

## *Tabled?*

The Campbell Lecture on Christian Unity  
Lehigh County Conference of Churches  
DeSales University  
April 1, 2004

John H. Thomas  
General Minister and President  
United Church of Christ

There is a great deal of interest in the question of “tables” in the ecumenical movement today. In the first instance, tables serve as a metaphor for the ways in which the ecumenical movement is often embodied and experienced at tables of service and hospitality where the homeless, the hungry, the transitional, the newly arrived, the stranger, the marginalized in our communities are literally welcomed at tables for meals, for counsel, for material assistance, for companionship. Serving tables. But we are also finding ourselves reflecting on the mandate to “expand” or broaden the ecumenical table, to welcome churches and ecclesial bodies that have traditionally been resistant to ecumenical encounter, or unwelcome at such encounter. Even more radically, ecumenical tables are frequently being transformed into interfaith tables. Serving tables and expanding tables are often deeply faithful expressions of the ecumenical movement in our time. These tables enable us to respond to the Gospel mandates of compassion, justice and peace. They stand in deep continuity with decades of ecumenical witness and they recognize the increasingly diverse and fluid religious landscape of our communities, a landscape that has a constantly widening horizon which the ecumenical movement dare not ignore.

This first lecture will explore some of the current dimensions of those serving tables and expanding tables and will celebrate the promise of this “re-tabling” of the ecumenical movement. But I will also raise some questions about whether in the process of re-tabling we have also effectively *tabled* - to borrow a concept from parliamentary procedure - a core element of the ecumenical vision, namely, the reconciliation of the people of God, the Body of Christ, around the Table of the Eucharist. I say “tabled” because we have obviously not formally removed from our agenda the vision of a reconciled church sharing in the sacrament as either a sign of or a

means to the unity of the church in its fullness. But amid the considerable energy found in the re-tabling of the ecumenical movement around serving tables and expanding tables, passion for concerns of the Table frequently appears to be on the wane. Why is this so? What are the implications of such a tabling of this core concern? What diminishments might this tabling mean for the churches, for the ecumenical movement, for the people of our congregations, and for our pastoral and prophetic witness in the world? And what might a recommitment to the Eucharistic Table as a primary concern - not in place of serving tables and expanding tables, but along side of them and as the context for them - mean for the renewal of the ecumenical movement and for the church's faith, life, and witness amid a world of violence, greed, and deception?

Fifty years ago if you were to ask the member of a local church to describe the ecumenical movement the answers would likely reference a conciliar body - the World Council of Churches, the National Council of the Churches of Christ, or a state or local ecumenical council. I remember my home church in Connecticut listing on the Sunday bulletin its support for the World and National Councils. While these Councils obviously included significant dimensions of cooperative service, particularly programs of emergency relief and refugee care through agencies like Church World Service and Heifer Project International, as well as initiatives around youth ministry, civil rights, Bible translation, and Sunday School curriculum, the conciliar dimension of the Councils also involved attentiveness to the unity of the churches around faith, sacraments, and ministry culminating in the publication of the *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* document in the early 80's. Today the typical church member - and often the pastor or regional judicatory executive - is less likely to name a conciliar body and more likely to name a host of programs and projects locally or regionally that gather Christians in cooperative service. During my years in Easton in the 1980's those ministries proliferated - ProJeCt of Easton enabled the churches to respond to emergency needs together; the Easton Food Bank served the needs of the hungry; the Easton Drop-In Center provided a home for those emptied into the community by the deinstitutionalization of the mental health system. Safe Harbor Easton provided shelter and transitional housing needs for the homeless. Elsewhere efforts like Habitat for Humanity have become the centerpiece of ecumenical ministry.

There are lots of reasons for this, and many of them are laudable. The desire for "hands on" experience in mission on the part of many in our churches reflects an awareness that mission

is not something that only occurs at a distance, requiring little more than our prayers and our checkbooks. The recognition that the problems in our communities whether it be poverty, racism, housing, domestic violence, police violence, etc., require shared rather than unilateral responses from the churches. The understanding that human need requires engagement through a variety of partnerships between government and various secular and sacred human service efforts, and that the church is a more effective partner when it works together. The awareness that if ecumenism is to mean anything at all, it must be embodied locally in ministries that can be seen and touched, not merely in distant and only vaguely understood conciliar movements. These motivations for ecumenism conceived as serving tables are all positive developments for a movement that is deeply concerned for the unity and the renewal of the human community in all of its vulnerability and brokenness.

