

INTRODUCTION

During the past twenty five years, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has experienced a loss of ecumenical consciousness. We no longer see ourselves as a community of faith within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Instead, we see a collection of local congregations with individual identities and aims. The ecumenical commitment that once was integral to Presbyterian self-understanding is now a fading memory.

It is true that old denominational hostilities have been replaced by mutual respect and active missional cooperation — especially at the local level. Yet this may have more to do with the culture's notions of tolerance and the inviolability of private belief than with a mature sense of the church catholic.

Thus, fragmentation and attendant localism, combined with middle-class values of tolerance and privacy, produce an odd 'ecumenism' that lacks a deep sense of the church's unity. There is an urgent need to recover ecumenical engagement as an aspect of Christian discipleship that is faithful to the gospel.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s Advisory Committee on Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations (ACEIR), aware of the church's ecumenical crisis, invited Professor Lewis S. Mudge to address the issue. The Committee knew of Lew Mudge's deep involvement in ecumenical thought and action, both professionally and personally, and anticipated that he could be of help to ACEIR as it fulfilled its service to the church. His informal address to the ACEIR meeting included an insightful analysis of current ecumenical realities and an exciting exploration of possibilities for our common future.

The Office of Theology and Worship invited Prof. Mudge to expand his remarks for publication in our series of Theology and Worship Occasional Papers. We are grateful for his response, and for his willingness to undertake this additional service to the church.

Renewing the Ecumenical Vision is set forth in six sections. The first three, "The Ecumenical Vision: Then and Now," "The Travail of Ecumenical Organizations," and "Bilateral Dialogues and Church Union Negotiations," constitute a revealing analysis of the ecumenical past and present. The next three sections, "Moral

Formation in Church and World," "Articulating the Oikumene," and "The Vision of Revelation 21" present the possibility of a new ecumenical vision. In addition to benefitting individual readers, Dr. Mudge's analysis and proposal are rich resources for consideration by groups in congregations and presbyteries.

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Lewis Mudge has a long history of ecumenical involvement. He has been engaged in the Department of Theology of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, the Faith and Order Committee of the National Council of Churches of Christ, the Consultation on Church Union, and numerous bilateral dialogues and ecclesiological studies.

Parts of *Renewing the Ecumenical Vision*, Theology and Worship Occasional Paper No. 7, have been adapted from materials written by Dr. Mudge for studies currently in progress within the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches of Christ.

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RENEWING THE ECUMENICAL VISION

Critique and Prospect

Lewis S. Mudge

Only a few years ago, the ecumenical movement was regarded by many Presbyterians as one of the most exciting frontiers of mission and witness for our church. Today that excitement has been all but lost. The commitments that accompanied it have weakened. Knowledge of ecumenical issues and opportunities has diminished. Our Church's membership in such bodies as the World Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches and the Consultation on Church Union, not to speak of participation in ecumenical initiatives for "justice, peace, and the integrity of creation," is being called in question by many individuals and groups for whom purity in the gospel seems to mean going it alone.

What has happened here is much like what happens in many other arenas of human affairs. With the passage of generations, we forget the reasons why we did things. Only the doing of them remains, seemingly without much sense of purpose. There was once a comprehensive vision for the Church Universal shared by Presbyterians with other Christians in America and across the globe. Now there are organizations, activities, committees, bilateral dialogues, union plans. We see these remains of an earlier day, but do not know what they once meant. Alasdair MacIntyre relates a fable in which some catastrophe interrupts the active teaching and pursuit of the physical and biological sciences. A later generation comes upon the evidence of this former scientific enterprise: books with stained pages and charred edges, dusty cobwebbed laboratories. Can this later generation, MacIntyre asks, reconstruct from mere words, mere artifacts, what it really *meant*, what it really *was*, to be actively engaged in scientific pursuits? Only with the greatest difficulty. Science would need to be virtually reinvented. The words on pages and test tubes in the racks could not substitute for a living tradition.¹

So it seems for ecumenism, except for the fact that there are still persons around who remember that earlier age of excitement and conviction. I am one of them. I believe that ecumenical

commitment is still of the essence of who we are as Presbyterians. But today such a statement needs to be supported by background information, clarification, and, if possible, new vision. We live in a time when the Christian churches of the world are faced with new and serious challenges, both inside their own houses and without. They can deal adequately with such challenges only if they face them together. Furthermore, the ecumenical frontier remains the focus of many of our most engaging *theological* opportunities, i.e. possibilities of understanding the gospel more deeply than we have before.

I will try in these pages to explain to a new generation what all this is about. I will also try to sketch a new *kind* of ecumenical theology: a vision that is just coming over the horizon, a vision capable, I think, of injecting new life into a movement which in recent years has lost support. That new kind of "ecumenical" theology takes the word ecumenical and its Greek root *oikoumene* seriously. What the movement is about is not merely the churches: it is about "the whole inhabited world," about humanity as a household or people of God, moving toward the enactment of God's rule and the fulfillment of what it means to be called to be God's image in the universe. It asks what the churches might have to do to fulfil *that* biblically attested mission. Ecumenism, in short, is coming to see the Church of Jesus Christ as a global moral community which holds space open for the coming of God's reign among the whole of humanity.²

1. THE ECUMENICAL VISION: THEN AND NOW

It is hard now to imagine those early days. "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven," wrote Wordsworth (naively, we may now think) of the French Revolution. But there *was* something like bliss for young ecumenists in the late forties and early fifties. The ending of World War II, a determination never to let a Holocaust happen again, the founding of the United Nations, the neo-orthodox movement in theology giving us reason to hope that we could get it together, people flocking to church, the Presbyterian Church united in spirit and in the forefront of ecumenical awareness—this was indeed a heady time. Ecumenism seemed the wave of the present, and of the future as well. Who would not want to be "present at the creation" of so many potentially wonderful things? It would have been impossible, then, to imagine the evaporation of membership, the financial retrenchment, the mutual suspicion and distrust, the loss of energy and spirit, which we have suffered since.

As a "younger theologian" I soon learned, of course, that ecumenism had suffered many previous ups and downs, and would again. The late nineteenth century was a time of great optimism and energy, centered largely on the missionary movement and leading up to the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910. But World War I nearly snuffed it out. A much sobered vision of the world, combined with a determination that the horrors of trench warfare should not be repeated, greeted the Stockholm Life and Work Conference of 1925 and the Lausanne Faith and Order conference of 1927. The Great Depression slowed ecumenical progress and World War II sent ecumenical planning underground, from which it was to emerge with the founding of the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam in 1948. Yet even this post-war energy and optimism was soon to be dissipated in several directions. A weakening of neo-orthodoxy undermined ecumenism's theological rationale. Social movements of the 1960's—civil rights and anti-Vietnam war protests—both energized and divided ecumenism's social witness.

