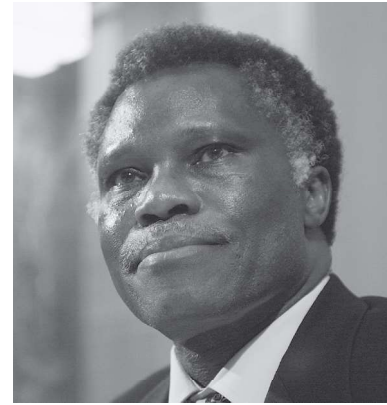


Global Challenges to North American Christians

Samuel Kobia

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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.

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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

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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

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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.

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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-racking 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.

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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.

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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).