Other reasons for this proliferation of local and regional initiatives as the principle embodiment of the ecumenical movement are less positive: There is the growing suspicion of anything that is not local and the demeaning of “world” or “national” or “state” entities whether they be governmental, social, or religious, a suspicion admittedly encouraged sometimes by the ethical lapses and emotional distance of some of those agencies. The abandonment of the poor by government was a factor clearly at work in Easton spurring ecumenical action during the years of Reaganomics. Listen to the comments of one governor who, in a relatively recent inaugural address, pointed to the government buildings surrounding the state capitol, and said, “There would be no greater tribute to our maturity as a society than if we can make these buildings around us empty of workers - silent monuments to the time when government played a larger role than it deserved or could adequately fill.” (Jeb Bush) There’s a not so subtle relationship between political indifference to the poor and the championing of the work of faith based organizations. Then there is the radical localism prevalent in all of our churches, a localism that is reinforced by the American glorification of rugged individualism and freedom. Scratch a member of almost any church in the United States - Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Protestant - and you’ll likely find a congregationalist!

Thus, for reasons both good and for ill, ecumenism increasingly has become reflected in serving tables. In some ways we are seeing two classical ecumenical principles at work, one formal, one informal though no less influential. First, there is the famous Lund Principle from

1952 - “Should not the churches ask themselves whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?” Second, and less positively, there is the enduring suspicion and, in some cases the ideological conviction bubbling beneath the surface of the ecumenical movement that “service unites while doctrine divides.” Acknowledging the negatives, let me be quick to say that none of these serving tables are to be demeaned. I’m reminded of the question the disciples brought to Jesus regarding a man casting out demons yet who was not among the twelve. Jesus’ response is appropriate for even the nervous ecumenist worrying about the clarity and endurance of a core vision of unity: “Do not stop him; whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward,” (Mark 9.38-41). Beware the Pharisees who may hide among the ecumenists!

Along with the proliferation of serving tables, we are also, as I have suggested, seeing a growing fascination with expanding tables, with adding leaves, if you will, to the ecumenical table. At the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Harare in 1998 the delegates committed themselves to two initiatives. The first was a renewed effort to enter into dialogue with evangelical and Pentecostal Christians who, for the most part, are not part of the ecumenical movement, at least as defined by bodies like the World Council of Churches. The second initiative was the call for an establishment of a “Global Forum” which might bring together the major families of the Christian Church at a more inclusive and diverse table than anything heretofore possible.

Meanwhile, in the United States, a new initiative, partially spawned by the National Council of Churches, is seeking to gather a radically diverse group of Christian churches and parachurch organizations in an organization provisionally named, “Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A.” A minimalist set of theological affirmations: “belief in the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the Scriptures; worship and service of the One God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and seeking ways to work together in order to present a more credible Christian witness in and to the world,” have thus far attracted a rather startling cast of characters including the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Salvation Army, the Church of the Nazarene, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Southern Baptist Convention, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, World Vision, the Church of God

(Cleveland, Tennessee), the International Pentecostal Holiness Church, the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, the Friends United Meeting, the Moravian Church in America, Evangelicals for Social Action, the Salvation Army, and many more. The hope is that such an expanded table could, as the provisional documents declare, “rejoice in our faith in the Triune God, provide fellowship and mutual support, contribute to affirming our commonalities and understanding differences, foster Christian evangelism faithful to the proclamation of the gospel, and speak to society with a common voice whenever possible.” Skeptics are likely to say, “Good luck!” Yet momentum is developing and interest growing for an expanded table that would more truly represent the wholeness and catholicity of the church of Jesus Christ in North America today.

The challenges of adding leaves to the ecumenical table are obvious. At the Harare Assembly many of us arrived knowing that questions of human sexuality were likely to play a dominant role. The President of Zimbabwe had recently launched a crusade against homosexual persons in his country and was labeling the World Council of Churches as a body that was encouraging homosexuality; while this may have served his internal political interests, anyone associated with the Council knew this was bizarre in the extreme! At the same time, fault lines over this issue among the member churches were emerging as well as pressure from churches like the Metropolitan Community Churches, still on the outside looking in. As the ecumenical officer of the United Church of Christ at that time I was accustomed to articulating the distinctive convictions of our General Synod on this issue, convictions that often raised questions among the leaders of other churches around the world. So I was prepared to be at the center of a difficult debate in which the very unity of the Council might be at stake.