Of course the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) was a powerful stimulus with its great, open-hearted documents, among them the Sacred Constitution on the Church and the Decree on Ecumenism. Bilateral conversations involving Roman Catholics and others began in earnest. Indeed, the late sixties saw what

may have been the high water mark of the World Council of Churches up to that time, or even since. The Uppsala WCC Assembly of 1968 was abuzz with rumors that the Roman Catholic Church might be ready to join the Council. A program of global social witness by the churches to themselves and the rest of humanity seemed within reach. Signs of democratic flowering which might eventually defeat Eastern Europe's Communist dictatorships had been appearing for months.

I remember vividly the moment most of this optimism collapsed. It was not anything done in Rome or in Uppsala. My airline ticket for leaving the Assembly said, "Stockholm-Prague." On arrival at the airport I learned I was not going to Prague after all. No one was. Soviet tanks were rolling through Wenceslas Square. The "Prague Spring" was over, and with it much of my generation's youthful optimism that *anything* might be possible in God's world.

We have since been in a long, patient ecumenical building process. More WCC assemblies followed (New Delhi, Nairobi, Vancouver, Canberra). More Faith and Order meetings were planned and carried out. Significant ideas and initiatives emerged: the "conciliar unity" idea, the Program to Combat Racism, the Giving Account of Hope study, "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry," the Apostolic Faith Study, just to name a few. There were far more events and documents than could possibly be mentioned here. Yet as this energy and activity unfolded, attacks on ecumenical organizations from the far right (notably the *Reader's Digest*) did their damage: financial support of the World Council of Churches began to wane, interest by the churches began to evaporate, and a generation of ecumenical leadership passed away. The notion, rather widely held in the seventies and eighties, that the turn of the millennia might be an ecumenical triumph withered (except in the mind of John Paul II) under repeated evidence that the road to unity might be longer and harder than anyone could have imagined.

Where did the years go? Now we find ourselves in the middle of the final decade of the twentieth century, sobered by what we have been through. Is it possible, in the face of all this, to find a new ecumenical vision? There has been no single recent event such as the end of a great war to spur us on. Indeed the signs of

our times are profoundly ambiguous. On the one hand, we have witnessed a series of events which seem to justify hope: the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of *apartheid* and the election of Nelson Mandela in South Africa, repeated peace overtures in the Middle East and now in Bosnia, signs of progress in Northern Ireland. Have we learned something? Are we handling things better?

But the other side of the story seems equally compelling. In contrast to a series of hopeful *events*, we have to acknowledge the disheartening *conditions* of our lives. Moral confusion seems endemic to our times. Religious traditions retreat before the forces of consumerist individualism, the distrust of social institutions, and racial-cultural division. We live in an age of global tension based not only on rivalries among nation-states but also conflicts of civilizations as defined by history, language, and, above all, religion.³ Gang-type violence is on the increase all over the globe. Hordes of refugees are pressing at the borders of more privileged nations, and there will soon be more.⁴ We witness a progressive degradation of the human condition as we despoil the natural environment and trash our political institutions.⁵

Our continuing disunity prevents us from either making the most of hopeful events or constructively confronting the degrading circumstances of our times. An anecdote told by former WCC General Secretary Emilio Castro puts the matter memorably: "One of the most painful moments in my ecumenical experience was explaining to [West German President] Carl-Friedrich von Weisacker the ecclesiological difficulty of calling a council for peace. There he was, deeply and profoundly concerned with potential world nuclear catastrophe, and we as churches of Jesus Christ were responding that we could not overcome our historic internal disunity sufficiently to speak to the world with one voice in a dramatic manner, one able, perhaps, to impact the course of world events."⁶

We need to do better than this. For a new situation, we need a new vision. That could arise from realization that the word "ecumenical" means more than a union or cooperation among churches. It is a vision for the household of life, of humanity as such. Such a new vision may have begun to emerge in WCC General Secretary Konrad Raiser's book *Ecumenism in Transi-*

*tion: A Paradigm Shift for the Ecumenical Movement?*⁷ For him, the "household of God" is a reality more comprehensive than any existing ecclesiastical body can claim to represent. At the very least, it means the whole company of the baptized, and all those whom God has called by a baptism of the Spirit. Raiser calls for greater recognition of diversity in the Christian community. Persons and movements beyond this community also need to be taken into account. Raiser writes, "The biblically based perception of the *oikoumene*...is founded on the totality of relationships as well as structures; it is an expression of living interaction. ...It lives in the certainty that the earth is habitable, because God has established his covenant with the whole of creation, and is guided by the hope that God himself will dwell with humankind, with God's people."⁸ My own book, *The Sense of a People: Toward a Church for the Human Future*⁹ uses different terminology but shares much the same vision. It is a vision which speaks, with Joseph Haroutunian, of "the people of God and their institutions," meaning by this that churches are not ends in themselves but signs, sacraments, and instruments of God's larger reconciling work in the world. Revelation 21, the vision of the holy city where God dwells with humanity in "a new heaven and a new earth" is basic for both books. The churches are institutions which mark and hold space open for a new humanity in the perspective of God's reign to begin to appear. They are, to coin a word, harbinger spaces! How can such a vision begin to shape the reality of ecumenical striving?

2. THE TRAVAIL OF ECUMENICAL ORGANIZATIONS

If this new vision of the churches as a community representing the future of humankind is to have substance, we need to look at ecumenical organizations as its possible carriers. I have in mind mainly the World Council of Churches and the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. What are we to say of these organizations as vehicles for a new ecumenical vision today?

The first thing to say is that these institutions and others like them are important. Against the dismissive attitudes of young people and many others, Robert Bellah has shown us in his book *The Good Society* just how important they are. Institutions form us. They represent the way we habitually do things. They hold in being certain patterns of life and thought. Without them our work would not have tangible, lasting, results. We could not build a better world. It is too easy just to denigrate institutions, and extremely difficult to replace them when they are gone. We need to see why ecumenical institutions in particular transcend mere ideas to shape our lives in ways that can make a difference.

At the practical level ecumenical institutions borrow structural notions from many "secular" sources. The WCC and NCCC resemble many governmental and non-governmental organizations, with their boards of control and headquarters bureaucracies. They have also borrowed the 'movement' model from a variety of secular initiatives, as well as parliamentary models for running assemblies and meetings of all kinds. More importantly, however, they seek to discern the meaning for our time of an institutional vision not to be found in today's public world: the *conciliar* model based on the ancient "councils" of the Church. The conciliar model looks toward, even if it does not yet embody, a "conciliar" unity far deeper than what is meant by "council" in titles such as "World Council of Churches" or "National Council of Churches."

There is no space in this essay to say what should be said of the achievements of these ecumenical bodies. The account of assemblies and initiatives and studies offered in the preceding section of this paper gives only a superficial sense of the energies generated, the obstacles overcome, and the missions accomplished by the WCC and the NCCC. The fact that they have been

under attack, largely from the right and often falsely, cannot detract from the admiration they deserve. Anyone who knows anything about the church history of the twentieth century need only ask where we would have been without these bodies, in order to realize the difference they have made. A Rip Van Winckel asleep since 1890, or 1920, or even 1945, would be amazed at the changes in attitude of the churches toward one another and the cooperative works accomplished. Truly, for all our failings and disappointments, this is a different age. Ecumenical institutions deserve much of the credit.

