

The Challenges of Mission-Shaped Ecumenism

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I am very glad to be with you at the 2013 National Forum for at least two reasons. First, I have had contact with the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) and its predecessor body for nearly thirty years, having given the keynote address at the assembly of the Australian Council of Churches in 1984. (It makes me feel older than I think I am just to say that!) Such persons as Jean Skuse and David Gill have been friends during these three decades, and I am pleased to renew this association.

But, second, I also appreciate what the NCCA has become, including your very interesting and promising process of covenanting, and am anxious to learn more about it. Beyond that, your current General Secretary, Tara Curlewis, has become a good friend and colleague in conciliar ecumenism. As I hope you know, she represents you very effectively at meetings of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and in other ecumenical settings; and it is a joy for me to experience her leadership on her home turf.

And so, I begin with a prayer of thanksgiving for the ministry God has done through your churches in this council, and with a prayer of petition that God will use our time together to build up the body of Christ in this part of God's creation.

I want to offer one other personal word of appreciation—for Bishop Michael Putney. I met Bishop Putney—Michael—when he was at the Gregorian University in Rome, writing his doctoral dissertation on “The Presence and Activity of the Holy Spirit in the Church in the Studies of Faith and Order,” and I was a new member of the Faith and Order staff in Geneva. In fact, he graciously mentions that I was of help to him in the acknowledgements.

In the conclusion of his dissertation, Michael points toward the sometimes tortuous, but nonetheless tremendous, convergence of the churches on matters of doctrine as a sign of the Spirit's work in our midst. But “now ... the time has come,” he writes, “to ask why minor ‘miracles’ [i.e., the various doctrinal agreements] have not become major ones of reconciliation.”

And so, my second prayer of thanksgiving is for Michael and his ministry, including his leadership in the NCCA. May God's comforting presence be with him in these days. And may we respond to his challenge by following where the reconciling Spirit would lead us.

And let all the people say, “Amen!”

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I like the theme for this Forum—"Mission Shaped Ecumenism"—although I am not exactly sure what it means. As you know, the ecumenical movement, to a large extent, grew out of the missionary movement of the nineteenth century; but what we mean by "mission" has been a point of real contention among churches for at least the past sixty-five years. For some, mission-shaped ecumenism likely means a collaborative effort to evangelize the world. For others, it likely means a concerted response to human need and injustice.

We will return to this tension in a minute, but I think we can reach a tentative understanding of the theme without resolving it. At a meeting last year of the NCCA Executive Committee, Archbishop Jeffrey Driver argued that "if ecumenism in Australia is to find new energy, ... it will be at the missional edge, where the church engages the world" This suggests less focus on the church's internal divisions—sacraments, authority, ministry, confession of faith—and more focus on cooperative activity in, with, and for the broader Australian society and the world beyond. I feel certain, even without knowing him, that Archbishop Driver does not regard an internal focus and an external focus as either-or; but he is clearly saying that the priority for ecumenical communities, such as this one, should be on programs and actions that look outward in service, advocacy, and witness. That is what gives energy for our common life.

If this is what is generally meant by "mission-shaped ecumenism," then, indeed, I appreciate the theme. Among other things, it can be an antidote to the individualistic spirituality that is so prevalent in our era. Mission is the outward movement of the church; and mission-shaped ecumenism is the outward movement of the churches together. This theme, however, also raises a number of questions, poses a number of challenges, that, it seems to me, ought to be named as we begin this National Forum. A good theme is one that invites deeper reflection, and my hope is to initiate such reflection by introducing four of these challenges.

1. The meaning of mission. Over the past hundred years, churches involved in the ecumenical movement have undergone a remarkable shift in thinking about mission. For example, we now agree that mission is a two-way street. Churches in Australia or the United States receive gifts from sisters and brothers in the Congo or Papua New Guinea, even as we share with them what we have received from God. Behind this is the realization (still resisted by many in our societies) that western culture—home to horrific violence, enduring racism, massive pollution, and vast disparities of wealth—has no claim to moral or spiritual superiority. This is hardly news to indigenous communities in either of our nations.

