the Catholic Church through its appropriate Conference of Bishops is a full member and participant.

Until last year that was not the case in the United States. But after three years of dialogue, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops made its decision to become a founding participant of Christian Churches Together in the USA, an emerging fellowship on its way toward official organization. This is the first time in U.S. church history that the Catholic Church has made a decision to join such a body, and this has brought vitality and deepened expectation to the journey of CCT.

But at the global level, an ecumenical impasse remains. Terms have not yet been found for Rome to be a full and official partner in an ecumenical fellowship of churches functioning on a worldwide level. A Joint Working Group exists between the Vatican and the WCC, producing useful reports, and looking for specific avenues of cooperation. For 40 years this has kept open a channel for relationship. But at times it seems governed more by diplomacy between two separate bodies. In some ways, it can freeze the status quo; no one these days seriously puts on the agenda the prospect that the Catholic Church would join the WCC.

Whether or not the advent of the new Pope, Benedict XVI, and the fruit of many bi-lateral dialogues conducted between the Vatican and numerous Christian groups, will result in new possibilities,

remains to be seen. The present reality is that in the broadest global ecumenical fellowship that presently exists—the WCC—the Vatican sits at the back of the room as one of several observers, rather than having a seat at the table. Present structures and prevailing assumptions from both sides won't really allow this to change. Something new would have to be imagined—but that, of course, is one way to describe the work of the Holy Spirit.

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The list of those who seem not to be invited, or who do not respond, to the banquet of today's ecumenical institutions, goes on. Noteworthy in several contexts are those churches that have sprung up in the indigenous cultural roots of their societies, and whose identity is formed more by this reality. Most familiar are the African Instituted Churches (sometimes also called Indigenous Independent). Simply defined, these are churches begun in Africa by Africans. They seek a deep embrace of African culture, but in that process encounter in fresh ways the complex relationship between gospel and culture within their context.

A very small number have found their way into ecumenical settings, including the WCC, but not without difficulty. Most thrive in their indigenous cultural independence, grow rapidly, but also face the challenges of any relatively young church that lives without ties to the history, witness and tradition of the historic church.

Similar indigenously rooted and fast growing churches are found elsewhere, like Brazil for Christ and the Jesus is Lord Fellowship in the Philippines. Globally, those in such "independent" and "indigenous" denominations now number an estimated 386 million people, compared to the 342 million in the historic Protestant churches of the Reformation.

We can summarize these "brutal facts" like this: Most of the church's future growth will take place in fresh, locally rooted expressions of Christianity that demonstrate promising vitality, but also display disturbing independence and isolation from the wider church. For instance, consider this: in 50 years, if present growth rates and trends continue, the world

will be home to one billion Pentecostals. But our present global ecumenical institutions are comprised largely of the historic Protestant and the Orthodox churches. They are becoming seriously marginalized from streams shaping the future of Christianity.

We face an urgent need to build relationships between the independent freshly emerging faces of Christianity and the historic expressions of the Christian tradition. My conviction is that there is no ecumenical challenge more important for the health of the whole global church and the strength of its witness within the world in the 21st Century. But in the present agendas of ecumenical institutions, this concern at best languishes on periphery.

This much is true. As we look forward into the first few decades of the 21st Century, an ecumenical body with evangelicals, Pentecostals, and Catholics remaining out of the room, or at best as polite observers, will have failed in its foundational mission and forfeited its capacity for common Christian witness.

Institutional Momentum or Spiritual Vision?

One of the key questions for ecumenism in the 21st Century, both globally and in the U.S. is this: what, in reality, will be the driving force to energize our ecumenical calling? I suggest two extremes that may seem simplistic: institutional momentum or spiritual vision. Yet, to many, this often seems to describe the choices.

Globally, ecumenism today is encumbered by the sheer weight and complexity of its institutional structures. The process of *ecumenical reconfiguration* was initiated by the WCC because of this bureaucratic burden. Its study on "Mapping the Oikoumene," done by Jill Hawley for the consultation in Geneva last December, provided a unique and comprehensive picture of the interlocking and overlapping web of ecumenical institutions and agencies. On the one hand, the proliferation of so many bodies is a testimony to the growth in ecumenical vision. But today's reality is that their organizational needs overwhelm available financial and human capacities. An ecumenical attention deficit has resulted. The typical story is that today's ecumenical institutions shrink in their budget but not in their agendas, so their governance loses coherence, their

over-worked staff become demoralized, and supporting churches become more disenchanted.

As such institutions struggle to be solvent, they fall prey too easily to the temptation of equating their sustainability with the continuation of the ecumenical task. When faced with threats to organizational survival, reliance on institutional momentum can actually squelch appeals to fresh spiritual vision. It's much like the local congregation with dwindling membership and declining finances that becomes determined to find any way to keep its doors open, but no longer asks why.

Fresh ecumenical experiments are present today, but tend to be found on the periphery of established structures and institutions. The Global Christian Forum is one. Its roots are in the Common Vision and Understanding process of the World Council of Churches, and it was endorsed by at the Eighth Assembly of the WCC in Harare. The vision was simple, but bold. Could a way be found to bring the four main *families* of the Christian community (Orthodox, historic Protestant, Evangelical/Pentecostal, and Catholic) into an intentional place of ongoing fellowship on the global level?

Fresh ecumenical experiments are present today, but tend to be found on the periphery of established structures and institutions.

For several years this fragile initiative has worked with scarce funding and minimal recognition. But it has received faithful support and a needed infrastructure from the World Council of Churches, whose General Secretary, Dr. Sam Kobia, has not wavered in this commitment. Now the Global Christian Forum has begun producing promising fruit. Quiet, initial consultations to explore this possibility met with affirmation. Most significant was their process. I remember sitting in a room at Fuller Seminary some years ago, in 2002, with about 60 representatives from churches and Christian organizations covering this wide spectrum of belief and tradition. Each representative was asked to share their story of Christian faith. That alone took about two days. And in all my years of ecumenical meetings, I had never participated in such a process. The result was a palpable spiritual bonding that opened up other possibilities of relationship and trust that previously had been excluded.