It is important, therefore, to know enough about the achievements of councils of churches not to lose what they have gained for us. But it is also important to look ahead and see what must now be done to make them fit instruments of ecumenism in the days ahead. How far, and in what way, do various organizational models today serve as vehicles for the central conviction that we are being formed in a comprehensive *koinonia* of faith? I will offer three observations (not criticisms) concerning the WCC and the NCC which seem to me to catch their reality at this present time.

First, neither of these organizations has the monopoly on ecumenical reality and activity it once did. The WCC used to refer to itself as a "privileged instrument" of ecumenism. That may still be the case in certain ways. But ecumenism always did, and even more now does, include a great deal more than what comes within the specific compass of either WCC or NCCC. Take the question of the Roman Catholic Church, which nearly thirty years ago was thought by some to be on the verge of applying for WCC membership. The Roman Church is still formally outside these councils (although it is a full member of the WCC and NCCC Faith and Order Commissions). Many other Christian bodies also remain outside. Moreover, some of these 'outsiders' have their own ecumenical institutions. Steps need to be taken not merely to include them in the existing structures of the WCC and NCCC but to reform these structures to reflect a much larger ecumenical reality.

Second, there has always been a certain tension between the member churches with their perceived interests on the one hand, and the programs of ecumenical organizations on the other. In

some ways the tension is still growing. Sometimes it is simply expressed as growing indifference, or as preoccupation with other than ecumenical matters. Sometimes it is expressed as outright disagreement with council policies and actions. In part these differences reflect mutual misunderstandings between what Wade Clark Roof has called the "cosmopolitan" and "parochial" views of the world. Such tensions have been exacerbated (usually not deliberately) over the years by creative ecumenical staff persons who have visions beyond those officially sanctioned by the churches from which they come. Ecumenical organization staffs often represent unique ecclesial cultures in their own right. In earlier years many were shaped by an upbringing in the World Student Christian Federation. Many more recently have been nurtured in Geneva, or 475 Riverside Drive, or in some other ecumenical culture. Some ecumenical cultures have been extremely visionary and productive. But misunderstandings with those of other, more traditional, ecclesial cultures have sometimes been destructive to the movement.

Third, the WCC and NCCC have not been able to overcome the long-standing tension between those in their ranks who see ecumenism in "faith and order" terms and those who think in terms of "life and work." Although steps are being taken to overcome the disjunction, it must be stressed how damaging to the ecumenical cause this difference of fundamental direction has been. People concerned about unity in ministry and sacraments have been on a different wavelength from those involved, say, in the Program to Combat Racism. Efforts have been made to find some single wavelength on which all could communicate. The Commission on Faith and Order has dealt several times with "church and world" issues and their impact on the quest for unity. But here, too, we are dealing with different ecclesial cultures, different learned reactions, different habitual vocabularies. Faith and Order and Life and Work were historically different movements, even though some of the same people participated in both. Now these two ecumenical constituencies overlap in terms of personnel less than they used to.

Can we think of organizational arrangements which might better serve an ecumenical vision of humanity as God's household, of a future universal People of God? Both the WCC and the NCCC have been undergoing extensive self-studies. It is im-

possible in this space to recite all that these studies involve. Much of the concern has been internal and organizational in any case. Nevertheless, the WCC and NCCC studies have in common the insight that current ecumenical reality calls for institutional instruments which are more inclusive, more tolerant of cultural and theological differences, closer to representing what a real "household" or "people" of God might mean.

There are two obvious models for a reorganization of ecumenical organizations in this direction. One would be to broaden the membership of councils from "churches" as such to a variety of organizations and movements that are not ecclesiastical in the strict sense. One thinks, for example, of the National Association of Evangelicals, or the constituency represented by the Lausanne Conferences. The first problem here would be to identify who is eligible without being patronizing or seeming to impose definitions on others who will certainly come with their own ideas. The second problem would be to anticipate how the existing member churches might react. How might one deal with such questions? One could invent two parallel categories of membership, one for "churches" and one for other bodies. Or one could try to accomplish the same broadening of constituency programmatically, by including other groups and other energies in activities but not in formal structures. In either case, what price might the WCC and NCCC have to pay to gain the cooperation of outside groups which might not wish to be associated with either organization as it now is? Might moving toward one group such as the Roman Catholic Church or the National Association of Evangelicals damage one's credibility with the others?

Alternatively, one might start from scratch and build an association of ecumenical organizations of which the WCC and NCC would be members alongside other bodies. The WCC and NCCC would then presumably be distinguished as the bodies having "churches" as their constituencies, as opposed to movements with constituencies of other kinds. But who could, or would, take initiative to create this larger association, and what would its principles be? Might there be a loss of focus on the specific vision that has animated institutional ecumenism thus far?

I am of the conviction that some change of one or the other kind is needed. Such change must embrace the ecumenical world

as it really is, breaking down the false distinction between “evangelical” and “ecumenical.” It must also energize a real transformation, beyond what can occur within the current organizations and the forces at work there. We are clearly on the brink of a much broader understanding of who is included in ecumenism. How might we reconceive the deployment of ecumenical institutions in such a way that *both* evangelical and pentecostal groups *and* the Roman Catholic Church are at home?

Beyond the reconstituting of organizations of churches or denominations or other organizations, it is important that the genuine *spiritual energies* at work in world Christianity be included in an appropriate way. We need to tap the real centers of vitality more fully than we have in the past. What about seeking to bring together not only organizations but centers of intensity, forces, trends, types of spirituality? I see the great issue in Christianity in the next few years as recognizing the centers of Christian spiritual energy for what they are, while preventing them from separating from (or effectively ignoring) the organized churches. Centers of genuine spiritual power are now centrifugal in tendency. Feminist, African-American, Hispanic and Asian movements, for example, are not just theologies; they are divergent lived spiritualities, diverse ways Christians are being effectively formed in the faith. They are often very different from the ecumenical formations of the past forty years or so and very different from one another.

If we were to think in terms of an ecumenical umbrella covering these vastly different types of Christian spiritual formation, one of the results might be that the distinctively “liberal” way of interpreting and living the faith might begin to see itself as a distinctive spirituality too. Liberalism might no longer appear as a leadership culture hanging on for dear life at the apex of denominations whose members are not sure they want to follow, but rather as a form of Christian life in its own right, worthy of development and defense. Christian liberalism deserves a hearing. It is not getting one because it has no sense of its own distinctiveness, and therefore of its particular witness, as one of the spiritualities of the Christian world.