To my surprise, the first day of my work on one of the Assembly committees took a rather strange tack. We were responsible for reviewing membership applications from churches and had before us the application of the Celestial Church of Nigeria, one of the fast growing indigenous communities called African Independent Churches. Conservative in theology, charismatic in worship, centered on the leadership of founding personalities, churches like these, along with their colleagues in the historic churches, take a dim view of changing norms in western sexual ethics. They would fully support their colleague, the Archbishop of the Anglican Church in Nigeria, who is leading the effort to reverse the action of the Episcopal Church which

recently consecrated its first openly gay bishop. The problem we faced was not homosexuality, it was polygamy! (God truly has a sense of humor.) How often have we heard someone encouraging the ecumenical table's expansion, when confronting the concrete realities of that effort, say "Oh, I'm not sure I really meant that!"

Expanding the ecumenical table is, I believe, a faithful part of the mandate we have received from Jesus regarding the oneness of believers, a mandate that is embodied in the church's confession about itself - "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic." Catholicity is, by definition, expansive rather than static or constricting, a mark of the church that ought to make us uncomfortable with any seating arrangement that does not leave empty chairs for future guests - Elijah or otherwise! But expanding tables don't solve the ecumenical problem. In some ways they only intensify our awareness of the challenges. In like manner, serving tables embody the enduring commitment of the ecumenical movement to be as attentive to the fragmentation and wounds of the human community as to the fragmentation and wounds of the church. But serving tables alone don't ultimately solve the ecumenical problem either. They enable cooperation which may invite us toward various forms of covenanting and ultimately toward full communion. In fact, serving tables may actually increase conflict or fragmentation as churches endlessly realign themselves around a constantly shifting set of agendas. And, the more the table expands, the less capacity the table has to serve as expansion brings increasingly diverse and at times conflicting visions of what kind of service is needed, and to what end.

It has been my experience in the ecumenical arena that deep discomfort often develops between those I describe as "community builders" and those we might label "coalition builders." Community builders are fascinated with the expanding table. The more leaves they can add to the table, the better. Coalition builders are preoccupied with the serving table. The more focused the agenda, the better. Perhaps a not so hypothetical situation can illustrate: Ecumenical coalitions formed around such contested moral issues as reproductive rights and abortion, for example, are not generally eager to welcome to the table both the United Church of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church. Little service for either "choice" or for "life" would be possible in such a broad table. Or, to give another example, ecumenical coalitions around strengthening public education are wary of churches joining the table that have a vested interest in broadening school voucher programs. At the same time, ecumenical efforts to expand tables and broaden

community are skittish about raising the question of the meaning of membership and ministry by and among gay and lesbian persons, knowing that to do so is to scare some - or all - from the table. Many table expanders will be thrilled to see the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod join the table, until the question is posed rather sharply about whether it is now possible to say a table grace together!

So we are pressed back to the question raised at the beginning, but now with greater urgency. Has the central ecumenical problem of the Eucharistic Table been effectively tabled in lieu of our fascination and preoccupation with serving tables and expanding tables? And in light of the inherent limits in both the serving table approach and the expanding table approach to seeking more faithfully to embody the gift of unity, what are the implications of such a tabling of the Table? First, we might ask why the quest for Eucharistic unity been tabled? Let me suggest three reasons. First, many have decided that it is simply too big a problem. Second, others have decided that "its not my problem." Third, an alarming number of Christians are simply indifferent, in effect saying, "what's the problem?"

Its too big a problem. There is something very American about this assertion. Problems not readily solved are problems often avoided. And problems that can't be solved in my lifetime are often dismissed. I used to think that at some point during my ministry Roman Catholics and many Protestants would be able to formally and officially invite all to the Table, and that all would be free to positively respond with integrity. I no longer think that's likely and the temptation for me, and for many others, is to simply turn attention elsewhere, leaving this big problem to the future. It's a bit like the way our government responds to issues like health care, education, medicare, social security, and the like. These are big problems, not likely to be fully solved in our lifetime. So we defer to our children and grandchildren. Let's make it their problem. The same could be said about the ecumenical problem of the Eucharist. Because our generation's optimism proved ill founded or overly optimistic, because the problem thus far has proven to be too big, we'll let another generation deal with it while we choose lesser, more manageable problems to solve.

