

A Report from the Front Lines of a Movement Under Siege

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I recently had the joy of being with my thirty-year-old daughter, Anna, who lives in Kansas City. Seeing her brought back the memory of a time I was preparing to travel somewhere and Anna, who was then four or five, asked where I was going. I told her. “What are you going to tell ‘em?” “I’m going to talk about how Christians are related to each other because we all love Jesus, and how our churches should be less divided.” “Well,” she said, “I could tell ‘em that!”

I start this way to remind us that the idea behind ecumenism is not all that complex. The first assembly of the World Council of Churches put it this way: “Christ has made us his own, and Christ is not divided.” The goal of the ecumenical movement is not to create church unity; such unity is a gift of God. The goal, rather, is to help the churches be what they are—the one body of Christ. Because if Christians lived as a visibly reconciled people, it would be the most powerful witness possible to God’s reconciling grace, and greatly strengthen our capacity to serve as an agent of that grace in the world. Conversely, the way Christians so often live—treating other churches with neglect and indifference, reinforcing the class and racial lines of the wider society, ignoring our connection to Christians in other parts of the world, unable to break bread together or recognize one another’s ministers—is nothing less than a counter-testimony to the gospel.

The purpose of this presentation is to report on the state of this movement for Christian unity, at least as I see it from my location in the United States. I have been deeply involved in ecumenism—locally, nationally, and globally—for more than thirty years; but the focus of my work over the past decade has been the National Council of Churches in the U.S. And so, that is the lens through which these remarks are filtered.

I want to thank Ray Williamson for the invitation to be here, and also for his faithful and effective efforts to teach the ecumenical vision in Australia and New Zealand. For all of the ministry that God has accomplished through him, let us say “Thanks be to God!”

Ray proposed that I talk about the future of ecumenism, but since this is a topic that is bound to make one generation’s speaker look foolish in the next, I will begin with the far safer work of diagnosis before offering a couple of tentative suggestions with regard to remedy. Actually, diagnosing present challenges is not an insignificant task. If we can accurately name contemporary strengths and weaknesses, we should be in a better position to identify future direction. That at least is my hope (and I’m sticking with it!).

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It would not be right to give such a report without stressing that ecumenism occupies a prominent place in the history of the church in the twentieth century. “The ecumenical movement,” writes the British theologian, Paul Avis,

has not simply replaced suspicion, incomprehension and rivalry with understanding, trust and friendship—though in itself that is no mean achievement. In the form of theological dialogue, ecumenism has also significantly scaled down the extent of church-dividing issues between Christian traditions...[and] has established that there is “a certain, albeit imperfect, communion” between churches that are not yet in full communion.

Think back sixty years to the state of Catholic-Protestant relations and give thanks for what the Spirit has done through this movement!

In the form of councils of churches, the movement has been the setting within which previously-competing denominations pray for and with one another; bear common witness to Jesus Christ, instead of only recruiting for their “brand” of Christianity; join in concerted action against racism, war, and economic oppression; and engage in shared service on behalf of those in need.

Even where closer structured relationship has proved difficult, churches have at times been changed through encounter with Christians in other confessions and cultures. To say it another way, churches have been renewed through mutual sharing of the gifts each has received thanks to their distinctive experiences of God’s presence and power. My own denomination, the Disciples of Christ, is an example of how worship has been enriched and understandings of mission have been expanded as a result of relations with other churches through various dialogues. The ecumenical school of theology where I now teach, set within a Jesuit university, is an example of how ministerial education is enriched when multiple Christian traditions are brought intentionally together. It is my hope that this kind of theological education will be central to ecumenism’s future. Speaking personally, I have continued to be involved in the movement because, like many other Christians, I long for a church better than the one I see around us—and ecumenism is a way of possible renewal.