Where might the center of gravity of such an inclusive ecumenism prove to be located? How might one construct a plat-

form for a broader ecumenism that would draw in far more of those who understand themselves to be Christians without alienating former WCC or NCCC member churches that now would be unwilling to participate? In such questions formational issues begin to loom larger than purely theological ones. The issue becomes who you *are* in the faith, and therefore where you stand on moral issues that affect humankind. Moreover, moral questions would no longer be addressed by pronouncements emanating from a leadership class at the top. They would be addressed by large numbers of people believing and acting on the basis of how they were 'formed,' or 'brought up.'

The churches are already deeply rooted in many different formative cultures. We can demonstrate the capacity of the gospel to bring a more comprehensive unity into place, embracing many different cultural situations. We have a chance to help weave the many different faithful practices, forming us within their own story-lines, into a larger narrative which has room for many variants, yet leads to a common end in the reign of God.

It would seem to follow that councils such as the WCC and NCCC, however inclusively reconceived, should be our instruments for discerning the signs of the coming-to-be of the universal moral community of humankind, the realm in which God rules. If councils have a distinctive task of their own, it could be to help work out the larger meaning of that vision of the *oikoumene*, of the "household of God" or "household of life." Councils could help their member bodies, and their constituencies of the Spirit, move toward being genuine signs, sacraments, and instruments of that reality in the world.

3. BILATERAL DIALOGUES AND CHURCH UNION NEGOTIATIONS

There is more to ecumenism than councils of churches. Among other things, there are bilateral dialogues and church union negotiations. What can we say of these efforts in the larger context of institutional ecumenism just sketched?

The need for such formal dialogues and negotiations seems elusive to many of us. We are used to cooperative relationships at the local level and see no need for anything more. Considering how well we usually get along in this day and age, it seems incredible that Presbyterian ministries and sacraments, and even our basic faith-statements, are not formally recognized by Lutherans and Episcopalians, let alone Roman Catholics and Orthodox. Yet it is so. We are not “in communion.” This problem of basic recognition ought to have been solved long ago. Some say today that the reality of friendship and cooperation—especially in the light of the larger ecumenical vision discussed in the previous section—has simply overtaken formal ecclesiological categories. We should just declare that these things aren’t problems anymore, and get on with our business.

In some ways the people who say this (and they are many) are ahead of the dialoguers and negotiators, but in some ways they are not. They are ahead in following the leadings of the Spirit which simply ignore the lack of formal recognition between certain communions, encouraging a sheer neighborliness that naturally extends to sharing at the Table of the Lord. But these same people are often behind the dialoguers in that they do not grasp the total vision that animates ecumenical work. Neighborliness, amiable and even Spirit-filled as it often is, is frequently content to leave the *status quo* unchallenged and unchanged. The divisions that remain among us, anachronistic as they are, block wholehearted common pursuit of the ecumenical vision for us and for humankind.

Bilateral dialogues are formal conversations between theological representatives of the different *communions* or *confessions*: e.g. Anglican-Methodist, Lutheran-Orthodox, Reformed-Roman Catholic. These conversations may or may not be aimed at change in the relationships of the bodies concerned. Church union negotiations, on the other hand, typically aim at some new form of structural tie between particular *churches* or *denominations*, e.g. the Congregational and the Evangelical and Reformed to form the United Church of

Christ, or the major northern and southern branches of American Presbyterianism to form the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

a. Bilateral Dialogues.

Bilateral encounters involve a wide variety of communions and confessional groups. Some bilaterals are aimed simply at clarifying what the commonalities and differences among different groups of Christians are, without intending to build new relationships beyond whatever friendship and mutual trust the dialogue itself can engender. This is the situation, for example, between Presbyterians and Roman Catholics and Presbyterians and Eastern Orthodox. We are too far apart to expect any formal change in ecclesiastical relationships, but we can name the beliefs and practices in which we are united, and we can narrow down and define more clearly what really separates us. This type of bilateral generally looks for doctrinal agreement, or at least agreement of a conceptual sort that can be put in words on paper. As a format it is biased toward the verbal, building, as one observer has said, "fragile bridges of words between worlds." Still, such verbal bridges can be highly illuminating. The dialogical process clears away prejudices and misunderstandings of all sorts. It can often make more ambitious steps easier to take in the future.

Other bilateral dialogues are undertaken with new relationships specifically in mind. In this latter category, for example, are the recent conversations between American Presbyterians and Lutherans, designed to lead to full communion, or as Lutherans say, "full pulpit and altar fellowship." A similar aim has animated the recent conversations between American Lutherans and Episcopalians. These propose a "concordat" between the two denominations which would bring about a ministry fully recognized by both.

There have been scores of dialogues of both types, and the sum of their findings is impressive. The problem is to get the material used. Of course it does sometimes happen that the officialdom of a church does not accept the results achieved by that church's negotiators. This was the case when the Roman Catholic Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith declined to endorse, and in fact severely criticized, the joint report of the world-level Anglican-Roman Catholic conversation. Still, the achievement of bilateral talks in clarifying issues is there for the use of future generations of ecumenists to build upon. The fail-

ure of the Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue to win over theologians in the Vatican has not ended efforts of Anglicans and Roman Catholics to draw closer together. It has, in some ways, usefully sharpened the issues and cleared the air.

Furthermore, the bilateral format, together with our extensive accumulated experience in making it work, is there to be used for dialogues between parties other than confessions or communions—representatives of different Christian spiritual disciplines, for example. Why should bilateral conversations not take place between middle-American evangelicals (a distinctive spiritual culture) and “paleo-orthodox” Lutherans and Roman Catholics (another distinctive spiritual culture)? Why not a dialogue between liberal Protestant social activists and “Catholic Worker” priests, religious, and laypeople?

b. Union Negotiations.

Union negotiations among particular denominations have an even longer history than bilaterals. A number of these have succeeded in creating new bodies such as the United Church of Canada, the United Church of Christ, the Church of South India, the Church of North India, and so on. But church union activity of this sort has slowed to a snails pace. A proposal for union among Anglicans, Methodists and United Reformed in Britain failed by a narrow vote in one of the three legislative “houses” of the Church of England. There have been other failures, or efforts simply suspended for lack of progress.

The ‘union plan’ most immediately in question for Presbyterians and eight other denominations is that proposed by the “Consultation on Church Union.”¹⁰ COCU is an initiative that goes back to 1960. It produced an unsuccessful plan for structural union in 1970. A second, very different COCU proposal is now under consideration by the member churches, and remains open to any other churches that might want to join at this point. The Presbyterian General Assembly has already voted, first to enter (1993), and then to remain active in (1994), the COCU “covenanting” process. Our Church is now at work on internal polity changes thought to be necessary actually to enter the proposed covenantal relationship.¹¹ What is this all about?

COCU is not now what it has been in the past; the goal envisioned by COCU has changed significantly in recent years.

