

Where Have All the Churches Gone?

The Campbell Lectures on Christian Unity
Lehigh County Council of Churches
DeSales University
April 1, 2004

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

At last year's meeting of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, Konrad Raiser, the retiring General Secretary, called for the initiation of a process that would consider what he called "the reconfiguration of the ecumenical movement." A preliminary meeting was held late last year hosted by the Catholicos of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Antelias, Lebanon. The resulting report discussed the dramatic changes in the shape of the ecumenical movement and the enormous proliferation of ecumenical initiatives and entities that has so altered the landscape since the middle of the last century when the World Council of Churches and other national and regional councils of churches defined the institutional shape of the movement.

In large measure the ecumenical movement has already been reconfigured by the emergence - along side the traditional conciliar bodies - of the world confessional bodies like the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Lutheran World Federation, by the tremendous growth of bilateral and multilateral dialogues and processes encouraged in particular by the post-Vatican II focus of the Roman Catholic Church, by the birthing of so-called "united and uniting churches" around the world beginning with the Church of South India but including as well my own denomination, the United Church of Christ, by the growth of para-church movements and organizations locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally that gather individuals from many churches around particular agendas and mission programs, and now increasingly by questions of interreligious dialogue and cooperation where concern for the unity of the church is joined by the urgent need to attend to the unity of human community.

Often this reconfiguration today is caused not so much by the acts of churches as by the movement of people in response to new church dividing issues or to immigration patterns. Two

of the United Church of Christ's current ecumenical initiatives are, for example, with the Alliance of Baptists and the Congregational Christian Church in American Samoa. The Alliance churches are a loose federation of individuals and congregations who found themselves estranged or evicted from the Southern Baptist Convention and who are now seeking a relationship with faith communities who share structures that resist authoritarian and hierarchical control while committed to a liberal or progressive social ethic and an inclusive approach to membership, whether around questions of theological orthodoxy or sexual orientation. The Congregational Christian Churches in American Samoa, a product of the work of the London Missionary Society in the 19th century, is planting churches in Hawaii and throughout the western United States following migration patterns of American Samoans who are quickly becoming more numerous on the mainland than on the home island. These churches are identifying with their Congregationalist cousins in the United Church of Christ. Neither of these ecumenical relationships could have been anticipated in the years of the World Council's formation, and to some extent no longer depend on a World Council or any other conciliar body. Yet they demonstrate the dramatic reconfiguration underway throughout the world responsive less to churchly initiatives than to what in the Philippines during the end of the Marcos regime we once called "people power."

The question is not, "Should we reconfigure the ecumenical movement?" Rather, we are being asked what to make of the reconfiguration that is currently going on. Where do we find a new sense of coherence and vision for what many hope and believe is still "the one ecumenical movement?" And in light of that, what is the enduring vocation of the venerable ecumenical institutions that emerged from the early days of the movement but which find themselves struggling today to reinvent themselves or even to survive? Beneath the language of reconfiguration there is a tangible and almost poignant yearning for a recovery of a sense of vigor and vitality that we recall having prevailed in the late 19th and early 20th century out of which the primary ecumenical bodies emerged. Often in recent ecumenical discussions that is translated into a distinction between ecumenism as "movement" and ecumenism as "institution." How do we recapture the movement dimension of ecumenism embodied in the evangelical zeal of founders like layman John R. Mott and organizations like the World Student Christian Federation, or even more recently and in light of these lectures, in the passions of persons like

Robert Campbell? How do we lift ourselves out of an alleged institutionalism that has left many feeling overly bureaucratized, regulated, and limited? Thus one hears pleas like those calling for a world centered ecumenism as opposed to a church centered ecumenism. At the Antelias meeting, for example, Konrad Raiser spoke of this theme as “the movement from institutional to people-centered ecumenism,” noting that the ecumenical movement began as a movement of people that was then institutionalized. The struggle now, he says, “is how to become more people-centered and inclusive.”