Too big a problem easily becomes someone else's problem. This happens in a number of ways. Those who celebrate at a so-called "open table" tend to feel that "its not my problem. All are welcome. If some choose not to come, that's their problem." Churches that place a fairly

clear and defined discipline around their norms of Eucharistic hospitality tend to view the problem as belonging to those who fail to meet what to them are a self-evident set of theological standards. Some, interpreting Paul's injunction about non-believers eating and drinking to their own judgment, view their "fences" as a charitable gesture to those whose "problem" would be severely exacerbated by their sharing in the Eucharist. Regardless of how this is played out, and I trust you can recognize these viewpoints in contemporary church life, "not my problem" easily becomes "your problem to solve."

But there's another way we have made the Eucharistic table someone else's problem as we have increasingly relegated the problem to an arena of theological "esoterica" and have handed it over to a relatively small group of experts. Now, the impulse for this is sound. The Eucharistic problem is, in some sense, a deeply technical problem involving complex matters of historical and constructive theology, Biblical exegesis, and liturgical practice. We need highly skilled experts who can maneuver through these complexities and discern solutions to problems heretofore seen as intractable. Theological dialogue and the faith and order movement have demonstrated their usefulness time and again. One might cite, for example, Lutheran-Reformed full communion, "Called to Common Mission," Lutheran-Moravian full communion, and the Joint Declaration on Justification between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation.

But, when the Eucharistic problem - or any ecumenical problem - is given over to the sole preserve of technical experts, it once again becomes possible for most in the church to say, "not my problem." Even worse, the enterprise easily becomes caricatured as an exercise in angel counting on pin heads, something easily demeaned and, therefore rendered silly, superfluous, even distracting. The world serves us a more than ample fare of so-called "real problems." Can the church afford to spend time on this problem? Now, let me acknowledge that sometimes the experts confirm the worst caricature by failing to engage their technical and complex task in ways that engage the whole church or that demonstrate deep connections to the human predicament. Nevertheless, there is a readiness among many to hand the problem over to experts and then ridicule the problem because it is being addressed only by experts - and theologians at that! I said earlier that underneath the skin of most Americans you can find a crypto-congregationalist. Underneath that same American skin is often a shared suspicion of the

intellectual pursuit.

Too big a problem. Not my problem. And finally, perhaps inevitably, “what’s the problem?” Once we have grown indifferent to the problem of our division at the Eucharistic table, or become diverted from it by single-minded devotion to serving tables or expanding tables, or pretend to solve the problem through local short cuts or various forms of ecclesial “civil disobedience,” we have effectively “tabled” the question of the Eucharistic Table in our ecumenical life. And that’s a problem!

Why? First, it’s a problem because failure to break down the fences around our Eucharistic table leaves an increasingly large number of marriages, civil unions, and families vulnerable to deep wounds and divisions inflicted by the church at the most difficult and profound pastoral moments. The most recent completed round of Roman-Catholic and Reformed dialogue in the United States took up the question of sacramental life and interchurch families. At the heart of the dialogue was the excruciating experience of family after family whose fidelity to their tradition renders the church’s ministry to them at sacramental and pastoral moments deeply flawed and painfully compromised. Every two years I help teach a class at Andover Newton Theological School titled, “Pastoral Ecumenics” in which we help the students reflect on the history, theology, and practice of the ecumenical movement in the context of the realities of pastoral ministry. Part of the class involves asking students to present case studies from their own experience and, as you would expect in New England, most of them focus around the often contentious interaction of Catholic and Protestant traditions. It’s painful to listen to these case studies, often involving the students’ own families, in which the inability to either invite or to respond to an invitation to the Table at the most poignant moments in our lives is not merely inconvenient, but spiritually devastating. At the present time we can, at best, ameliorate some of the hurt through fostering better understanding and deepening pastoral sensitivity. But amelioration is little more than palliative care. By tabling the challenging problem of the Eucharist, we effectively ignore the cries of an increasing number of the baptized for whom the divisions at the Table tear through the fabric of their own family life.