"Covenanting" is no longer envisioned as a preliminary step on the way to becoming a single, organized, church structure. In its current documents, COCU has removed all references to covenanting as an interim step toward something else. "Church union" has been defined in a new way. No longer do we look forward to consolidation of forms and structures, but to what the early church referred to a "communion in sacred things." That means becoming one in faith, sacraments, ministry, and mission. This is a unity which is visible and organic, whether or not church structures are united. This is a form of church unity broad enough and deep enough to permit an ever widening circle of churches to manifest their unity in Christ.¹²

Where could, or should, all this lead? *Churches in Covenant Communion*, makes clear that covenanting is not a step on the way to institutional, that is structural, consolidation among the member churches. That was the intent of the 1970 *Plan of Union* and it didn't work. But I think covenanting *might* lead to something far more interesting that has not been much talked about. COCU could turn out to show the way toward an ecclesial covenant, not merely of national denominations, but of locally lived Christian spiritualities. COCU offers us a plan for living together even at the parish or presbytery level which could hold together in the face of a possible future decline of the national denominational structures. Instead of denominations—which bring into our lives the results of otherwise long-forgotten controversies—we may well see Christianity in America evolve in the direction of becoming more like an array of formational spiritualities, distinct ways of training and gathering people in the faith. Could the oft-foreseen realignment of the energies in American protestantism be held together in something like this "covenanting" mode? Could an idea invented to bring the denominations closer together in mutual recognition and reconciliation serve also as a comprehensive form of life for what might succeed the denominations? This transition could take a long while. It would be a transition from national bureaucracies servicing networks of parishes to distinctive life-shaping spiritual disciplines giving substance to the life of local congregations. As we understand what it means to think about spiritual formation, and as we grasp the need to revive theologically informed traditions of life, we will begin to see our way clear to a new ordering of Christian life in America.

4. MORAL FORMATION IN CHURCH AND WORLD

As we seek to focus the *possibility of a new ecumenical vision* we are faced with the question of the relation between the unity of the world's Christian communions and our common moral witness in engagement with all that is going on in the world. This is the question which the WCC calls the issue of "ecclesiology and ethics."

In fact, this is an old conundrum in the ecumenical movement. Behind it lie the parallel histories of the Faith and Order and Life and Work movements: on the one hand the Faith and Order effort to articulate the church's essential being and unity, on the other a Life and Work focus on what the church and its members do in the world in consequence of the gospel. We have always known that these concerns are interrelated, but circumstances, both theological and institutional, have tended to keep them in separate compartments of concern. Despite highly focused efforts to overcome this division, despite reams of ecumenical drafting which hold ecclesiology and ethics together in the same paragraphs and even the same sentences, we have not yet achieved a comprehensive, vital, and energizing frame of reference for seeing them as one.

A new effort to find such a comprehensive frame of reference is now being carried on by WCC Units on 'Unity and Renewal' and 'Justice, Peace, and Creation.' The Ronde (Denmark) Consultation in 1993, was a major effort to bridge the gap, producing a text, *Costly Unity*, that was transmitted to the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order at Santiago de Compostela in August of that year. A subsequent consultation in Tantur (Israel) took up the issues again. The report of the Tantur meeting has been issued under the title *Costly Commitment*.¹³ There will be yet another consultation in the same series in the spring of 1996.

All this discussion, and much going on elsewhere as well, has produced talk of a "new paradigm" in the ecumenical world: one in which the unity of the church is seen as inexplicable apart from God's worldly work, and in which the meaning of the human journey as such is thought adequately signified only in the church's *koinonia* or communion. *Costly Unity* mentions both themes and seeks to grasp them together:

...faith has always claimed the being of the church as itself a "moral" reality. Faith and discipleship are em-

bodied in and as a community way of life. The memory of Jesus Christ (*anamnesis*), formative of the church itself, is a force shaping of moral existence. The Trinity is experienced as an image for human community and the basis for social doctrine and ecclesial reality.¹⁴

Stanley Hauerwas has made the same point in an aphorism: "the church does not *have* a social ethic; the church *is* a social ethic."¹⁵ What might it really mean to say this? Does there lie here the possibility of a new way of looking at ecclesiology: one which sees the unity of the church tied closely to the question of a moral vision for the human race understood as a "household of God" or "household of life?"¹⁶

The moral power of Christian faith—that which relates it to the whole human world and thereby forecasts the coming of the reign of God—is much more fully located in spiritual energies translated into congregational life or *koinonia* than it is in the moral arguments of academic specialists or ecumenical staff members. I believe we must begin to consider the different spiritual cultures of Christianity as distinctive places of *moral formation*. If we do this, we must also reflect on the formative power of the different practices and commitments of the contemporary world. (Some would say that the worldly formations we undergo today are more powerful than those we experience in church.)

Any community of which we are members 'forms' us in the sense of orienting us to the world in a certain way, encouraging certain kinds of behavior and discouraging others. An emphasis on local and ecumenical formation could point us toward emphasis on actual communities with their cultures: toward what anthropologists call the complex "thickness" of lives actually lived.¹⁷ It could link up with the historic traditions of Christian spirituality, leading us to reflection on the way human lives may be oriented around ultimate concerns through different 'exercises' of the spirit.

Notions of "formation" and "spirituality" not only point to the energies already present in the wider ecumenical world, they also open up an exceptionally rich perspectives on the topic of "ecclesiology and ethics." Therefore, we need to look more closely at how moral formation actually works, first in the church and then in the world, finally focusing on the interaction between the two.

a. Congregations as Morally Formative Communities

Surely congregations are nurturers of moral awareness. Effectively or not, with better or worse outcomes, congregations engender certain ways of seeing life just by being the kinds of communities they are. Indeed it is evident that ecclesiastical politics play out in certain local forms of life, certain ways of living, that shape the way church members comport themselves in the world. There is no way of talking about Christian ethics without asking how the congregation functions in moral formation.

Although it is obvious that congregations do this, considering ethics in the context of formation marks a departure in ecumenical theological method. Most ethical reflection in the ecumenical movement has been done on an inference model rather than a formation model. That is to say, individual thinkers—theologians, ecumenical staff persons—have sought to reason from this or that aspect of the Christian message to the moral consequences.¹⁸ But now we are asking about the actual thinking that goes on in the congregation and on the congregation's capacity to form people, to shape their moral patterns of action by the kind of community it is and by the kind of nurture it provides. Such shaping and nurturing go on whether we focus our attention on formation as such or not. The ways a spiritual community is ordered, its internal habits, all have moral consequences. In *this* formational sense, then, no one can deny that ecclesiology and ethics go together. To be in the Christian community is to be shaped in a certain way of life.

To be sure, formation has been more consciously operative at some times and places than others. The term "formation" is more familiar to people in the catholic traditions where the word is used to describe one aspect of theological education or the preparation of novices for full membership in monastic communities. The fact that "spirituality" is a growing interest in certain protestant traditions that did not know they had such a thing is all to the good. Far from being something only for the dedicated few, spirituality can mean every Christian's faith-formation: the ways of worship and work which shape our fundamental attitudes to life, our sense of what is real, and indeed the ways we understand the being of God. (The "protestant ethic" is certainly formational in its own way, with the central notion that one's worldly work can be as much a Christian vocation as any more

ecclesiastical calling, and that therefore it needs to be understood and pursued in a way worthy of the gospel.)