This kind of language, of course, sounds quite appealing, particularly to a culture that is always suspicious of, if not outright hostile to institutions, to church folk who regularly dismiss denominational and ecumenical leadership as “bureaucrats,” and that yearns quite rightly for the energy and passion and vitality of renewal movements amid institutional challenge and decline. And who wouldn’t want to be “people centered,” to experience an ecumenical movement led and inspired by persons alive with evangelical spirit and passion for the unity of the church. Having sat through more than my share of ecumenical gatherings I can attest to the need for renewal born of young people, of lay persons, and of pastors alive with zeal for embodying Christ’s call to oneness in faith, life, and witness. There is a tendency toward institutional captivity and institutional caution that the ecumenical movement must always be wary of if it is to be an authentic renewal movement within and among the churches.

The ecumenical movement has always had a prophetic edge that resists the ecclesial status quo. Forty years ago at New Delhi the World Council of Churches crafted what remains the classical vision of unity toward which the ecumenical movement strives. In what is perhaps the longest sentence ever written, they said,

We believe that the unity which is both God’s will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people.

The key phrase for us is “fully committed fellowship” which the authors in a commentary remind us is fully church while at the same time not merely church as institution. The authors at New Delhi put it this way:

The word “fellowship” (koinonia) has been chosen because it describes what the Church truly is. “Fellowship” clearly implies that the church is not merely an institution or organization. It is a fellowship of those who are called together by the Holy Spirit and in baptism confess Christ as Lord and Saviour. They are thus “fully committed” to him and to one another.

So the ecumenical movement is a movement of the Church, but it is not fully defined by the institutional manifestations of church or even the institutional manifestations of the ecumenical movement itself. It lives and flourishes in the koinonia, the fellowship of the baptized, that is the people, as they are joined by the Holy Spirit.

In a time of institutional decline, institutional uncertainty, even institutional malaise, it is not surprising that the koinonia of persons, the fully committed fellowship as a primary theme for ecumenism would emerge as a kind of life saving beacon while the churchly dimensions are given reduced priority, even to the point of being called into question by ecumenical leaders. Thus the already mentioned calls for a world centered rather than a church centered, a people centered rather than an institution centered ecumenism. But does this leave the churches off the hook? Does this give the churches themselves rationale and excuse for what seems to be happening, namely the gradual withdrawal of churches from the ecumenical movement in ways that the New Delhi Assembly would never have imagined or countenanced? As churches in local, regional, national and international settings reduce their funding for ecumenical agencies and initiatives, as church leaders at all levels reduce their personal involvement in the ecumenical institutions that seek to embody the ecumenical movement, as the churches themselves hand over to professionals and to parallel organizations the primary responsibility for living out the calling of the ecumenical vocation, have we simply been moving institutional liabilities and bureaucratic hindrances out of the way? Or have we radically undercut the movement itself, effectively marginalizing it and its capacity to call the churches to account and to conversion as an effective renewal movement with and among the churches?

“Where have all the churches gone?” is, admittedly, a question displaying more than a

little hyperbole! The churches have not abandoned the ecumenical movement. But there is, I fear, a significant withdrawal of interest and commitment which is, perhaps in an even more frightening way, causing the ecumenical movement to withdraw - or consider withdrawing - from the churches. Three illustrations may help make the point. Some of you know that the National Council of the Churches of Christ (note the name), has faced serious financial questions in recent years calling its very existence into question. A combination of drastic reductions in funding from the member churches, combined with serious management failures and indifference to fiscal accountability led many of us to believe that the Council might die. Significant financial recovery is now underway. But some are asking “at what cost?” The churches have not renewed their financial commitment. Instead financial resources are being, perhaps of necessity, sought outside the churches, in part from individuals in our churches, but also from foundations totally unrelated to the churches. Progressive social witness on important issues of justice may be accomplished with funding from Ben Cohen of “Ben and Jerry’s” ice cream fame as is now taking place through a Ben Cohen related foundation grant, but is this furthering the “fully committed fellowship” envisioned at New Delhi?

A few years ago a group of individuals - academics, former national church officials, and persons retired from various ecumenical organizations - created a Foundation for a North American Conference on Faith and Order. The goal is to convene a conference on faith and order in North America to assess progress made since the last such meeting in 1957 and to chart a way forward. Significantly this effort was initiated apart from the institutional expressions of the faith and order movement - the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches and the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches. Depending on your perspective, this reflects either a legitimate response to the frustration on the part of many Foundation members with the inability of these traditional organizations to move forward, or the arrogance of some who believe the traditional groups have lost their way, and that they know better! Either way, the churches are being viewed as less than welcome partners. Funding and endorsement is being sought, but active participation by the churches and full accountability to the churches is being resisted.