A plan was developed to have regional consultations beginning in 2004, leading to a global gathering in 2007. The first was in Asia, held in May of last year and jointly sponsored by the Christian Conference of Asia, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (Catholic) and the Evangelical Fellowship of Asia. Richard Howell, a participant who is General Secretary of the Evangelical Fellowship of India, said this:

GCF is the best thing that could have happened to the Christian Church in Asia. It created an open space where people could come together for the first time to share their stories and faith journey. The Church in Asia is growing, and growth brings challenges. The Global Christian Forum gave an opportunity for those from different traditions to listen. We discovered one another. And we discovered Christ at work within our different traditions.

The consensus of the group in Asia was to carry this initiative forward. Meanwhile, in India the Catholic bishops' conference, the National Council of Churches of India, and the Evangelical Fellowship of India have formed the National United Christian Forum, while preserving their separate organizational activities. In Howell's words, "We figured out that it was God's agenda to stand together, and we thank God for that."

Two months ago the Global Christian Forum held its African regional consultation in Lusaka, Zambia. As a member of the Forum's Continuation Committee, I was privileged to be present.

About 70 church leaders from all parts of Africa, and all parts of Christ's Body, gathered together. They represented denominations and Christian organizations that included Baptist, Anglican, Pentecostal, Reformed, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Seventh Day Adventist, Evangelical, and Lutheran churches, as well as the All African Christian Council, the Association of Evangelicals in Africa, the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, the World Student Christian Federation, World Vision, the United Bible Societies, the African Theological Fellowship, various national councils of churches and the African Instituted Churches.

Why was this so important? Simply because it had never happened before. As in previous meetings, we spent much of the first day and a half inviting each participant to share their personal story of faith.

We then shared the realities facing the church in Africa today. Most gripping; the devastating challenge posed to much of Africa by the HIV/AIDS crisis. The statistics, as you know, are staggering: two-thirds of the people in the world affected by HIV/AIDS live in sub-Saharan Africa. The gathering spent a significant amount of time focusing on both the theological and practical challenges confronting the churches from this crisis. Brigalia Bram, the veteran ecumenist now in South Africa, and Kwaben Asamoah-Gyadu, a noted evangelical theologian from Ghana, each addressed the group on "Our Journey with Christ in Africa." The group identified several other areas of social and political concerns that were widely shared, including the issues of reforming governments, particularly in the process of democratic elections, combating corruption, and other initiatives to strengthen "good governance" and public life. What was remarkable, in my view, was the natural way in which this group embraced the necessity of the church to be strongly involved in *social action*, while also giving clear attention to personal evangelism and spiritual renewal. There really was no serious controversy in this gathering over those issues, despite the wide diversity of churches and organizations that were present, and despite the fact that many had never met with one another before.

This diverse group of African church leaders responded to this encounter with enthusiasm, gratitude, and a clear commitment to create their own means to carry this process forward. Rev. Ekow Badu Wood, of the Ghana Pentecostal Council, put it this way: "This has been a beautiful opportunity for churches that have been marginalized to be given the opportunity to speak."

His words bear reflection, for like others, he shared the clear sense of being marginalized from the ecumenical community. That view was reflected often, and with real feeling.

Bishop Silas Yego, head of the African Inland Church, explained that his church never would have associated with the WCC or other "ecumenical" bodies. But at the end of the gathering, he told the group he had never been in a meeting like this, and was filled with gratitude, determined to build similar bridges in his own context.

Rev. Daniel Bitros, a pastor in the Church of Christ in Nigeria and former general secretary of the Evangelical Fellowship of Africa, put it this way: "A stone

has been moved from off the top of the hill, and now it is rolling. There is no other ecumenical body that could have brought us together in this way. Now we have to make this concrete."

He told the group he had never been in a meeting like this, and was filled with gratitude, determined to build similar bridges in his own context.

So the Global Christian Forum is a fledgling initiative with little money, a part-time retired staff person formerly with the WCC working out of his home in Switzerland, and a committee that works mostly by email. But its vision seems to have struck a nerve. This patient, quiet work is now finding a strong response, especially in these regional meetings, first in Asia and now in Africa.

This is the same vision that propels the work of Christian Churches Together in the USA. Most of you here know this story, and are participants in writing the next chapter. The journey began in September, 2001 when church leaders representing the wider spectrum of the Christian community articulated a vision for a place of fellowship that would draw them together. When publicly shared the next year, they said this:

We lament that we are divided and that our divisions too often result in distrust, misunderstandings, fear and even hostility between us. We long for the broken body of Christ made whole, where unity can be celebrated in the midst of our diversity.

We lament our often diffuse and diminished voice on matters critical to the gospel in our society. We long for a more common witness, vision and mission.

We lament how our lack of faithfulness to each other has led to a lack of effectiveness on crucial issues of human dignity and social justice. We long to strengthen the prophetic public voice of the Christian community in America.

We lament that none of our current organizations represents the full spectrum of Christians in the United States. We long for a place, where our differences could be

Look again just at the numbers. Of the world's estimated 2.1 billion Christians, only about one quarter are part of those churches making up the fellowship of the World Council of Churches (215 million Orthodox, and 342 million Protestants).

better understood and our commonalities better affirmed.

Early on, CCT identified five major Christian families which needed to be represented—in addition to Catholic, Orthodox, Historic Protestant, and Evangelical/Pentecostal, “racial and ethnic churches” were also included in light of the history and reality of these issues in the U.S. Over these past years a process of mutual engagement, agreement on purposes, and organizational planning has moved forward.

Today 32 churches (denominations) and Christian organizations have agreed to become founding participants of CCT. They represent well the first four families. At its meeting last June, CCT's participants decided to delay their official launch in order to enable further dialogue with the Historic Black Churches in the U.S., whose participation in CCT is vitally desired. Recently, the first Historic Black Church decided to join, and others are in their respective processes of discernment and dialogue.