However conceived, the move to an emphasis on formation also has important implications for ecumenical politics. By taking seriously the duty of pastors and congregations to bring people to heightened moral awareness, we tie ourselves to whatever proves to be *possible* in this regard. Congregations and communions often take stances which frustrate politically revisionary theologians who seem, at least to their critics, to identify ecumenical witness with liberal moral stands. Furthermore, an emphasis on moral formation is likely to disclose disagreements that have not previously surfaced in Faith and Order discussion. The question of the moral attitude the church should take toward homosexuality—especially where ordination is concerned—has already been divisive. The action of Greek and Russian Orthodox leadership in suspending their churches' membership in the National Council of the Churches of Christ a few years ago over the issue of the Council's even *entertaining* a membership application from the Council of Metropolitan Community Churches shows how quickly a moral question can take on ecclesiological significance.

Still, for most of us, to speak of formation in the congregation is more challenge than accomplishment. We are not doing it well. Most Christian congregations today, especially in the West, are not very effective communities of moral nurture. Under the fragmenting pressures of modern life, we are not transmitting tradition from one generation to the next. We are suffering a grievous loss of biblical literacy. Furthermore, an emphasis on teaching and learning in every congregation may well disclose how contextually specific many congregations have become, how many *local* versions of the faith are being practiced in the world today. The present generation may be far less formed by the churches in Scripture and apostolic tradition than at any time in the recent past.

Much of the literature of congregational life nonetheless sounds as if the congregation were a total cultural environment, as if it were possible to take up the world's story entirely into the Christian story. But total cultural environments scarcely exist in the contemporary world. Most of us exist in a multiplicity of cul-

tural environments, and engage in several different occupational and familial practices, each with its own symbolism, logic, customs, and the like. Pluralism enters our personhood. We are literally multiple selves. We are formed in different, and perhaps divergent, ways by our lives in the church, in our families, in our secular occupations, and perhaps in political, recreational, or other activities as well. Each of these spheres of life is a distinct culture in its own right. The relation of the community called church to all of these other cultural situations varies from place to place, but the problem is unavoidable. 'Ecclesiology' maps only part of the setting for faithful life.

To recover anything like the 'forming' role the Church once had would have to mean restoration of the sorts of religious communities that existed in pre-modern times. That is not likely to happen short of some disaster wiping out the structures of the modern world. What people need and want is guidance in living their daily lives, exposed as they are to the corrosive pressures of state and market, to the beguilements of many alternative lifestyles. We need to find a way to *integrate* personal moral issues with questions of social ethics and the public weal. We have not made clear at the level of congregational life what a moral strategy for life in the household of God would look like. Many persons of faith simply do not recognize the sort of moral engagement we have in mind as a vocation for themselves. Conversely, many of the most effective Christians in the world's struggles have difficulty relating their moral and political convictions to the faith they are being taught in Church. In ecumenical organizations, our preoccupation with global strategies and large ideas may well divert us from the responsibility of making sense of all this for the average Christian.

b. The World as Arena of Spiritual-Moral Formation

We are formed as spiritual-moral beings not only in church but also in the larger social world, the *oikoumene* in the larger sense which I have been talking about. We are shaped as the people we are by having been born and grown up at a given time and place in world history. We are members of many secular communities of formation: educational, occupational, financial, political. As Christians, we are called to engage these diverse worlds in the name of the gospel. Right now the effort at social engagement in the World Council of Churches focuses on an effort to

foster “justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.” Does our analysis of ‘formation’ issues throw light on this commitment?

First, most of us realize that our late-twentieth-century age entertains a remarkable set of secular moral assumptions which seem to enjoy broad support. These are significant achievements in their own ways. In the West, we find a notable, seemingly cross-cultural, agreement about human rights. Many see Amnesty International as an “exercise of the conscience of the world.” There seems to be growing agreement that the welfare of persons *as such* deserves protection under all circumstances. This broad accord plays itself out in the nearly universal condemnation (if not yet the elimination) of slavery, child labor, torture, and the like. This is connected with the notions of civil rights for racial-ethnic minorities and of the political and economic rights of women.¹⁹

These are not the assumptions of most other ages of human history, and indeed their basis may be more precarious than we think. While this modern moral code is thought by many secularists to have a rational basis independent of any and all religious doctrines, little agreement exists about what that rational basis is, and none appears to be in sight. Yet Christians as well as everyone else are significantly formed by this contemporary moral agenda, and indeed are welcome to interpret it in relation to a larger theological conception of life if this will help bolster the larger community’s processes of moral education.

There is a further level of worldly moral formation related to the different spheres of social life: home, office, school, business, politics, and so on. While the ‘rights’ agenda gives us clues as to what ‘justice’ entails, the actual meaning of justice plays out differently in each of these cases and serves repeatedly to test the adequacy of our general conception. Likewise formation goes on in the characteristic practices of our world. Various performance standards, assumptions, and ideas of good practice are embedded in the ethos of what it means to be a stockbroker, or a truck driver, or a homemaker, or a politician. Each practice requires certain skills, but also a certain set of attitudes. These standards—what it takes to succeed in each particular calling—form us as much as does the general ethos of modernity, and indeed contribute strongly to that ethos. Such practical ‘goods’

are not necessarily parts of any transcending moral awareness or of any horizontal assumptions of what it is to be human. They are embedded in what we do, and in how we live.

The different spheres of life and practices of the contemporary world are inter-related to produce a complex whole: the material civilization which covers the entire earth and exists in one form or another in all human cultures. The nexus which connects our different 'worldly' practices today is above all economic in character. We live in an age of inter-connected trans-national business to which governments become beholden, to which politicians must bow. Other fields are colonized, if not invaded, by this money-nexus. The practice of law is mostly about money, a commodity thought capable of compensating people for every misfortune, including death. Even medical ethics, in this day of various forms of business or governmental management of care, becomes a form of economic ethics. Some societies in the 'capitalist world' teeter on the brink of seeing medical services as a commodity whose distribution should be based not on rights and obligations we share as human beings but on market forces: supply and demand, the ability to pay.

One must ask if the economic nexus in which we live is in the process of undermining our deeper sense of the 'rights' of persons: rights as something we have in virtue of being persons, not in virtue of having wealth? 'Rights' are now being interpreted as the right to economic gain, the right to be left alone in our acquisitiveness, irrespective of social consequences or what it does to our souls. The primary values of our global civilization seem to be production, consumption, and the acquisition of capital. These formative values compete strongly with the values of moral formation found in the churches. It could well be that the inter-connection of modern practices in a global economic nexus comes closer than Max Weber could ever have imagined to enclosing us in an "iron cage:" not so much of industrialism *per se*, but of a nexus of wealth for the few and poverty for the many, combined with materialist values that erode both public institutions and individual lives.

c. Churchly Formation and Worldly Formation in Dialogue

How do our churchly and worldly formations interact? Can the formation we have undergone in church prepare us to bear wit-

ness to the gospel among the equally formative practices and institutions of the public world? Translated into 'formation' terminology, this is the practical heart of our question about "ecclesiology and ethics."