Finally, in my home of Cleveland there is no longer any city-wide ecumenical body in existence. The Interchurch Council of Greater Cleveland used to be one of the flagship local

ecumenical organizations. It is remembered for its groundbreaking work around racism and for engaging the churches in the struggles of the city schools. During the 1980's, as funding from local churches and judicatories started declining, the Council began to secure its financial base increasingly in county grants for sheltering the homeless and feeding the hungry. When the county commissioners suddenly awarded its grants to another agency for political reasons over which the Interchurch Council had no influence, the Council's doors closed almost immediately. Not only is this a sobering illustration of a public financial tail wagging the church's ecumenical dog, it is also a reminder of what happens when the churches cede their important justice commitments to an increasingly independent organization. A state council of churches executive recently told me that more and more church members she knows are exercising their justice ministries apart from their churches as partners in a variety of secular social groups and movements. Such partnerships are not to be despised. But one does wonder how those members engagements impact the life of the congregations in which they worship. Again, doesn't this let the churches off the hook, removing the challenge that can lead to authentic ecclesial conversion as well as to more faithful and courageous witness? Does such "people-centered" or "world-centered" ecumenism, increasingly divorced from the churches, really foster the "fully committed fellowship" that has been at the heart of the ecumenical movement's mandate?

I ask the question, "Where have all the churches gone?" as a church leader who must take some of the responsibility for the withdrawal of the churches from significant arenas of ecumenical life. I can describe many reasons for that withdrawal, and for painful decisions that I and others must make. But in the end they only explain, they do not excuse. Yes, ecumenical leaders may be partly to blame for such a withdrawal, but only in part. In the end the churches are starving precious ecumenical institutions that have stewarded the ecumenical vision for a long time. They may need to be reshaped, reformed, even reconfigured, but there is no inherent virtue in their death. Having said that, I also ask the question "where have all the churches gone?" as a challenge to ecumenical leaders who seem prepared to accept that withdrawal, and even to clothe it with justifying language as if the withdrawal of the churches is actually a helpful shedding of institutional baggage, institutional caution, and bureaucratic burdens. Now I suspect that there are plenty of bishops and a general minister and president or two who have contributed more than their share of baggage, caution, and burden to the ecumenical movement.

We need the renewing spirit of people like Robert Campbell and others who represent their vibrant and energetic Christian spirit more than their ecclesial loyalties. But we also need the bishops and the general ministers and presidents and all that they represent. For if the churches go, and if our ecumenical organizations allow them to go, we will be diminished in some critical ways.

Perhaps enough has been hinted at regarding the dangers of this withdrawal for the ecumenical movement itself. Therefore, for the remainder of this lecture I want to explore what that diminishment might look like for the churches. Clearly a great deal is at stake for conciliar bodies like the World Council of Churches or the Lehigh County Conference of Churches. But even more may be at stake for the integrity and faithfulness of the churches themselves. Self-isolating churches living with the illusion of their self-sufficiency not only diminish the witness of the church in a world awash in violence, greed, and deception, they also live in danger of distorting their very identity. Such isolation removes us from the gifts other traditions have to offer, and robs those other traditions of our own gifts. Such isolation allows us to settle comfortably into the arrogance of our own status quo where we need not be exposed to the mutual affirmation and mutual admonition which the Lutheran-Reformed full communion agreement describes. Such isolation allows us to resist change, to avoid the conversion that is at the heart of the Christian gospel - for each of the baptized and for the churches that embody the *koinonia* of the baptized. Could it be that this is why the churches have gone away? Not just because we're all struggling with money, not just because we have grown discouraged or disenchanted by the slow and uncertain pace of ecumenical achievement, not just because leaders have become preoccupied with institutional vulnerabilities of all kinds, but because we are really more comfortable with our parochialism and have little interest in the conversion that is inherently part of the engagement that occurs within the ecumenical movement?