CCT's next gathering will be held in Atlanta in March of 2006. A central focus will be placed on how our respective churches understand and confront the challenge of poverty—a focus actually proposed by the Pentecostal/Evangelical participants in CCT and embraced by all.

Clear parallels can be drawn between the Global Christian Forum and Christian Churches Together in the USA. In both cases discussions giving birth to these initiatives started in existing ecumenical bodies—the WCC and the NCCCUSA. Both initiatives found it essential to form an identity and organization that is clearly separate from those established structures in order to have any hope of achieving their vision. Neither the Global Christian Forum nor CCT have any desire or intention of replacing existing ecumenical institutions. In both instances, the actual budget, staff, and capacity of these two initiatives is so minimal and fragile that most of the energy comes from purely voluntary effort. But in both cases—and this is the most important—the power driving these initiatives is a simple but clear vision which participants discover

to be biblically compelling, spiritually empowered, and therefore virtually irresistible.

Incremental Change or Deep Change?

We all know that the ability to change is one of the key ingredients to describe any healthy organization seeking a sustainable future. But most change, necessarily, is incremental. Robert Quinn, the author of the book *Deep Change*, describes incremental change as “the result of a rational analysis and a planning process. Incremental change usually does not disrupt past patterns—it is an extension of the past.” This is what most healthy institutions generally experience—ongoing, incremental change. It's how those who learn to effectively lead institutions spend most of their time, and wisely so, mastering, accelerating, and directing the process of incremental change. But times come when something different seems to be required, and it's what one like Quinn calls *deep change*. This requires “new ways of thinking and behaving. It is change that is major in scope, discontinuous with the past...distorts existing patterns of action and involves taking risks. Deep change means surrendering control.”

When we look honestly at the “brutal facts” describing the present ecumenical landscape and architecture, and when we delve deeply into the spiritual vision undergirding our efforts, it seems at least to me that the future of ecumenism in the 21st Century requires deep change.

Look again just at the numbers. Of the world's estimated 2.1 billion Christians, only about one quarter are part of those churches making up the fellowship of the World Council of Churches (215 million Orthodox, and 342 million Protestants—but many of these are not in member churches of the WCC). By in large, those churches that have formed the foundation of present ecumenical structures are in decline, and those outside of such fellowship are more often the same churches whose dramatic growth is shaping the future of Christianity. The stunning shift in the balance of Christian populations from the North to the South further intensifies this picture. Whereas a few decades ago

70% of all evangelicals were in the “North,” primarily in the U.S., today 70% are in the churches of the global South. At the beginning of the 20th Century, 81% of Christians were white. By the century’s end, the number was 45%. 542 million Pentecostals (more than the total of Christians in all the churches belonging to the WCC) continue their rapid growth throughout the world. The Catholic Church, which is projected to lose 20 million members in Europe in the first quarter of this century, will gain 100 million members in Africa, 50 million in Asia, and 140 million in Latin America. So one must ask, will incremental changes in present ecumenical structures, patterns, and assumptions have any hope of meeting the challenges posed by the new realities of the church in the world as we enter into the 21st Century?

542 million Pentecostals (more than the total of Christians in all the churches belonging to the WCC) continue their rapid growth throughout the world.

Or look at this simple fact. An estimated 8,000 churches (denominations or communions) around the world have web sites. Most of these in terms of sheer number are not in the “North.” What might this suggest about the possibilities for making networks of ecumenical connection in the future?

Even more astonishing is that the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, published by the Oxford University Press, estimates that there are now a total of 33,380 denominations in the world. Only 347 are members of the World Council of Churches, and only a few hundred more who are not members belong to the complex and duplicative web of other ecumenical bodies. Optimistically, one can say that the ecumenical fields are ripe unto harvest.

But I do think that will require deep change.

Take one small but symbolic example. Does anyone here believe that it will make sense for the staff of major ecumenical bodies—the WCC, WARC, and LWF, for instance, to still be located in Geneva by the middle of this century? Or even 25 years from now? But the resistance to even seriously discussing such proposals is a metaphor for the challenge posed by deep change to existing ecumenical arrangements.

Like all here, I hold deep and dear value to ecumen-

ical instruments created in the last half of the last century. My own church was a founding member of the WCC and the NCCCUSA. These continue to play important roles, make valuable connections, and empower critically needed witness and advocacy. But the future of ecumenism in the 21st Century urgently requires space to nurture fresh and creative movements of God’s Spirit—the Spirit that always seeks to build the unity of Christ’s body for the sake of God’s transformational mission in the world.

So my conviction is that this future must be shaped by a creative and inclusive ecumenism, rather than a protective institutionalism, by compelling spiritual vision rather than predictable organizational momentum, and by deep change rather than incremental change.

In conclusion, for the first time, God’s grace is in the theme of a WCC Assembly (“God in your Grace, Transform the World”). Grace is such a distinctive feature of Christian faith, and a gift to all humanity. As we move toward Porto Alegre, all of us deeply yearn for the world to be transformed. But will we reflect and speak a distinctive word which the world hungers to hear? Will we explore what it means for God’s grace to transform the world? That is a question which can engage all the families of Christian faith, and speak to the depth of human hopes and aspirations.

Todd M. Johnson, co-author of the 2001 *World Christian Encyclopedia*, said, “Christianity is steadily moving from this Caucasian, European-dominated, modern way of life, even beyond Christianity as an institution... There’s no central, unifying narrative.” This is far truer now than it was four years ago. And how can we ever hope to restore a “unifying narrative” if we aren’t even listening to one another’s stories?

That, it seems to me, is the place to begin. And in some ways, we come back to the place where the ecumenical movement started, and always begins anew: engaging the wildly different and divergent stories of those who, in St. Paul’s words, “were all made to drink of one Spirit,” (I Cor. 12: 13) and then asking where God would lead us together in the midst of the world. To paraphrase Walter Brueggemann, “We would as soon wish God were always stable and reliable. What we find is God moving, always surprising us and coming at us from new directions.” May that be so for the future of ecumenism in the 21st Century.