It seems increasingly unlikely, however, that this ecumenical impulse, at least in its past forms, will figure prominently in the history of the church in this century. Two months ago, I met with the editorial staff of the well-known magazine, The Christian Century, for what they termed a “background conversation.” “But I must tell you,” editor David Heim said at the outset, “that we no longer use the term ‘ecumenical’ if we can avoid it. Readers just aren’t interested.” New York Times columnist, Ross Douthat, speaks for many outside observers when he writes that the ecumenical movement has borne real theological fruit, “but what began as a daring experiment has decayed into bureaucratized complacency—a dull round of interdenominational statements...only tenuously connected to the gospel.”

There is truth in this indictment, but let's nuance it. Any report from the front lines must take note of the extensive split between two sets of ecumenical priorities—to the point that it is difficult to speak of one ecumenical movement. In the U.S., this split becomes very visible each spring in the different constituencies that attend two of our major interchurch events: Ecumenical Advocacy Days and the National Workshop on Christian Unity. (You can guess what goes on at each from the titles.) In my experience, most Advocacy Days participants argue that the fundamental divide in human community is between rich and poor, oppressor and oppressed; and the basic division in the church has to do with how Christians respond to and participate in these divisions of the world. They use language like “unity in solidarity” and focus, not an agreed statements of faith or common structures, but on a shared willingness to act together in response to human need.

By contrast, those who attend the National Workshop generally contend that the church would serve the human community best if it were to live more fully as the church God wills—confessing Christ together, sharing the eucharistic meal, recognizing the baptisms and ordinations performed in other parts of the body, having a structure that allows, when needed, for common decision making. Addressing these areas of division is, therefore, the highest ecumenical priority and the basis for authentic Christian witness and mission.

Both groups would say they are central to ecumenism in the United States, and, in my experience, there is almost no overlap between them. Indeed, many Advocacy Days participants see Faith and Order-style dialogue as, at best, irrelevant, at worst, detrimental to their efforts, since they have little interest in unity with those who don't share their social-political commitments. For their part, many National Workshop participants have a negative attitude toward political advocacy, viewing it as inherently divisive.

This split, which is certainly not new, is growing and is evident in all sorts of settings. I have been privileged to teach two different years in Indian seminaries where a high percentage of the students are from a Dalit background. When it comes to unity, their deepest bonds are generally with other Dalits, not with non-Dalit Christians who may not share in the struggle against caste oppression. They usually affirm the idea of unity-in-diversity, but not that diversity!

Much of my own writing and editing over the past quarter century has been an attempt to counter this split, to show that the ecumenical vision becomes most profound and the movement most vital when unity and justice are held in creative tension. This is only possible, as I see it, if Christians affirm 1) that the church's unity is a gift of God and not, therefore, constituted by human agreement, and 2) that this gift, which Christians are called to make visible, is also part of the church's eschatological horizon. Because unity is a gift, not a product of our agreement, we can eschew any “cheap unity” that would avoid contentious issues for fear of disruption. It frees us to disagree passionately without breaking fellowship. And because unity is an eschatological calling, Christians should also be prepared to challenge present, partial unities in order to manifest that

deeper, wider communion of God's promise. If ecumenism is to have a future, its proponents will need to address this division more effectively than we have done in the past.

I will add, somewhat parenthetically, that all of this was severely tested when, in 1991, I was nominated by the denominational search committee for the position of General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), a nomination that was ultimately defeated due primarily to my support for the gay and lesbian community. How can you call yourself ecumenical, I was asked more than once (and not just by right-wingers), when your public positions cause such division?

What became clear to me in those stress-filled months is that there are times when Christians must take sides against others who claim the name of Christ. Even in such moments, however, it is essential to recognize that the "them" we oppose are, in some fundamental way, "us." I began to insist, in public presentations, that the church cannot fear controversy or confrontation, because such fear is paralyzing for a commitment to justice; but Christians must also hate division because the story of our faith tells us that we have been linked in communion with persons we might otherwise shun (including those who shun others). Nothing else can testify so powerfully that our trust is in God, not in communities of our devising.