Another shift has been the affirmation that mission is the responsibility of the whole church, not just specialized agencies to which congregations give dollars. The most significant change, however, is the now-widespread affirmation that mission starts with God, not the church. The purpose of mission is not just the spread of the church but participation in all that God is doing—which, if scripture is our guide, includes opposing

those forces that make for poverty and war. But it is precisely this claim that has led to division in the church, since evangelical Christians often contend that broadening the definition of mission to encompass social transformation has devalued the importance of evangelism aimed at bringing people to Christ. Mission-shaped ecumenism that is truly ecumenical will not ignore this deeply-theological tension.

The current state of interchurch discussion about mission was vividly on display at the WCC-sponsored World Conference on Mission and Evangelism, held in Athens in 2005. Much thinking about mission over the past two generations, at least in WCC circles, has centered on the theme of liberation, active engagement on behalf of justice. In Athens, while liberation was not ignored, the real focus was on reconciliation, which implies involvement with perpetrators as well as victims and reconstruction of societies on the other side of oppression. The church, said various speakers, is called beyond political action to participation in the healing ministry of God. Its mission should be to foster the sort of tough-minded forgiveness (not forgetfulness) that makes a different future possible.

This emphasis seems to ring true in South Africa in the aftermath of apartheid, in Rwanda in the aftermath of genocide, and in Eastern Europe in the aftermath of the Cold War. But what about in the U.S. and Australia? Many ecumenically-engaged Christians in my setting feel a responsibility to confront a government bent on military response to threats, corporations apparently inattentive to the human cost of their decisions, and a society captive to the idolatry of consumption. Is reconciliation really the right mission paradigm for us?

Athens was also the first WCC-related mission conference to include a large number of representatives from Pentecostal and evangelical churches. This presence, which was by no means marginal, made the conference more “ecumenical,” if by this we mean theologically inclusive, but it also altered the agenda in that interfaith relations did not figure in the theme or plenary presentations, and was the subject of only one workshop. For many of us, I suspect, participation in God’s mission of protecting the environment or confronting racism or welcoming refugees demands collaboration with interfaith neighbors. As many of us see it, Muslims and Hindus are not objects of conversion but partners in God’s work of making peace and serving the needy. Since the agenda of God’s mission is too big for any single faith community, doing mission with people of other faiths is not only expedient but faithful.

So, my first point: Mission-shaped ecumenism will need to wrestle with what is meant by “mission.” It is a significant challenge.

2. The relationship between unity and mission. Modern ecumenism may owe its existence to the missionary movement, but its distinctive vision emerged with the recognition that the mission of the church and the unity of the church belong together. The WCC is an embodied expression of this vision in that it represents, as you probably know, an integration of Faith and Order, Life and Work, and the International Missionary Council—an integration that is echoed in the NCCA. Listen again to this well-

known definition from the WCC's Central Committee in 1951: "[The word ecumenical] is properly used to describe everything that relates to the whole task of the whole Church to bring the Gospel to the whole world. It therefore covers equally the missionary movement and the movement toward unity, and must not be used to describe one in contradistinction to the other." "We are concerned," said the delegates to the Council's assembly in 1954, "with the peace and unity of all [hu]mankind, but what greater hope there would be if only our Christian unity were achieved, a unity transcending the ethnic and racial differences of all believers."

The point is not simply that the unity of the church would make mission more efficient, but that unity is an indispensable dimension of such mission. The church doesn't just campaign for peace and justice; it must demonstrate peace and justice in the way its members live with one another. The church doesn't just proclaim Jesus Christ; it must visibly witness to him through the quality of its life as a community. Otherwise, the credibility of the message is undercut by the non-credibility of the messengers.

So the first part of this challenge is to insist that the relationship between unity and mission must be maintained. The church cannot be defined only by what it does (its service) or by what it says (its evangelism), but also by what it is (the character of our life together). The temptation of mission-shaped ecumenism will be to focus on the doing of the church to the neglect of its being—and this would surely be an impoverishment.

This challenge, however, goes even deeper. It used to be a truism of the ecumenical movement that "doctrine divides, but service unites." If Christians would just agree to do mission together, to bracket the polarizing theological debates of Faith and Order, the movement could actually move! We now realize that this axiom, first articulated at the 1925 conference on Life and Work, may be backwards. "Now, after many years of patient painstaking work," argued Jürgen Moltmann as early as 1977, "it would be true to say 'theology unites, praxis divides.'" Controversy in the ecumenical movement no longer centers on the Filioque, but concerns instead the Program to Combat Racism."