How Disciples Interpret the Bible

M. Eugene Boring



DR. M. EUGENE BORING, originally presented this address at the Stone-Campbell Dialogue in June 2005 at the Skillman Church of Christ, Dallas, Texas. He is Professor Emeritus of New Testament, Brite Divinity School, Texas Christian University, Ft. Worth, Texas.

Many thanks for your invitation to participate in this important dialogue. I would like to do two things: (1) present a brief study of a New Testament text appropriate to this occasion that will inductively illustrate some aspects of Disciples' approach to the Bible, and (2) present a list of thesis statements that a "typical Disciple" might, in my estimation, give in response to the question "How do Disciples interpret the Bible?" While I think my own approach is fairly typical of Disciples, I of course speak only for myself, and other Disciples might do the Bible study differently and present a different list, with different emphases, of what represents Disciples biblical interpretation.

A BRIEF SAMPLE INTERPRETATION OF ROMANS 14:1-15:9

I suggest it is better to have a text before us and study it together rather than deal in generalizations and abstractions.

First, the text (NRSV):

14:1 Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. 2 Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. 3 Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. 4 Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is

before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

14:5 Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. 6 Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

14:7 We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. 8 If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

14:10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. 11 For it is written,

"As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God."

12 So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

14:13 Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. 14 I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. 15 If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you

are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. 16 So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. 17 For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. 18 The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. 19 Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. 20 Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; 21 it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble. 22 The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve. 23 But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. 15:1 We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. 2 Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. 3 For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." 4 For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. 5 May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, 6 so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 15:7 Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. 8 For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, 9 and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

I will not, of course, attempt a full exegesis, but illustrate aspects relevant to our discussion.

Some members of the Stone-Campbell movement may feel that we don't need any interpretation, but

"just take the Bible for what it says." On this occasion, it does seem to be true that some statements in this text appear to jump out at us, quite apart from any interpretation:

"Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" (14:19) seems to require no interpretation, but to speak directly to us in this dialogue on biblical interpretation in the Stone-Campbell movement.

So also, "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (15:7).

Some members of the Stone-Campbell movement may feel that we don't need any interpretation, but "just take the Bible for what it says."

The text that was read last evening in worship, and again this morning as we began our day in worship, "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (12:18) seems to require no interpretation.

But then, after a little reflection, we might ask why not choose to read 16:7 in the same letter:

"I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offenses, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them."

Or why not read 2 John 9-11 to each other, without comment, interpretation, or "human tradition": "Everyone who does not abide in the teaching of Christ, but goes beyond it, does not have God; whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. 10 Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching; 11 for to welcome is to participate in the evil deeds of such a person."

Of course, we all already know: the *selection* of a text, without any comment, is already an interpretation. There is no way to have an uninterpreted text, but this is not an evil, not even a necessary evil. Interpretation is the way we appropriate texts—the only way. We thus need a more disciplined approach than "just taking the Bible for what it says," as Alexander Campbell already recognized in his famous seven

rules. It is precisely interpretation that lets us take a text for what it says.

*Of course, we all already know:
the selection of a text, without any comment,
is already an interpretation.*

I.1 Context

All meaning is contextual. No text means anything in itself. Every text has a context. Politicians responding on the 6:00 news to criticism of something they have said are not the only ones to appeal to “context.” We all recognize it as the fundamental rule of interpretation. Someone quotes our exact words in another context, thereby perverting what we said to mean something we did not intend. What is our response? “Sure I said it. But you’ve got to consider the context.”

I.1.1 Literary

In considering the context of Rom 14:1–15:9, it is necessary first to see it in its literary context. This text is the initial sentence of the hortatory part of the letter that begins at 12:1, filled with directions to the church and for the Christian life. But the way of life in Rom 12–15 is not self-evident, cannot stand on its own, and in Romans is not merely a matter of apostolic command. The section comes as the conclusion of a theological argument represented by Romans 1–11, which we can set out here only in rough outline: All human beings are sinners (1:1–3:23) for whom God has acted in the gracious event of Jesus Christ, appropriated in faith, baptism and life in the Spirit (3:24–8:39), worked out in God’s plan for history (9:1–11:36), *therefore* the Christian life (12:1–15:33).

The “therefore” of 15:7 that calls for mutual acceptance is part of the same “therefore” of 12:1. It is not merely a matter of being nice to each other, but of our response to the gospel.

I.1.2 Historical

Every text in the Bible was written to and for a particular time and place. While hearing a text in its historical context is not the final word in understanding it, any approach that ignores or avoids its original historical meaning is deficient. However, this historical context is sometimes difficult or impossible to obtain, and can only be approximated. Since the results of historical study are always only relatively certain, and since interpretation is partially dependent on these results, interpretation can never be absolute. This has implications for “biblical infallibility,” a term and concept not often found in Disciples circles. Disciples tend to think that even if we had an infallible Bible—and most would not subscribe to the doctrine—who would interpret it for us? Interpretation is fallible; all the Bible has to say to us comes through interpretation.

Back to the historical context of Rom 14:1–15:9. Paul writes to the church in Rome, where he has never been, from Corinth where he has just been through an intensive experience of opposition and healing divisions. These divisions are partly on the same issues he deals with in this text (compare 1Cor 8–10 and Rom 14). To understand this text, we need to understand the Roman church situation to which it was directed. We can do this with a certain degree of probability. The original readers, of course, knew what the situation was. Paul, of course, was dependent on second-hand information, interpreted in his own way, and may have projected onto the Roman situation some of his recent experience in Corinth. We, of course, are dependent on our inferences from Paul’s letter, and thus are at least twice removed from direct knowledge. Nevertheless, there are some aspects of the situation that seem to be clear:

1. One group of the Roman Christians eats meat, the other group eats only vegetables (14:2).
2. One group observes particular days as particularly sacred, the other group considers all days alike. It is not clear what these days are (14:5). Sabbath? Easter? Pentecost? Passover? Sunday?