All of these issues neatly converged in the newsletter of an obviously-agitated Disciples pastor in Nebraska. "While it now appears," he wrote, "that Kinnamon himself is not a homosexual, he is an ecumenist"! Well, yes I am. And, thus, if asked whether my deepest source of communal identity is in groups of like-minded gay advocates or in the church with its Nebraska pastors, I will answer, through gritted teeth, "in the church," because it is there that my own pretensions to self-righteousness are challenged and the full import of divine reconciliation is felt. I must not refrain from bearing witness to the gospel as I understand it; but central to that gospel is the new community of Christ in which I am linked with persons I may not like or be like.

This split in the movement is part of my report on weakness in contemporary ecumenism; but the malaise, I have come to see, is more deep-seated. It manifests itself today in a loss of commitment among leaders of our churches to the possibility, to the very idea, of Christian unity. I recently heard the head of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Cardinal Kurt Koch, say that what pains him most is that so many Christians are no longer pained by divisions that Vatican II called "scandalous." "For where the division of the one body of Christ is no longer perceived as an offense and no longer causes pain, there ecumenism ultimately becomes superfluous." In my experience, the great vision of eucharistic fellowship is reduced in the minds of many church leaders to policies of good neighborliness and occasional cooperation that can easily be demoted on the list of ecclesiastical priorities. Even full communion agreements, such as that between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the U.S. Episcopal Church, which I certainly applaud, are often implemented minimally rather than maximally, becoming examples of what the great ecumenist, Albert Outler, scornfully called "ecumenism within the status quo."

What has brought us to this state of affairs? One factor is, ironically, the movement's success in effecting a real, if limited, improvement in interchurch relations, which has lessened the urgency for further advance. We may not be able to share the eucharist or affirm one another's ministries or make much concerted impact on public debates about war or poverty or climate change, but at least we get along! Isn't that enough?!

This sentiment is especially prevalent within mainline churches, once the pillars of ecumenical organizations and dialogues. I don't need to recount how these churches, on both sides of the Pacific, have suffered a decline of resources and influence, and are now faced with internal divisions over issues like homosexuality. And I suppose it shouldn't be surprising that these churches now seem content with occasional cooperation, are less willing to risk new ecumenical ventures, and that we are witnessing a renewed focus on denominational identity. But it is still disturbing to see these churches, after a century of ecumenical life, engaging in a competitive, even predatory, scramble for new members. Generally speaking, ecumenism remains something that they do, when expedient, not something they are as scripturally-grounded communions. Occasional cooperation—yes. Renewal through deeper communion—not so much.

There is no doubt that all of this has soured many would-be ecumenists. I have repeatedly watched seminary students get excited by the products of ecumenical dialogue, of which there is no shortage, only to grow cynical when they grasp the profound lack of reception, lack of change, in our churches. Ecumenism is in crisis, writes Cardinal Koch's predecessor in the Vatican, Walter Kasper, because "there is now much disillusionment at unfulfilled expectations." Karl Rahner once spoke about "the neurotic fear that we might be in agreement"—so that whenever they get close to it, churches raise the ante. This is not lost on new observers. And when expectation outstrips actual accomplishment, energy for the whole effort will be lost.

Another factor in the decline of interest in ecumenism may be the, otherwise laudable, improvement in and emphasis on interfaith relations. Many of my students, again to take them as example, now regard Christian unity as passé, seeing interfaith dialogue as a more relevant alternative. Some acknowledge that the unity of Christians may have seemed important to our ancestors living in a predominantly-Christian society, but the growing religious diversity of our culture has made even eucharistic fellowship seem like a narrow, relatively inconsequential, aspiration. For others, it is simply easier and far more enjoyable to relate to irenic Jews and Muslims than to dogmatic types who also claim the name Christian.

A more profound reason for the loss of commitment to the goal of unity, however, has to do with the post-modern emphasis on particularity. What was once seen as scandalous division is now often regarded as enriching diversity. Of course, diversity isn't diverse apart from its placement in larger wholes (unity and diversity are symbiotic concepts), but this cultural shift has still cast suspicion on the very goal of ecumenism.