Let's expand this point. In recent decades, theological dialogues, both bilateral and multilateral, have reached once-unthinkable convergence on such topics as baptism and eucharist, the two natures of Christ, the nature and purpose of the church, the relationship of scripture and Tradition, the doctrine of justification, and the meaning of Christian hope. Meanwhile, the same churches whose theologians are busy clearing the decks of Patristic-era and Reformation-era divisions are experiencing new ones with regard to such issues as human sexuality and the need for military security in the face of terrorism. This past academic quarter, I taught a course on "Theology in an Ecumenical Context" to a class of eight Protestants and eight Roman Catholics. One of their assignments was to produce a common statement in mixed groups of four on poverty and how the church should address it. The students thought this was a piece of cake—until they ran head-on into the question of population control and different understandings of the role of government in stimulating the economy!

I don't dispute the claim that the ecumenical movement may gain new energy from its engagement with the world. But please don't think for a minute that this is because the issues will be easier, less divisive! There is no end to the challenges for mission-based ecumenism that takes unity seriously.

3. The relationship of church and world. "It seems to me," said the WCC's first General Secretary, Willem Visser't Hooft, at the Council's assembly in 1968, "that the ... ecumenical movement has entered into a period of reaping an astonishingly rich harvest, but ... precisely at this moment the movement is more seriously called into question than ever before. And once again the basic issue is that of the relation between the church and the world." His point is not just that churches disagree on whether and how to support particular causes. They disagree on how affirming the church should be of the world. It is commonplace to say that the church is in the world, but not of it. But how "in it" should the church be? How closely identified should the church be with social movements and developments?

Closely related is the question: To what extent can we read God's presence in secular history and culture? Once again, my recent course on "Theology in an Ecumenical Context" was a case study. For example, we read an essay by Wonsuk Ma, a Korean Pentecostal missionary and theologian, in which Dr. Ma contends that "the human race has made amazing progress in every aspect of human life, particularly in the past one hundred years." In this way, he declares, God is revealing his plan for all creation and inviting the church to join in this journey of divine restoration. The general reaction was summed up by the student who wondered "What planet is he living on?!" As most of my students see it, the world is fundamentally out of sync with the values of the Reign of God, and the problem with the church is precisely that it is co-opted by the same forces that dominate human society to the detriment of those excluded from privilege and power.

Interestingly, one of the most popular books I assigned all quarter was For the Life of the World, in which the Orthodox theologian, Alexander Schmemmann, argues for a "eucharistic" understanding of creation—even though his position calls into question the kind of activism practiced in many of their denominations. A movement that focuses on the "missional edge, where the church engages the world" will avoid such theological conversation to its detriment.

Let me come at this from a slightly different direction. The ecumenical movement, in addition to the themes of unity and mission, has always been understood as a movement for renewal. Ecumenical leaders once talked about the church being renewed through a sharing of gifts (i.e., through communion with one another) in order to be a renewing force in society. In the past two generations, the emphasis has been reversed: engagement with the world, through which the church might experience its own renewal. I wish, for example, that the church had been ahead of the curve when it comes to justice for women; but you know as well as I that it has been through participation in social movements that the church has been prompted to include women more fully in its own leadership. The real point I am making, however, is not that one paradigm (God-church-world or God-world-church) is preferable to the other, but that

church and world are symbiotic concepts. They exist in necessary tension, a tension with which mission-shaped ecumenism must continually wrestle.

Conversations with Australian friends lead me to add a footnote. It is trendy today to bash the church—and, God knows, members of the church are too often intolerant, abusive, and unattuned to the major issues of the day—not to mention fragmented. It seems to me, however, that anyone with a realistic anthropology will hardly be surprised at the church's brokenness (or, for that matter, the brokenness of the world). And surely there are moments when, thanks to the Holy Spirit, the church fulfills its biblical calling to be a sign, instrument, and foretaste of God's purpose for human society. I have experienced such moments in my own local community, as I suspect you have in yours, as well as in the ecumenical movement. Let us not give up on the church.