Since the results of historical study are always only relatively certain, and since interpretation is partially dependent on these results, interpretation can never be absolute.

3. One group drinks wine, the other group does not (14:21).

It thus appears that within the one Roman church there was a group of wine drinkers and meat eaters who didn't observe days, and a group of those who didn't drink wine and did observe days. Who were these people? Paul describes them as "weak" and "strong." The "weak" don't drink wine and do observe days; the "strong" drink wine and don't observe special religious days. I think we can be sure the Paul's "weak" Christians considered themselves the rigorous and strong and the other group as lax and weak, and probably were so considered by others. Paul includes himself among the strong, which may be a bit of unintentional condescension.

The situation is sometimes described as tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Concern for the observance of special days fits, but not scruples about eating meat or drinking wine. There were numerous groups in the Hellenistic world with such characteristics, and elements within the Roman church may have been influenced by some of them. It is also likely in the setting of the Roman church that was heavily influenced by its Jewish roots that the "weak" Christians included a Jewish element.¹ To the extent that there was a Jewish element in the one group, interpretation of the Bible would have played a role in forming and advocating their point of view—in fact, they would seem to have had the Bible on their side. The Bible specified certain meats that were not to be eaten, certain days that were to be observed.

A side observation: in attempting to resolve this issue, Paul does not say, "Both groups should just follow the teaching of the Bible." It is easy to imagine that one group did quote the Bible to the other: those who did not eat meat and did observe particular days could cite texts that supported their position; those that "ate everything" and "counted every day alike" could not. Paul quotes the Bible, but not on the particular practices involved. He does not surrender the Bible to the "weak" group that quotes it, cites it himself as authority in matters of salvation and salvation-history (cf. chs. 4, 9–11), but does not attempt to settle this issue of church life by citing the Bible. In any case, the Bible that would have been quoted would have been the Jewish scriptures, the Christian Old Testament. N.B.: in all of our talk about "restoring the New Testament church," one important element in early Christian-

ity has not been on the list of things to be restored: the Bible of early Christianity, the Old Testament as the church's Bible. A restored New Testament church would have no New Testament, and an obscure text sometimes quoted in defense of restorationism, "Do not go beyond what is written" (1Cor 4:6 NIV),² would mean not to go beyond what is written in the Old Testament.

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We do not know, however, how the issue was defined and argued in Rome. Was the issue considered to be in the realm of "opinions"? This might be suggested by the standard translations of *dialogismoi* in 14:1 as "opinions" (so NRSV; "disputable matters" in TNIV). The same word is translated "thinking" in this same letter (1:21), and "intentions of the heart," including murder and adultery, in Matt 15:19. In any case, it is not likely that either Paul or the Roman Christians understood "opinions" in terms of the much later distinction between "matters of faith" and "matters of opinion." Paul could not quote the later motto "In matters of faith, unity; in matters of opinion, liberty," as though the issues of Rom 14–15 are only matters of opinion, so the church cannot be divided by *them*.³

I.1.3 Imperatives: "what the Bible says to do"

Within this biblical text, if we look for "express commands," to obey, we find:

- I. "Welcome one another." The imperative of *proslambanomenai* here does not mean merely "be nice to," but "receive," "accept" in the ecclesiological sense. Weak are to receive the strong, strong are to receive the weak (14:1, 3; 15:7). The basis: God has welcomed them (14:3); Christ has welcomed them (15:7).
2. A particular command to the "strong": Don't "despise" those who abstain. *Exouthenew* "despise" does not here mean "hate," but "disdain." The temptation of the "strong" is

not to hate their “unenlightened” brothers and sisters, but to disdain them. Not only lack of faith and false doctrine creates disunity, but the down-the-long-nose perspective creates disunity. The Bible forbids it.

3. A particular command to the “weak”: Don’t pass judgment on those whose theology and practice is different from yours. “But I don’t see how they *can* be acceptable to God.” Well and good: you don’t have to see. God has accepted them. God is not enslaved to your theology, God can accept people even though our theology does not make it possible for us to see how. In this most profoundly theological of all his letters, Paul has a high view of theology. There is no expression of faith without theology. No one can simply “believe”; as soon as one thinks about the faith and attempts to articulate it, we have theology. Paul has his theology, and in this letter struggles to articulate it clearly. The most difficult theological problem over which he agonized was the role of Israel in God’s plan, and whether God had been unfaithful to the promises God had made to Israel. In chs. 9–11 Paul articulated what seemed to him, on the basis of biblical revelation and recent revelation, to be the solution of this problem.⁴ Israel had mainly rejected the gospel, but this was only to allow it to go to the Gentiles. Their conversion would make Israel jealous, and Israel too would be converted. All this was to happen soon. This was Paul’s theology, his reasoned articulation of the plan of God based on Scripture illuminated by the Holy Spirit. On this particular point so important to him, his theology turned out to be wrong; the mass of Jews were not made jealous by Gentile conversions, did not convert to the Christian faith. Paul did not yet know this, and believed his theology on this point was true (we should all think this of our own theologies, as did both “weak” and “strong” at Rome). Yet he did not absolutize it. He realized that no human theology can grasp the ultimate purposes of God, and concludes his theological declaration with a hymn of praise to the God who is not captured in any theological system, in the Bible or out (Rom 11:33–36).

Most Disciples I know would affirm this relativizing of theology, as they would affirm the relativizing of all biblical interpretations. This does not mean we absolutize relativism itself, which is itself a kind of

absolutism. Some theologies are better than others, not all interpretations are created equal—but only God is absolute, and in this world we all grasp the truth of God only *ek merous*, in fragments (1 Cor 13:12).