Historians point out that the ecumenical movement, for all of its early Orthodox involvement, was a product of modernity, reflective of the same dreams for human unity that gave rise to the United Nations. In its heyday of the 1960s, the movement championed an understanding of unity in which particularity is subordinate to wholeness and there is an appreciation for common structures and theological consensus that transcends local context. The Uniting Church in Australia, a church for which I have deep appreciation, is a product of the period.

Such models now feel, at least to many of our contemporaries, like corporate merger, even like forms of hegemony designed to preserve the power of those who already have it. Ecumenical leaders—most especially the German theologian, Konrad Raiser—have attempted to articulate a post-modern basis for ecumenism. Raiser argues, as I have, that “fellowship does not come into being as a result of individuals joining together on the basis of common commitment, belief, or inclination. The abiding difference of the other is rather a condition for the possibility of relationship and fellowship.” But if ecumenism is to have a vital future, much more work needs to be done on an understanding of Christian unity suited for the twenty-first century.

All of this, of course, has taken a great toll on ecumenical bodies, including the National Council of Churches in my country. You may have heard or read that the Council, faced with grave financial challenges, is in the midst of dramatic reconfiguring. I am willing to talk about these changes if you wish, but for now I want to illustrate the financial challenge by picking on a church family that I actually like a lot—the Orthodox. One quarter of the thirty-six NCC members are Orthodox churches, either Eastern or Oriental. When I became General Secretary at the beginning of 2008, the previous year’s combined contribution from all nine Orthodox members would have kept us open for one hour on January 2. Nearly half of the member communions had contributed nothing at all. I am pleased to report that this percentage improved during my time at the NCC; but, meanwhile, the Presbyterian Church (USA) reduced its undesignated giving by fifty percent in one year, more than offsetting any gains from small churches.

All of this further undercuts fundraising, because it is tough to get individuals or foundations excited about supporting the NCC financially when the overall giving of its members has fallen by two-thirds in the last decade. An understandable concern for survival (I certainly felt it) begins to take precedence over innovative thinking. And financial difficulties lead inevitably to restructuring, which generally means that fewer staff are asked to do the same amount of work.

I mention all of this because financial constraint will surely be a prominent feature of the future ecumenical movement. Focusing on finances, however, is like treating orthopedic symptoms when the real problems are cardiac. The overriding issue for councils of churches, in my experience, is the failure of churches (i.e., church leaders and representatives) to grasp that the essence of any council is the relationship of the member churches to one another, not their relationship to some structure or office. Starting with the WCC’s attempt at self-definition (the Toronto Statement of 1950), conciliar leaders have insisted that a council is not an organization churches join, but a

mutual commitment they make in order to form a fellowship centered on a vision of fuller unity. Whenever churches regard a council of churches as “that organization” rather than “our fellowship,” then conciliar life has been radically misunderstood—and the accountability, including financial, that ought to go with conciliar membership is minimized. Actually, the picture is even more troubling. When councils lose their vision of being provisional communities on the way toward deeper communion, they become service organizations aimed at self-perpetuation. And to the extent this happens, their very existence institutionalizes present divisions.

I will name only one other indication of this fundamental misunderstanding (one that affects every council of which I am aware). Outsiders often assume that meetings of the NCC, with members ranging from Quakers to Greek Orthodox, are filled with theological fireworks—but that is not the case. Rather, the NCC is marked by what Jan Love (a significant leader in the WCC) calls a “polite parallelism” that avoids contentious matters, precluding the possibility of learning from one another or seeking God’s guidance together. If a church cannot ask its partners in the community of the council, “What is your theological basis for ordaining persons who are gay or lesbian?” or “Why have you refrained from joining other churches in public witness for gun control?”, where can such questions be raised? Churches that think only in terms of cooperation will avoid hard questions for the sake of a shallow harmony. Churches that think in terms of mutual commitment will welcome them for the sake of mutual growth and deeper discernment of God’s will. In my judgment, this will be a litmus test for the future health of conciliar ecumenism.