This alone ought to confront us with the liability of tabling the Eucharistic question. But there’s an even more profound diminishment for our churches as well as for the ecumenical movement. Here I refer to the diminishment of the church’s imagination and thus of the church

prophetic vocation. Walter Brueggemann has said that “it is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one.” Sacrament is the imaginative, prophetic act of the church par excellence. In a culture that is increasingly drawn to the aesthetic, that is starved for mystery amid arid rationalism, and that is often attracted to worship that engages all of the senses and to the fullest use of the arts in order to convey meaning, to inspire, and to provoke imagination, in such a culture sacrament becomes pregnant with spiritual possibility for the nurturing of the church’s imagination. Some years ago Amos Wilder warned us about the loss of imagination:

Imagination is a necessary component of all profound knowing and celebration; all remembering, realizing, and anticipating; all faith, hope, and love. When imagination fails doctrines become ossified, witness and proclamation wooden, doxologies and litanies empty, consolations hollow, and ethics legalistic.

The tabling of the Eucharist by the ecumenical movement impoverishes not just the liturgy of the churches, but also their imagination; furthermore, it renders the ecumenical movement incapable of fulfilling its own prophetic task.

Liturgies - both secular and sacred - shape imaginations, and thus futures, in profound ways. Last year Americans shared in the spectacle of their president as commander in chief landing a jet on an aircraft carrier in full battle gear, strutting across the deck to declare a form of victory in the war in Iraq. Some applauded what they saw as leadership. Others cried foul for what appeared to be little more than rank partisan opportunism. In fact, we were experiencing a kind of public liturgy, a liturgy designed to shape our imagination and to conjure and propose a particular kind of future which “the king” wants us to believe is the only one thinkable. It is, I would argue, a bankrupt future laden with vanities, fraught with danger - certainly for others, but ultimately for us as well - and built on deception. But whether you agree with that assessment or not, few can deny the power of such a liturgy to shape the public imagination - whether for good or for ill.

For all their words and well organized protests, the churches on their own, and the ecumenical movement together, found themselves impotent in the months running up to the invasion of Iraq in the face of this civic liturgy. What was lacking, in large part, was the

capacity of the sacrament to liturgically shape an imagination and thus conjure and propose an alternative future to that envisioned by the king and his courtiers. Were the Eucharist not tabled, could we not have more effectively shaped liturgies informing us that oil is not for violent competition, or for greedy hoarding, but for anointing the deep wounds in our world. Could we not have more effectively shaped liturgies informing us that the water of baptism bestows grace and dignity on friend and enemy alike, that at the very least one enters into conflict with deep lament, absent the unholy enthusiasm that was on such public display, that this same grace calls us to repentance for the axis of evil that touches our own shores and can be traced through our own hearts. Could we not have more effectively shaped liturgies informing us that bread is for sacramental use, for sharing, not for sanction, that the cup we share is an invitation to accept vulnerability rather than simply pushing it off on those already vulnerable in our world. Without compelling liturgies the liturgy devised and enacted by the king need not compete; there are no imaginations capable of proposing alternative futures and we are left deeply vulnerable to futures that may seek the church's blessing while distorting the Gospel beyond recognition.

In a stunning book with the startling title, *Eucharist and Torture*, William Kavanaugh analyzes the horrific years of the Pinochet regime in Chile. Through an insightful analysis of the theological commitments of the Catholic Church in Chile at the time, he offers a profound indictment of the Church's inability to adequately confront and resist the terror. Eucharist was understood and practiced in a way that rendered it unable to shape resistance. "If torture is the imagination of the state," Kavanaugh writes, "Eucharist is the imagination of the church." With Eucharist as a compelling and public shaper of imagination tabled, the dark and private liturgies carried out in prison torture cells had free reign. Just over twenty years ago the historic achievement, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* affirmed that the Eucharist

opens up the vision of the divine rule which has been promised as the final renewal of creation, and is a foretaste of it. Signs of this renewal are present in the world wherever the grace of God is manifest and human beings work for justice, love, and peace. The Eucharist is the feast at which the Church gives thanks to God for these signs and joyfully celebrates and anticipates the coming of the Kingdom in Christ. . . . The eucharist brings into the present age a new reality which transforms Christians into the image of Christ and therefore makes them his effective witnesses. (*BEM*, Eucharist,

II.E.22 and 26)

Since then little - not nothing - but little has been done to claim the prophetic power and the prophetic possibility of that Eucharistic conviction and reality.