Paul’s point here is not abstract. Like politics, all interpretation is local. Here it means that each group should be convinced in its own mind (14:5). But the God who transcends all theological and hermeneutical differences has already accepted both groups. Even if the theology of one group does not allow them to see how this could be so, they are to accept the other group because God has already done so.

No one can simply “believe”; as soon as one thinks about the faith and attempts to articulate it, we have theology.

1.1.4 Literary and historical context

Interpreting in literary and historical context cannot always be neatly separated; the two approaches are intertwined and impinge on each other. In this same literary context, i.e. in the same letter, we not only have these words from Paul, but in Rom 16:17 other words apparently addressed to the same situation: “I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offenses, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them.” These are different words, with a different tone, from the same apostle to the same situation. Here Paul does not call for receiving each other, but avoiding the other. It may be that Rom 16 was not part of the original letter to Rome. This theory, once popular among historical critics, is now the minority view, and is not my own view—but interpreting either Romans 14 or 16 calls for a decision on this issue, a decision that can be made with only relative certainty. So also, in Col 2:16 we have words attributed to Paul that seem to address the same or a similar issue: some Christians do not eat and drink certain things, and observe certain days, on the basis of their Christian convictions. There, the author (who may not have been Paul himself) considers the advocates of such views to be divisive “heretics,” and does not enjoin fellowship with them. The interpretation of such texts calls for literary and historical criticism, trying to sort out the

“Interpretation” is a better way of posing the issues that divide Christians than “authority,” for authority can’t be discussed apart from interpretation.

ancient meaning(s) in it/their own historical context(s). This can never be done with absolute certainty, but there is no legitimate way around such historical issues. Thus even at the historical level, we have unavoidable ambiguity.

1.2 “What it means” – hermeneutics

To return to the injunctions of Rom 14, even in their ancient setting, it is not clear how the Roman Christians were to carry out the practical aspects of receiving each other. On the matter of observing particular days, what would the worship committee in the Roman church do in planning the church year? On the matter of eating meat and drinking wine, what would the fellowship committee do in planning the menu for fellowship dinners? Paul gave them strong imperatives, but in deciding what to actually do, they could not just “do what Paul says,” not to speak of “just doing what the Bible says.” Even the original readers of the letter, in a historical setting clear to them but ambiguous to us, could not avoid the task of interpretation.

Even more so, those in the contemporary church who want to translate the biblical imperatives into our own setting, cannot just quote verses from the Bible. Thus “*Interpreting the Bible*” is a good choice of words as the topic for this conference, a good way to define the issues.

“Interpretation” is a better way of posing the issues that divide Christians than “authority,” for authority can’t be discussed apart from interpretation. The Bible’s authority, however conceived, is not inert, but functions as authority only by being interpreted. “Authority” is an abstraction until it is made concrete in the act of interpretation. It is thus not helpful, nor is it biblical, to pose the issue in terms of the *authority* of a book. Interpreters in all three groups present today recognize this when advocates of premillennial dispensation, as popularized in the “*Left Behind*” phenomenon, charge most of us in all three streams of the Stone-Campbell tradition with “not believing the Bible,” and are quick to respond that the issue is not biblical authority but how it is interpreted.

PART TWO: THESES ON DISCIPLES BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

My comments have already illustrated that the effort to discover the ancient meaning of a text leads to coming within “hearing distance”⁵ of its meaning for our own times, and that the above discussion has not been strictly literary and historical; the historical discussion already becomes transparent to present meaning. I will now break off the discussion of interpreting Romans 14, and attempt to summarize some of the aspects of Disciples biblical interpretation in a series of theses. They represent my effort to respond to the question “How do Disciples interpret the Bible” with a list of general statements.

2.1 Disciples acknowledge that we interpret the Bible. For the Bible to speak at all, it must be interpreted. There is no access to the Bible without interpretation.

While most Disciples laypeople would be unaware of

Alexander Campbell’s famous “Seven Rules of Biblical Interpretation” mentioned above, practically all would acknowledge that in order to have the message of the Bible at all, it must be interpreted. Thus who interprets the Bible, and by what methods and authority, are important issues. Disciples are not always clear about this.

2.2 Disciples’ biblical interpretation is characterized by *variety*, though there may be an identifiable main stream or majority approach.

2.2.1 Professor/ Pastor/ Pew

A gap sometimes exists between the work of Disciples biblical scholars, the seminary-educated clergy, and the “typical” Disciple layperson in the pew. Here, the variety may not be altogether wholesome.

Pew: the person in the pew is often interested in what

the Bible as word of God has to say to us today, how we should understand it in contemporary categories (*hermeneutics*, though this word is hardly used by laypeople). The task and responsibility of understanding the Bible is oriented to personal Christian life, the shaping of one's personal theology, and to life within the community of faith.

Professor: Disciples professors charged with teaching the Bible in college, university, and seminary are often interested in the ancient or literary meaning of the text (or its sociological, psychological, linguistic, political aspects). Unfortunately in my opinion, Disciples Bible professors are not always interested in the present theological meaning of the text, nor always interested in the Bible in the life of the church. They are sometimes oriented to the academy rather than the church. If the professor speaks of the contemporary meaning of the text, he or she may do so in terms of ideology rather than theology. (Other heirs of the Stone-Campbell tradition may do this too, but may be more likely to think they are just delivering the message of the Bible.) Disciples Bible professors are generally well-educated in their specialty, but sometimes have not been interested in theology, do not always have a theological degree or theological competence. This is sometimes due to the (over-) specialization of their educational track that had a minimal theological component, or sometimes is a matter of personal inclination. Disciples educational institutions do not normally expect teachers of the Bible to be capable in theology or to make theological judgments. Disciples Bible scholars may thus have contributed to creating a gap between critical study of the Bible and its theological appropriation in the life of the church, and/or to have short-circuited the hermeneutical process by going too directly from the text of the Bible to contemporary ideological affirmations.

Disciples Bible scholars may thus have contributed to creating a gap between critical study of the Bible and its theological appropriation in the life of the church.