4. The tensions inherent in doing mission as a council of churches. I need to begin this section of my presentation by stressing that the essence of any council of churches is the relationship of the churches to one another. The NCCA, understood theologically, is not simply an organization your churches have joined; it is the expression of a commitment they have made to one another to make visible the unity that is ours in Christ and to engage in common witness, proclamation, and service (i.e., mission).

I will note, parenthetically, that the language of the NCCA's website is ambiguous on this point. The "Brief History" says—appropriately, in my judgment—that "the NCCA is its nineteen member churches in their commitment to each other," a commitment expressed in your various covenants; but the statement above it, taken from the Council's Constitution, contends that "the NCCA gathers together in pilgrimage those churches and Christian communities which confess Jesus Christ as God and Saviour"—as if the Council were a body alongside of, apart from, the churches themselves. The reason this is so important is that this latter perspective makes it easy to evade the accountability that goes with conciliar membership, to talk about "that council" rather than "our fellowship."

The other side of this coin, however, is that a council compromises its essence when, for the sake of moving quickly, it overrides the wishes of minority members. Let's be honest. It is always easier to do advocacy through a coalition approach, which seeks common cause with like-minded partners, than through a conciliar approach, which seeks consensus within a community of divergent perspectives. Being part of an ecumenical community demands that we value the others for their life in Christ, not the size of their resources. And it demands that each church be concerned with the mission priorities of others, that their perspectives be taken fully into account. Needless to say, this complicates the already-difficult task of public advocacy!

This is one tension inherent in mission-shaped ecumenism carried out in the context of a council of churches—especially when such mission takes the form, as it often does, of advocacy. I can think of about a hundred others from my time as General Secretary of the National Council in my country, but I will focus on four:

One, related to what I have just been saying, is the need for the social witness of councils of churches to reflect the will of their members, while also prophetically challenging the churches to live out the full calling of the gospel. I like the way Visser't Hooft once put it. The WCC, he wrote, "has a special responsibility to maintain the fellowship between its member churches, for the achievement of this fellowship [with all its tensions] is the real raison d'être of the World Council But it is a fellowship based on common convictions and called to common witness. An important element in the very substance of our fellowship is what we have hammered out together in our assemblies ..."—and this includes a common commitment to promote peace with justice, a common commitment to combat racism and sexism, and a shared preferential option for the poor. It is not Tara's job to press an advocacy agenda on your churches; but it is precisely her job to push them to enact the implications of decisions they have made together. The fellowship experienced in the NCCA is not only rooted in what your churches are, but in what they are called to become.

As I am sure you are aware, church representatives at gatherings such as this one are notorious for voting to take pioneering advocacy positions that their own churches aren't yet ready to take—which complicates the picture! Sometimes this has positive result. For example, early opposition to the 2003 war in Iraq on the part of the NCC seemed to prod several U.S. churches to take a stronger stand on behalf of peace. But, of course, a council speaks with authority to the wider society only when people in the pews, not just their leaders, say "Amen."

Another tension for mission-shaped conciliar ecumenism is the need, on the one hand, for focused attention to particular advocacy priorities, and the need, on the other, for advocacy that integrates multiple themes, that sees our particular and immediate problems in wider context. To take one example, as General Secretary I spent a good deal of time arguing, in line with NCC policy statements, that quality public education for all is a justice issue. But, of course, we cannot simply focus on education alone since, at least in the U.S., a large part of the problem is inequitable funding based on patterns of race and class.

I came quickly to appreciate the need to be very specific if my advocacy efforts on behalf of the churches were to bear fruit. For example, in repeated conversations with Jewish colleagues, including several with the Israeli ambassador to the United States, I stressed three concerns related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—the revocation of the residence permits of Jerusalemites who study or work abroad, the separation of Palestinian families when husband and wife have different residence permits or one is an Israeli citizen, and the delay in approving building permits in Palestinian areas—because on these I saw some possibility of positive outcome. If this were all the NCC did or said, however, it would mask the even deeper issue of Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, with all the suffering and injustice that has entailed. Focused attention and attention to the broader picture.

A related dilemma is that the NCC—like other councils, I fear—has often dissipated its energy and resources on an almost-endless list of causes (running the danger of what a

former leader of the British Council of Churches called “omnipotent mediocrity”), in part because its members have different priorities. How can a council take seriously the mission concerns of very diverse members and, at the same time, stay focused on overriding issues of the day?