A ten year old ecumenical reflection by a group of French Catholics and Protestants called, *Les Groupes des Dombes*, describes this as the temptation of the status quo. "This is the recent temptation of the churches that are content with the state of separation, or of vague relations which are no longer regarded as divisive; it is thought possible to retain the identities of all peaceably, in an existence where there is no conversion," (*For the Conversion of the Churches*, p. 80). This is the temptation to place the bar low, a bar each of our churches can

easily traverse, a bar that requires little change and where we refuse to allow ourselves to be meaningfully exposed, made vulnerable, to the challenge of others. Is this where we've gone, and why?

A number of churches today are in the midst of identity and advertising campaigns. I know of such efforts by the United Methodist Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The United Church of Christ has been moving slowly into such an initiative and has just this past month begun airing ads on television in six test markets around the country in anticipation, we hope, of a national campaign next November and December. Now let me say at the outset that I am an enthusiastic participant in this effort in my own church as long as we understand it to be about renewal, not simply shoring up a badly leaking institutional boat at the expense of the other boats struggling to stay afloat on the sea of secularism and the competitiveness of the spiritual marketplace. That is to say, any identity or ad campaign must, at least for me, meet three basic criteria: First, that our effort to clarify our identity and make it more public and visible does not by intention or effect demean or caricature the identity of other churches. Second, that our effort to clarify our identity helps our own members explore and claim with energy those dimensions of our own church life that are particular gifts or charisms to be contributed to the broader Christian witness in our culture, a witness that requires the gifts of all of the churches for its fullness, its integrity, its catholicity. And third, that our effort to make the distinctive faith, life, and witness of the United Church of Christ more visible in the public arena is in the service of a broad evangelical witness to persons outside the church rather than in a narrow and self-serving proselytism that seeks our own ecclesial advancement at the expense of others. As the French conversation puts it, "ecclesial identity must always place itself in the service of Christian identity."

Disciple of Christ ecumenist Michael Kinnamon has said that denominations, properly understood, are renewal movements preserving or protecting important dimensions of the Gospel in danger of being lost. Assuming this is true, then attentiveness to matters of identity must serve the renewal of the church catholic and its broad commitment to the fullness and the integrity of the Gospel it seeks to proclaim and to serve. For the United Church of Christ, as for any church, it means that inquiring about our identity must in some sense mean asking the question, "what dimension of the Gospel has been entrusted to our protection and our nurture in

order that the witness of the whole church might display its full catholicity?” As we have explored our history in its many diverse streams, as we have reflected on our contemporary commitments, a provisional answer is emerging embodied in the phrase, “God is still speaking,” and in the use of a quotation borrowed from Gracie Allen, “never place a period where God has placed a comma.” (We acknowledge that Gracie was not a theologian or a member of the United Church of Christ, but she was, after all, married to God!) A church of the comma, a church of the still speaking God resonates with words from the pastor to the Pilgrims, John Robinson, who reminded them as they left Holland, “the Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from his holy Word.” It resonates with a readiness to ordain a woman 150 years ago, long before others were prepared to do so, and to commitments around the abolition of slavery earlier than American churches. It resonates with the Reformed notion of the church “reformed, yet always reforming.” It reflects our readiness to seek new ways to confess or testify beyond the historical creeds and confessions in engagement with the justice issues of our day. It reflects a long history of welcoming persons who have traditionally been seen to belong outside the boundaries of acceptability, including most recently gay and lesbian persons.

Other churches would find language to articulate their distinctive identity and to name the charisms or gifts that have been entrusted to them for the sake of the catholicity of the church’s witness in different ways, although there undoubtedly would be overlap. No one church lays sole claim to any of these gifts; they remain a matter of emphasis rather than uniqueness. To the extent that the churches do this work in engagement with each other, these identity efforts offer the promise for renewed vigor in articulating the Christian gospel in its fullness, of the mutual exchange of gifts, of the mutual affirmation and admonition that protects each of us from arrogance and distortion. Yet it is precisely at this point where the renewed interest in identity on the part of many denominations, coupled with the churches’ withdrawal from ecumenical arenas, poses the greatest danger. Clarifying and articulating identity in the context of the status quo that isolation offers leads precisely to that arrogance and distortion that is so corrosive to the church’s witness and that seduces us into crass competition. To say that the United Church of Christ has been responsive to the need to rethink the limits of welcome, to hear the Gospel’s call to the demands of justice in ways that challenge received convention or consensus, or to engage the oppressions of our world early rather than late is not to suggest that

other churches are narrowly exclusive, indifferent to injustice, or overly cautious any more than saying that Lutherans have historically helped us to protect the primacy of grace is to suggest the rest of us are works righteousness Christians. It is merely to say that each tradition approaches these concerns with a distinctive accent and voice that enables others to be challenged or encouraged in important ways. But in order for this to happen issues of identity and of conversion must be held in close tension. And for that to happen churches must engage one another, rather than withdraw from each other.