Pastor: Pastors have sometimes been caught in the middle of this spectrum. They may be personally attracted to the critical approaches learned in seminary. They have accepted critical methods and

conclusions, but have not become adept at using them in a church context. This sometimes means that they revert to low profile use of critical methods and conclusions, to a basically pre-critical approach. It sometimes happens that pastors have lost their critical naiveté in seminary, cannot honestly revert to a pre-critical approach, with the result that the Bible is displaced from the center of attention in preaching and teaching. Preaching then becomes the propagation of contemporary ideologies, using the Bible as a "resource" or as tangential illustrations for contemporary points of view. In my opinion, the Bible no longer functions as canon when it is so used.

2.2.2 Variety within each group

There is, of course, a fairly broad spectrum within each group of Disciples mentioned above. None of the above should be taken as generalizations. "All generalizations are untrue, including this one." I know of no general statements that would accurately represent the approach to the Bible of all Disciples, whether they be laypersons, professors, or pastors. Yet the historical process that has contributed to this not altogether wholesome situation among Disciples might be observed by other streams of the Stone-Campbell movement; there are lessons to be learned and paths to be avoided.

2.3 Disciples acknowledge there is a difference between being addressed by the Word of God that comes through the Bible and understanding the biblical text.

This is an experienced reality: we can be addressed, even in a life-saving way, by words and sentences we do not understand or misunderstand. In Bologna, Italy, I once almost stepped off the curb into the street in front of an oncoming truck. An Italian gas-station attendant saw what was happening, yelled at me; I stepped back, and was saved. I do not understand Italian, and don't know what he said. I was addressed, spoken to, by what he said, though I cannot supply any conceptual content to what he said (I can well imagine, but that's beside the point). The point is, we are all addressed by words we don't understand, even if we think we do (i.e. we misunderstand them). We can be deeply moved and changed by words in another language we don't understand. We can be addressed, deeply moved, even changed, by the music and dialogue in an op-

era even if we don't understand or misunderstand the Italian. When the Roman Catholic mass was in Italian, millions of Christians were addressed by, and their lives were changed by, the liturgy they could not conceptually understand. We can all have that experience by worshipping in a Christian congregation that does not speak our language(s). We should all be grateful that our encounter with God through Holy Scripture does not depend on a right understanding of its meaning. God can speak through a bad interpretation, a bad sermon that misunderstands the meaning of the text it attempts to interpret, a misunderstanding of a text in a church school class or a conversation. Otherwise, we must either claim that our interpretations are correct, or that God does not speak through them. I think all of us in this dialogue more or less agree that God does not wait on our getting out exegesis and hermeneutic straight before encountering us in the Bible.

But the Word of God is not only the encounter with the living God through the medium of Scripture; it involves understanding.⁶ We Disciples have always argued for a reasonable faith, have always tried to understand as much and as well as we can, have not wanted to use our fallible human intellect or the relativity of all interpretations as excuses for failing to think as hard, as deeply, and as honestly as we can. While address and understanding are distinguishable, understanding, and not only address, is important.

The point is, we are all addressed by words we don't understand, even if we think we do.

2.4 Disciples interpret Bible in context (cf above illustration from Rom 14-16).

2.4.1 Literary context

Understanding each text in the context of the document as a whole is important for Disciples interpretation. Analogously, it is important to understand each book of the Bible in the context of the Bible as a whole, of which Christ is the center.⁷ Thus "literary context" becomes Christocentric interpretation.

2.4.2 Historical context

The two fundamental principles in understanding the Bible are as follows:

1. *Nothing in the Bible was written to us.* Just as Romans was written to the Romans, so everything in the Bible was written to someone else.
2. *Everything in the Bible was written to us.* We do not study the Bible as a matter of historical or literary interest, but as the church's Scripture. We belong to the church, the ongoing people of God in continuity with the biblical communities of faith to which all of Scripture was addressed.

The two fundamental principles in understanding the Bible are as follows:

- 1) Nothing in the Bible was written to us.*
 - 2) Everything in the Bible was written to us.*
-

The juxtaposing of these two affirmations is not a matter of being cute, but expresses something at the heart of Disciples hermeneutics. Yet how to negotiate the distance between "what it meant" and "what it means" is a matter of ongoing discussion.

2.5 Disciples biblical interpretation generally accepts the historical-critical method and its results. Many other methods are now employed, but these are not a rejection of historical criticism.

Many Disciples would see the kind of historical criticism that developed after Campbell's time as the extension of his famous "Rule 1": "On opening any book in the sacred Scriptures, consider first the historical circumstances of the book. These are the order, the title, the author, the date, the place, and the occasion of it." An interpretation of Rom 14 above, for instance, would involve critical judgments about the "historical circumstances" to which Romans was addressed, whether the different instructions in chapter 16 are part of the same letter, and whether Colossians was written by Paul himself or a later Paulinist. Disciples scholars share the same general spectrum of opinions on such issues as critical academic biblical scholarship generally. These are represented, for example in

*How to negotiate the distance between “what it meant” and “what it means”
is a matter of ongoing discussion.*

Dennis E. Smith, ed., *Chalice Introduction to the New Testament* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), a cooperative work by ten Disciples scholars, and by M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004).

2.6 Disciples biblical interpretation is ecumenical.

Disciples, at the level of professor, pastor, or pew, do not generally ask whether the author of interpretative materials they are using are written by Disciples or not, but draw from the scholarship of the whole church, often unaware or unconcerned about the denominational connections of the author.

2.7 Disciples biblical interpretation is unaware of or uninterested in “restoring the New Testament church,” in the sense of pattern restorationism, as an approach or motivation to study of the Bible.