Yet another, closely related, tension is the need to respond with appropriate urgency to crises of the moment and the equally urgent need for long-term formation so that advocacy grows from the churches’ very identity. In the United States, in my experience, our churches seem to discover issues with an evangelical zeal (e.g., gun control in the aftermath of a mass shooting), but often retain only short-term commitment because they are missing long-term formation. Audrey Chapman, a former mission executive for the United Church of Christ, makes the case powerfully in her book, Faith, Power and Politics. “In the absence of shared understandings about identity and vocation,” she writes, “... political ministry tends to be unfocused and diffuse, lacking explicit theological grounding and sustained membership support and involvement. Political witness tends to become a specialized mission activity undertaken primarily by national agencies ... on behalf of the denominations, rather than an expression of the community’s faith journey.” I understand full well that things like climate change will not wait for long-term education, but surely such education—about the biblical call to care for the environment, about the extent of the earth’s degradation as a result of human activity—must accompany our efforts at immediate response.

An even more profound tension that goes with mission-shaped conciliar ecumenism can be summed up in the term “hopeful realism”—realistic assessment of our social situation coupled with a willingness to imagine and proclaim alternative realities based on the gospel. On the one hand, councils of churches have often responded to war or discrimination or environmental destruction with idealized slogans and utopian pronouncements. On the other hand, the NCC, to take the example I know best, has often been reactive to the world’s agenda, promoting reforms that, while important, leave the underlying status quo basically untouched.

This is tough. Was the WCC correct, at its 1991 assembly in Canberra, to call for a return of Australian sovereignty to the Aboriginal people, or would it have been more useful to focus on land rights and passage of the Native Title Act? As I see it, American ecumenical leaders dare not stop pushing for laws to reduce gun violence or raises in the minimum wage or programs of recycling or reduction in military spending or passage of less-than-ideal immigration reform legislation. These are realistic steps that have some promise of success. But they are also tweaks of the system that stop far short of a truly prophetic witness which engenders hope for a different way of living in human society. Again, I agree the way Chapman puts it: “Our churches seem limited to recommending incremental policy changes that differ little from secular political actions.” What is often missing, in her words, “is a compelling religious vision, a sense of the ‘now’ and the ‘not yet’ of God’s Kingdom that challenges and opposes the injustices of the dominant reality by invoking God’s peace and justice.”

Hopeful realism. We cannot eradicate evil. The conceit of such utopianism has itself been the fuel of countless tyrannies; and a focus on the perfect can indeed be the enemy of getting good things done. But we also dare not allow those responsible for present systems of injustice to define what is possible, because we are followers of One whose promise is not just for another world but for this world made over.

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I hope these reflections on mission-shaped ecumenism, drawn from my study of the ecumenical movement as well as my work with councils of churches, have been useful. I cannot, of course, say with confidence that they apply to the Australian context or to the NCCA; but I trust they are close enough to generate at least some conversation.

I will end by naming one more tension, the most important of all: God's initiative and our human response. The gravest danger for mission-shaped ecumenism may be an over-emphasis on what we accomplish. Human effort is obviously of great importance; but, seen in faith perspective, such effort is understood as response to what God has done, is doing, and will do—as participation in God's mission. Getting this straight, in my experience, has very practical benefits. It is a check against self-righteousness. It is a spur to working with others. It is the foundation for deep hopefulness. And it is a reminder to ground all that we do in study of scripture and in prayer. One of the things that has undermined the NCC's social witness in recent years is inadequate theological and biblical foundation, which is usually a sign that we are pushing an ideological agenda rather than opening ourselves to genuine wrestling with how we best participate in God's mission.

To put it another way, mission is not an anxious effort to create a better world, but a testimony to our faith in God's redemptive power and healing purpose. "An activist," Henri Nouwen once wrote, "wants to heal, restore, redeem, and recreate, but those acting within the house of God point through their action to the healing, restoring, redeeming, and recreating presence of God." In the same way, ecumenism is not an anxious effort to fashion a united church, but a testimony to our conviction that we already belong to one another thanks to what God has done in Christ to tear down our self-imposed walls of hostility. Mission-shaped ecumenism begins and ends with the One who gathers us together and sends us out. And for this we say, "Thanks be to God!"

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