Our present interest in serving tables and expanding tables, with all its promise as well as its inherent limitations, reflects at least in part a tabling of the Eucharistic question by many of the churches and much of the ecumenical movement because it's too big a problem, because its not really my problem, its your problem, because we've made it someone else's problem and have demeaned it in the process, because we haven't thought carefully enough about why it's a problem in the first place. In so doing we fail our interchurch families and we profoundly diminish our capacity to fulfill the prophetic vocation of the Gospel, a vocation that calls for resistance shaped by imagination lest our "witness and proclamation grow wooden, our consolations hollow, and our ethics legalistic." Wilder's admonition strikes perilously close to home in far too many of our churches.

So what do we do? I hope you hear me clearly saying that we do *not* step back from the tables of service or from the effort to expand tables that so animate the ecumenical movement today and which offer water to thirsty people. But we must not make these the only two poles of the ecumenical vocation, for they are partial and alone have as much capacity to divide as to unite. I also hope you will not hear me suggesting that we "solve" the Eucharistic problem with local short cuts or what I earlier referred to as "Eucharistic civil disobedience." There are undoubtedly times when exceptional Eucharistic hospitality is pastorally sensitive and prophetically required. But in the absence of the full and formal embrace of our traditions, those times are exceptions not norms, they are not solutions to the problem, and in some sense they merely heighten our awareness of the problem. They are like an aperitif - whetting the appetite but not really satisfying the stomach and they inevitably create new divisions and ultimately, I think, make the "big problem" even bigger. And finally, let's not take back ownership of our ecumenical problem by dismissing the experts. There is critical, complex, and technical work to do that deserves our encouragement rather than our caricature. But let's demand that the experts in dialogue remain accountable to the churches and to the mission of God in which the churches participate, that their work be deeply contextual, carried out in light of the needs of our interchurch families and with a sensitivity to the desperate yearning of the churches and our

society for prophetic imagination and for futures alternative.

What would it look like in local places for us to put the Eucharistic question “back on the table?” First, let me propose that it would involve the pastors and teachers of our congregations and our judicatories pressing the question of the relationship of tables of service to the Table of presence. The hospitality of one is intimately related to the hospitality of the other and the teaching ministry of the church needs to help us recognize those links lest we simply opt for one as the easier ecumenical enterprise as if we are dealing with an either/or rather than a both/and. Second, I would propose that our waiting for full Eucharistic unity become active rather than merely passive, that congregations engage one another ecumenically around sacramental practice not because they alone can effect national or international ecumenical agreements, but because they can help each other enrich and renew their own sacramental life. Third, it is important for the sake of our interchurch families that the Eucharistic problem be faced honestly and with sensitivity in the midst of the pastoral challenges those families face. This involves pastors and priests who are prepared to own the pastoral challenges together of our current impasse rather than merely lay the blame at the door of the other, who can interpret what is not yet possible with grace and humility while creatively claiming the very real opportunities that are there for us while we wait. Fourth, local churches, conferences, dioceses, and synods need to press their communions to renew their engagement with the sacramental questions that, with the exception of some important dialogues here and there, have been dormant - tabled - since *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*. And, while they do that, those local and regional settings of the church might consider adequately funding that work in national and international settings and honoring it, in spite of its technical, and occasional arcane theological complexity, as a vital contribution to faithfulness in our communities.

Ultimately, taking the Eucharist off the table again in ecumenical engagement involves a readiness to see sacrament not merely as rite and ritual, but as liturgical practice deeply constitutive of the church’s prophetic imagination where water, oil, bread and cup have deep resonances with the integrity of the creation, with our resistance to oppressions, and with our yearning for peace. Only then will we discover that our unity at the Table of presence is what nurtures the capacities and integrity of our serving tables, and what can make our expanding tables something more than ecclesiastical projects and programs. Only then will the

circumferences of our compassionate serving and expanding embrace be truly joined to the risen Christ who is known to us in the breaking of the bread.