The language of “restoration” is not typically found in Disciples discussions of the Bible. It is not the case that Disciples’ interpreters have abandoned restorationism; most have never had it as an approach to Scripture in the first place. Most lay-people are unaware of the term and its connotations, especially the large element in Disciples congregations that have come from other denominations. Disciples pastors and professors are aware of the restoration approach from their studies of Disciples history, but for most, restorationism is not a live option in their own approach to Scripture. The role once played in our history by the term “restoration” has often been interpreted in terms of “apostolicity.” Disciples who are attuned to their history as integral to the “one holy catholic apostolic” church of the Nicene Creed are aware of the definitive role of the Bible as mediating the apostolic faith. The Bible is studied as a normative witness to the apostolic faith, but not typically with the goal of “restoring the New Testament church.”

2.8 The Bible is interpreted alongside tradition and in relation to it, within a tradition of which many Disciples are unaware.

Disciples are generally at least vaguely aware of the whole church and its history, and consider themselves a part of the one church of Jesus Christ that has existed through the centuries and around the world, and the spectrum of tradition that has been an aid in interpreting the Bible. There is little of the “Bible-versus-human-tradition” perspective still viable among us, and often a heartfelt need to recover and revitalize both our biblical study and our appropriation of the classical Christian tradition.

A part of Disciples’ tradition is that Disciples are somewhat suspicious of experts.

On the other hand, a part of Disciples’ tradition is that Disciples are somewhat suspicious of experts, and tend to have a populist confidence in the abilities of the “ordinary Christian” to read and understand the Bible. Such statements as “We have freedom to study Bible for ourselves” and “nobody can tell me what it has to mean” are not uncommon in Disciples circles at all levels. There is sometimes a tendency to see other church groups, including not only Roman Catholics but various denominations that have creeds and catechisms, as well as the CC/CC and CC as restrictive and somewhat dogmatic, “telling people what they have to believe.”

2.9 Disciples interpret the Bible with respect, but often without a clear understanding of authority and/or inspiration.

This does not mean that Disciples do not believe in the authority of the Bible (which in any case is not a yes/no question), but tend see authority and interpretation as so closely related to each other (see above) that Disciples’ discussions are more likely to revolve around interpretation than authority. Disciples affirm God as the ultimate authority, but do

*All of us will, in ways that will continue to have some important differences,
take the Bible with utmost seriousness.*

not always have the same ideas about how the authority of God is mediated through the Bible.

“Inspiration of the Bible” is not a common topic in Disciples circles. Disciples do have a wholesome understanding and affirmation of the role of the Holy Spirit in the formation of the early church. This includes the writing of early Christian literature and the sorting out of authentic witnesses to the meaning of the faith from inauthentic ones (the process of formation of the canon), and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church, including interpretation of the Bible. Disciples would tend to subsume “inspiration of the Bible” within the major category of the work of the Spirit of God in the formation and life of the church as a whole, rather than having a specific doctrine focused on the book itself.

CONCLUSION

We can encounter the Bible as word of God whether or not we agree on its interpretation and meaning. When we disagree on interpretation, we should not

accuse each other of not accepting the Bible’s authority.

As a biblical people, the study of the Bible together will necessarily play a role in drawing closer together the various streams of the church represented in the Stone–Campbell movement. Given who we are, the Bible cannot be left out of the conversation. Studying specific texts of the Bible together may be more important in our conversation than discussing authority and interpretation in the abstract.

All of us will, in ways that will continue to have some important differences, take the Bible with utmost seriousness.

But in our dialogue with the Bible and each other, we will have to make practical decisions about faith, church, Christian life, in a way that we must take responsibility for, in a way that cannot be read off the surface of the pages of the Bible. In dialogue with the Bible, we will attempt to discern the will of God for our own time (Rom 12:1–2). This itself would be a “Disciple approach to biblical interpretation.”

Notes

- 1 Cf. e.g. Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* (Translated by Michael Steinhauser; edited by Marshall D. Johnson. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).
- 2 This text itself, of course, is not only obscure but textually uncertain; cf. the standard commentaries.
- 3 I recall, many years ago, attending a rally that included folk across the spectrum of the Stone-Campbell movement, and this motto was taken very seriously. The only problem was deciding what *were* matters of “faith” and what *were* matters of “opinion.” One minister rose to speak and unabashedly declared, “In my opinion, matters of faith are as follows, and proceeded to itemize them.” The problem of this approach to Christian unity persists. Who gets to decide what are matters of faith and what are matters of opinion?
- 4 Note the number of biblical passages in Rom 9-II that form the basis for Paul’s understanding, the key to which he believed had been given as a revelation of the mystery (II:25).
- 5 Most readers will recognize the final item in Alexander Campbell’s “Seven Rules of Biblical Interpretation,” which he published several times. The following is from p. 6 of *The Christian System in Reference to the Union of Christians, and a Restoration of Primitive Christianity, as Pleaded in the Current Reformation* (First published 1835 as “Christianity Restored”; 1939 in Pittsburgh as *The Christian System* by Forrester & Campbell):
 “Rule 7. For the salutary and sanctifying intelligence of the Oracles of God, the following rule is indispensable: *We must come within the understanding distance.*
 There is a distance which is properly called the speaking distance, or the hearing distance; beyond which the voice reaches not, and the ear hears not. To hear another, we must come within that circle which the voice audibly fills.
 Now we may with propriety say, that as it respects God, there is an understanding distance. All beyond that distance cannot understand God; all within it, can easily understand him in all matters of piety and morality. God himself, is the center of that circle, and humility is its circumference.” (p. 6)
- 6 Amos N. Wilder. “The Word as Address and the Word as Meaning,” in James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr. (eds.) *The New Hermeneutic* (New Frontiers in Theology 2. New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, 1964) 198-218.
- 7 Many Disciples would subscribe to the outline of biblical theology derived from our Reformed historical roots and recently summarized in e.g. M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock, *The People’s New Testament Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004) 595-96 on Eph 1:10: Creation/ Covenant/ Christ/ Church/ Consummation, which I have proposed as a needed contemporary “five-finger exercise.” See also my *Disciples and the Bible: A History of Disciples’ Biblical Interpretation in North America* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1997) 441-45.