As some of you may know, I decided not to accept the offer of a second term as General Secretary for health reasons. It was also becoming clear to me, however, that I am not the leader needed for this time of upheaval. For one thing, I am too invested in the current movement, perhaps too appreciative of the gains that have been made, to grasp fully the new things God is doing in our midst. Beyond that, I am also very aware of the tensions inherent in any single prescription for renewal. Can the revolution in communications technology bring new vitality to ecumenism? Yes, surely. But the key discipline of the ecumenical movement has been face to face dialogue and relationship building, and I cannot help but lament anything that undermines it. Can new evangelical and Pentecostal partners give fresh energy to the movement? Yes, surely. But, as you’ve heard, I believe that unity is inseparable from social justice, and I know that expanding the table often reduces the range of justice commitments the churches can make together. Can the leadership of young adults foster new ways of thinking and acting ecumenically? Yes, surely. But I am convinced that an orientation to the future must not forget the achievements of the past, lest we spend time reinventing rather than building on what has already been accomplished. Can the growing focus on interfaith relations expand the search for human wholeness that is central to the ecumenical vision? Yes, surely. But the ecumenical movement has been grounded in the conviction that in Christ we have seen God’s decisive work of reconciling love—that the church, the community of Christ’s followers, is called to be an embodied sign of such reconciliation—and I pray we will never back away from this witness.

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Before turning to my (brief) remarks about renewal of this renewal movement, I want to add a footnote. After writing this presentation, I read an article in the June issue of Foreign Affairs by Victor Gaetan, international correspondent for the traditionalist-oriented National Catholic Register, which contends that “Ecumenism...is on the rise, partly in response to secularization...and partly in response to a recent escalation in violence against Christian around the world.” This is a defensible thesis if the focus is on relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches, or on the common cause with regard to the social issues that conservative Roman Catholics find with conservative Protestants. My thesis about a weakening of the movement is accurate, however, with regard to more liberal Protestants and progressive Catholics, precisely the parts of the church that have carried the ecumenical impulse for the past century. It is possible to argue, in other words, that “ecumenism” has a bright future, just not among the churches many of us represent.

I obviously don’t intend to give up on these churches! So let me conclude this report from the front lines by indicating two (maybe three) areas where I see signs of hope, and where my own future work is likely to be concentrated.

First, I intend to spend more time encouraging local expressions of unity, especially ones that involve lay leadership. Histories of the movement often focus on such episcopal leaders as Nathan Söderblom and William Temple; but its lifeblood flowed from the mission fields, the World Sunday School Association, the YMCA and YWCA, the various Bible societies, and the Student Christian Movement—all of which were lay driven. What began, however, as a lay effort to renew the church was eventually domesticated, brought under control by the churches it was intended to reform. “My own personal ecumenical experience,” writes Ernst Lange in his marvelous little book, entitled And Yet It Moves, “was acquired...within the laity and renewal movements, which originally invented the ecumenical movement in the nineteenth century but were then swallowed up and alienated by it as the church institutions took over.” Are the Disciples an ecumenically-oriented denomination? Why, yes, we have an office in Indianapolis just for that purpose.

I give thanks for the work of professional ecumenists; after all, I have been one. But if the movement is to move, it must do so locally and among the laity—a development that may actually be enhanced by the weakening of denominational structures. The Latin American ecumenist and economist, Julio de Santa Ana, a man known for his advocacy on behalf of the poor, ends a recent essay on the future of ecumenism, not with a call for social justice, but by arguing that the challenge of our times is to make ecumenism appealing once again for the educated and activist-minded laity.” Local ecumenical work tends to be more a matter of cooperation than renewal through full sharing of life. Still, there is, in my experience, real energy there for common worship and mission. Sharing stories of what is going on in different settings may encourage others to go and do likewise.

Second, I will try to fan the flame in churches that are just beginning to experience the warmth and light of sustained contact with others. In this regard, I want to end by telling you about my favorite church in the NCC: the Mar Thoma.