A recent World Council of Churches document includes two fascinating paragraphs:

69. ...the boundaries of moral formation in church and world are fluid. The Church has its own moral substance. This can be seen in the moral deposit of the ecumenical struggles of recent decades: reverence for the dignity of all persons as creatures of God, affirmation of the fundamental equality of women and men, the option for the poor, the rejection of all racial barriers, a strong "no" to nuclear armament, pursuit of non-violent strategies of conflict resolution, the responsible stewardship of the environment, etc. Yet even this has been drawn out by moral struggles in society in which the church has had to learn at least as much as it has taught. In this way the efforts of moral formation in society have carried their own ecclesial significance: the church has often learned how better to *be* church through these efforts.

70. There is something crucial here: moral struggle, discernment and formation are not simply to be "annexed" to our understandings and ways of being church and used to draw out the genuine treasures of our traditions. They also challenge those deeply and teach us to learn from the world (which is, after all, God's) how better to recognize and "be" church as a faithful way of life. The kind of "*koinonia*" born in the cooperation of people of good will around specific struggles for a peaceful, just, and sustainable world may not be ecclesial *per se*. But it has ecclesial consequences in that it, too, is part of the spiritual and moral formation of the church itself as mediated by others in God's world.²⁰

There are two broad points here. Ecumenical relationships and efforts have brought us to broad agreement on a certain "moral substance" to which, as churches, we are prepared to bear witness. But we have reached that point partly by learning from the

moral achievements of the world, as well as the moral failures, which have some times helped us *be* the church in more authentic ways. Clearly, there is a dialectic here. On the one hand, the worldly formation we experience creates conditions for the church-formed moral witness we are able (or have the vision) to live out. But on the other hand, morally formed Christians can, by grace, model their societies' God-given possibilities. They can act out their socially conditioned roles as signs of God's already present and yet coming reign. They learn more about the meaning of the gospel in the process. We need to look at the complex ways in which we both form and are formed.

The moral witnessing of Christians needs to take account of the kinds of values already present in the 'secular' world and find appropriate ways of relating to them. Nominally Christian societies have sometimes enacted what the churches saw to be part of the genius of their own message. The outlawing of slavery and child labor, or the establishment of universal public education, are examples. But the secular success of church-instigated or church-backed policies has often set social processes in motion which, in time, leave the churches marginalized. Schools, hospitals, human rights laws, and the like, have often gained independent momentum and have abandoned their original ecclesial and moral roots. Finding themselves shunted aside by such secularizing processes, the churches have sought other ways to remain socially involved. Sometimes they have begun to reflect in their own lives the institutionally secularized forms of their original theological insights. They have relearned their own messages from the world, but in thinned-out and distorted forms. Victims of their own success, they have become captives to the cultural achievements of earlier ages of faith rather than places of genuine contemporary formation in the faith. In a generation or less the distinctive outlines of the gospel have begun to disappear.²¹

It is little wonder that certain theologians are now calling for a clean break from such well-meaning captivity to 'Christian' culture and a return to the sort of ecclesial-moral formation that stresses the special story of the community of faith in the midst of a world that has forgotten its spiritual origins.²² Such a return to genuinely distinctive formation may well be prerequisite to any genuine worldly witness. Once this is accomplished (no easy

task), and once we understand the limitations and dangers in posed by the way history has formed the complex church-world relationship in each particular situation, we are ready to grasp the possibilities for witness in our own time and place. Three dimensions of this sense of possibility (among many that could be adduced) now need to be drawn out.

First, a Christian formation can produce perspectives needed to mount principled criticism of the ways in which the moral achievements of secular cultures are now being interpreted and lived out. Imposing as they may be, and originally traceable to Christian influence as they in part are, such notions as individual liberty and justice have become not only distorted but also precarious. For two centuries secular thinkers have been determined to replace the despised religious reasons for these virtues with arguments about human autonomy and coming of age. But while they have produced innumerable secular treatises on justice, liberty, and other public virtues, they disagree with one another and have failed to win widespread support for their theories (either in or beyond the academic world). These efforts deserve to be honored for the insights they generate; indeed, they should engage our serious analytical interest. But the fact remains that our basic civic virtues now subsist without *any* broadly accepted ideational underpinning capable of supporting them and maintaining their fundamental character. The principle of human rights has become a *rightism*, in which the defense of 'rights' becomes the maintenance of all sorts of personal or special-interest claims, whatever their social value, against all comers.²³ We have forgotten that respect for persons and for the sanctity of life lie behind our rights, and that rights carry with them public responsibilities. One can claim rights in a way that forfeits one's dignity as a person. The world needs critical rearticulation of the basis of its own moral assumptions. It has lost the sense—once occasionally heard in public debate—of human grandeur and misery, of goodness and evil. We citizens of post-modernity do not understand ourselves as human beings. We practice debased versions of our virtues, to the point that they become the splendid vices St. Augustine so eloquently identified in the declining Roman Empire of his time. A refusal by the churches to identify with these fading and confused values and a critical recovery of formation in the authentic tradition of

faith is a first step toward genuine moral witness today.²⁴

Second, such a Christian formation, once achieved, can produce traits of character needed to help threatened democratic institutions in order to work. One does not have to baptize such institutions to want them to serve human well-being. But many of our best-conceived social practices, including those with originally religious motivations, are not functioning well. The competitive assertion of rights without recognition of responsibilities undermines social cohesion and the functioning of democratic institutions. Many nations possess the institutional forms of democracy, some old, some very new, but not the attitudes needed to make them succeed. What is needed is a citizenship publicly exercised, perhaps without overt Christian claims, yet evincing a generosity of spirit which exceeds the basic requirements of justice.²⁵ Without some who act *better* than they need to, social mechanisms go awry. Such witness may well be given *incognito*, as the social participation of good citizens who have valuable qualities of citizenship whose origins in Christian formation are not trumpeted about. If there is anything churchly moral formation can do for public life it is to generate persons who are quietly discerning and selflessly contributing. It can help us see what is needed among the practices of secular culture and work among these practices to supply it.