The work of Les Groupes des Dombes reminds us of the dangers of identity formation that is little more than resurgent confessionalism or denominationalism. Each withdraws into itself and rejects real confrontations with other confessions or denominations. . . . Confessional identity must be Christian identity: as such it remains faithful to its truth only in so far as it converts constantly to the gospel. This conversion to the gospel must first of all affect each person's own way of understanding the gospel and living it out. It is also an invitation to take up a different stance towards other confessional groups: not to condemn them, but to treat them as brothers and sisters, to hope for them and in them, to seek mutual understanding, peace and full communion. This does not mean an insipid irenicism, for one of the gospel's requirements for Christian fraternity is for fraternal correction. (*For the Conversion. . .*, pp. 24-25)

This conversion is nothing less than an ecumenical effort by which each tradition "cleanses and enriches its own inheritance with the aim of rediscovering full communion with other confessions." Les Groupes des Dombes concludes that "the strongest point in our identity is also that which is most vulnerable to temptation. We can live truly in accordance with our identity only in a continuous process of conversion," (p. 75)

As the churches withdraw from ecumenical engagement, and to the extent that ecumenical leaders and agencies allow them to do that, the possibility for conversion is diminished and the probability of arrogance and distortion in the ongoing work of naming identity increases. This is particularly true in an environment where the churches are pitted against each other in competitive modes, where religious seekers shop the spiritual marketplace, and where churches or denominations that feel quite vulnerable and anxious about the future are tempted to aggressively court the spiritual consumer. In such an environment denominations no

longer remain renewal movements protecting important dimensions of the Gospel in danger of being lost for the sake of the catholicity of the whole. Instead they increasingly become self-serving communities self-righteously certain of their own proximity to the truth and impervious to the call to conversion that lies at the heart of the Gospel and which is crucial for the fidelity and integrity both of the churches and of the Church. Inevitably they will lead astray those who otherwise might be drawn into the fully committed fellowship of all in each place.

Where have all the churches gone? Reconfigurations of the ecumenical movement either through specific initiatives or gradual evolution that encourage or accept the withdrawal of churches as churches either out of a nostalgia for the energy of the past or out of a romantic and rather gnostic notion that institutions only inhibit or burden, will have devastating effects on the movement itself and on the institutions that seek to embody that movement. Pitting world and church against each other, or setting apart people and institution are flawed juxtapositions and dangerous dead ends both for the ecumenical movement and for the churches. What is needed is a new sense of an engaged fellowship of churches on the way toward becoming a committed fellowship of churches - all in each place - and at the heart of that fellowship is the journey of conversion to the Gospel that is the vocation of the baptized and of the churches as they seek to be an authentic sign and instrument of God's design in a world desperately in need of its own conversion.

In the end we are called back to a Christology that refuses to divide body and spirit, divine and human, that understands that to speak of unity apart from the body of Christ, the church where Christ is fully present if not fully bound, is its own kind of heresy. Any ecumenism that denies the decisive import of the incarnation by being dismissive either of the church or of the creation is not an ecumenism worthy of the Word made flesh. At the same Assembly in New Delhi that called for the "fully committed fellowship," Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler called the churches to relate their own unity to the healing of a vulnerable creation, understanding that both church and creation are the locus of the incarnation and, therefore, of the proper recipients of the reconciling gift of Bethlehem:

The Church has found a melancholy number of ways to express her variety. She has found fewer ways to express her unity. But if we are indeed called to unity, and if we can obey that call in terms of a contemporary Christology expanded to the dimensions of the

New Testament vision, we shall perhaps, obey into fuller unity. For in such obedience we have the promise of the Divine blessing. This radioactive earth, so fecund and so fragile, is his creation, our sister, and the material place where we meet the brother in Christ's light. Ever since Hiroshima the very term light has ghastly meanings. But ever since creation it has had meanings glorious; and ever since Bethlehem meanings concrete and beckoning.