The Mar Thoma Church, for those who are not familiar with it, has its roots in the stories of the Apostle Thomas and his arrival on the southwest coast of India in 52 A.D. A portion of this ancient Orthodox community was deeply affected, however, by British missionaries, and it is this “reformed Orthodox” tradition, in full communion with the Church of England, that is known today as the Mar Thoma Church. This bridge church heritage has meant that the Mar Thoma in India have been inclined toward ecumenical engagement; and the church has produced such leaders for the global movement as M. M. Thomas, the first layman to serve as Moderator of the WCC’s Central Committee.

In the United States, I was initially opposed to Mar Thoma membership in the NCC because I thought they should be part of the Episcopal Church. The Council doesn’t need to encourage fragmentation by immigration. The hold of the Malayalam language and Indian culture proved too strong, however, and there are today between fifty and sixty congregations in the U.S.

During the first two generations of immigrants, the priests were all Indian-born and the church was, by its own admission, quite insular; but in recent years, a new spirit is emerging. For example, in the spring of 2010, not long after the earthquake in Haiti, I was invited to speak at the Annual Assembly of the North American diocese. When I finished, Bishop Theodosius announced that the Mar Thoma congregations had taken a special offering to be used by their conciliar partners. “The Mar Thoma Church has no presence in Haiti,” said the Bishop, “but because we are part of the National Council, we are there”—and handed me a check for \$131,000.

Not long after, a delegation of representatives from various NCC churches visited the Mar Thoma at their headquarters near New York City. This was part of the NCC’s program of “church to church visits,” designed to reinforce the point that the Council is the relationship of the churches to one another. In most instances, the visited church would have ten to fifteen persons present, including the Head of Communion. Bishop Theodosius made sure that more than sixty were present for the Mar Thoma visit, including a high percentage of their priests, as well as key laypersons—women and men, young adults and elder leaders.

We began by asking, “Are you an Indian church with a branch in the United States or an American church with roots in India?”, and watched the room divide generationally! Finally, Bishop Theodosius intervened. “It seems to me,” he said, “that we have much to learn from our ecumenical friends who have been through this ahead of us. We need your prayers and guidance.” Following every visit, I would send a letter summarizing the conversation to the Head of Communion. In this case, Bishop Theodosius sent my letter to every congregation, urging that it be read at a suitable public occasion as a gift from the church’s conciliar partners, and as an encouragement for them to be ecumenically engaged in their local setting.

I think you can see why this was my favorite NCC church; but, in a sense, this experience is not unusual. After thirty years of such work, I have come to realize that ecumenism flourishes in the period, the space, when a church emerges from exclusivity and isolation into encounter with other perspectives, when a church still holds fast to its theological core but also sees that its reading of the gospel can be enriched through dialogue and collaboration. That's why the Roman Catholic Church gave energy to the whole movement in the years after Vatican II, and why my students most interested in ecumenism tend to be disaffected evangelicals. Martin Marty once suggested that the problem facing the contemporary church is that many of those who are committed aren't civil, and many of those who are civil aren't committed. In my experience, ecumenism flourishes in that space when the committed are becoming civil.

There is no doubt it would have been easier to be on the front lines of this movement fifty years ago! In my better moments, however, I am happy to have been part of this ministry in such a time as this. A movement unable to revel in institutional success may learn to trust more in God's guidance, discerned through theological reflection and prayer, than in our skill at managing organizations or drafting texts. Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism speaks of "change of heart and holiness of life," of prayer "for the grace to be genuinely self-denying, humble, gentle in the service to others," as the essence of the ecumenical movement. Could it be that, in the absence of reasons to be optimistic, we discover greater humility and gentleness in our relations with sisters and brothers in other churches? Could it be that less optimism and more hope allows us to let go of favored projects and structures, while holding fast to those promises of God's Reign that commonly compel us? Isn't this a key to the movement's revitalization?

Ecumenical Christians today may be less optimistic than our earlier colleagues, but surely we have no less reason to hope for the day when one part of Christ's body will not say to another, "We have no need of you." Perhaps our role in such a time as this is to keep alive such hope as we try to discern the new directions the Spirit is leading.

Michael Kinnamon
School of Theology and Ministry
Seattle University