Third, there are instances of insight, generosity, courage and wisdom in the world akin to those taught by the Christian message but not directly related to it. There is 'secular' goodness which needs to be celebrated and encouraged. People may be better, and act better, than their accounts of themselves would lead us to expect. There are many in whom the Spirit may well be working who are theologically tongue-tied, who have found no adequate language for talking about the ultimate dimensions of their lives, but nonetheless put many Christians to shame by their devotion to the public good. But it is the Christian community which has the story of God's generosity, a story that makes sense of these moments of being better, and also makes sense of situations in which there is no being better but only human evil. In short, we are formed in a meta-narrative which society needs for the very possibility of understanding itself. If this is so, congregations can decode the signs of God's reign, become involved in aspects of society that seem to represent this reign appearing, and live a

story more adequate for the history of humanity than secular myths, powerful as they are. Congregations, whose members are formed by their 'worldly' occupations in attitudes and forms of life characteristic of secular society, are places where this society is re-formed in ways that bring out how God is at work, and that lift up the potential of this society to be a place where the reign of God is present and to come. When such potential is discerned, the time comes to speak and act: to ally oneself with the works of the Spirit and resist those of the Evil One. Congregations earn the right to be heard when they have critically understood the society around them and have also participated in building that society, thereby gaining a genuine stake in its life.

This imaginative, energy-releasing re-forming of the secular world around the narratives of faith, hope, and love can be understood and acted out in terms of several different church-world models familiar to us from church history. It is important not to take these models as disguised descriptions of particular confessions or communions, for most live out several different models of church-world relationship. They tend to stress one or another model without disowning the others. Although the different formational 'types' are described discretely for purposes of clarity, it is not always possible to isolate a pure example of each one in the real world, most actual examples are mixed. A community primarily committed to the sacramental model, for example, may nonetheless be prophetic, or responsible in a worldly way. A community committed to worldly responsibility may nonetheless attach high value to the sacraments. Any model of church-world formation may give rise to a "confessing church" if the need arises.

A sacramental model sees the very substance of the world's work, with the values embodied in its practices, taken up and transformed in the eucharistic act under the forms of bread, wine and the presence of the gathered community. We incorporate the liturgy beyond the "liturgy into the liturgy" itself, and vice versa. We re-order the very material content of our practical interactions with society and with creation into a new and transformative story which changes their substance to become the expression of Christ's presence among us in the power of the Holy Spirit.

A *discipleship* model employs the root metaphor of following Jesus, in which persons leave the formation they have received in their worldly occupations, yet take some of these practical understandings into a context which re-forms them around a new center of value and purpose. From being shaped by the mores of commercial fishing, Simon and Andrew are called to apply their skills to being "fishers of human beings." Discipleship is a costly walk through the world with Jesus Christ in which worldly skills are turned to the purposes of the Kingdom. The church is the community of those who recognizably share this new formation.

A *worldly responsibility* model turns the Jesus-following emphasis of discipleship outward, receiving by faith and repentance a gracious re-orientation of the will in the midst of worldly institutions and practices. The redeemed Christian takes special responsibility for these practices, with their characteristic kinds of secular formation, as social institutions which exist by God's will to serve God's purposes of ordering human life. One can be a businessman or professional person or government official, recognizing what constitutes 'good practice' in any or all such realms, yet practicing these virtues for the glory of God.

A *prophetic church* model seeks to denounce those worldly situations where injustice and false witness abound and to discern and point out those situations where signs of the God's reign are present. Its hallmarks are discerning insight on the one hand and engaged witness on the other. The prophetic church seeks to locate itself socially in such a way as to be a symbolic expression of its message, making its presence felt among the world's formative practices, and offering an alternative style of selfhood to those who may not otherwise see such a possibility. The prophetic church sees itself as a herald of God's present and coming reign in midst of history.

A *communitarian* model seeks to represent the highest possibilities of the culture in which it lives. It sees the

values of its social setting as capable of representing Gods will in the world. It sees the church as articulating and helping to maintain a theological interpretation of those values, recalling them continually to their higher purpose. In this model the Church is articulator of the soul of a people or nation, the place where the noblest aspirations of a people are acted out, a place, perhaps, where great civic ceremonies take place. Worldly formation and Christian formation come close together and occasionally are indistinguishable.

A *confessing church* arises as an act of prophetic resistance where there is a clear and present danger, or the actuality, of a church's being captured by its envioning culture to the point of apostasy. The confessing church places a total Christian formation over against the values and practices of the world, exorcising the idolatry of a society's institutions *and* of the broader church's connivance in them, proclaiming God in Jesus Christ as the sole object of our worship and obedience. Any historic Christian paradigm may give rise to a 'confessing church' protest in case of need. This alternative tends to be most effective in particular historic moments and is difficult to maintain over long periods. It relies on a gathering of sensitive and responsible leadership around a particular expression of faithfulness in clear opposition to the demons and idols lurking under cover of an ecclesiastical establishment.

5. ARTICULATING THE OIKOUMENE

From many experiences of church-world formation and from many kinds of spiritual shaping, we come together to try to articulate—to find language and structure for—the *oikoumene* they imply. What is the whole purpose of God, of which these formational experiences are partial appearances? How do we put together these lived clues to what it might mean for humanity to realize its calling to Gods 'image' in the universe?

At this moment in our journey the WCC and other ecumenical bodies are using the Greek word *koinonia* as a key term for grasping what this *oikoumene* might mean. The term has a range of meanings, well brought out in the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order at Santiago de Compostela, Spain. *Koinonia* has strong formational connotations, indicating a living-together which shares a certain spiritual substance, a common rootage in some particular religio-cultural "thickness."²⁶ For some the notion of formation also has philosophical implications. Formation in the things of God enables us to participate in God's Being, in the most fundamental nature of things as God has created and redeemed them.²⁷

We experience various forms of this *koinonia* in our different confessions and communions. Our problem is that the comprehensive *oikoumene* of God, to which our existing forms of *koinonia* point, remains a prophetic vision expressed in theological concepts, in various common activities, in certain more or less bureaucratic institutions. These ideas, activities and institutions represent the ecumenical vision in the world. They mark it, hold a place open for it, but they are not yet the substance of it. The comprehensive *oikoumene* of God does not yet exist in the world with the kind of tradition and substance and "thickness" that can truly form people ecclesially and morally.

Yet there are anticipations of this ecumenical *koinonia*. The nearness of the comprehensive, inclusive communion which is God's will has been palpable during many ecumenical events.²⁸ There are also places of ecumenical culture, of ecumenical spirituality, in which many (but few in relation to the churches' total memberships) have been formed. One thinks of the formation that used to go on in ecumenical work camps, in many national Student Christian Movements, in the World Student Christian

Federation, and even now among staff members, committees and adherents of councils of churches. But such ecumenical formation has not been sufficiently comprehensive, continuing and deep. It has been for a privileged few. It has seldom involved the whole of people's lives. It has not yet produced a profound spiritual tradition of its own. It has always tended to represent some of the existing ecclesial traditions of formation better than others, sometimes leaving whole communions and confessions feeling effectively unrepresented.

Articulating the visible form or forms of a truly comprehensive *koinonia* remains our problem: a problem theological and institutional at the same time. We have already seen how we borrow institutional concepts from the many secular models existing all around us. And there is a further question. Can we discern instances of this same *koinonia* in efforts to seek human unity and well-being beyond the boundaries of the visible church so defined? Many want to distinguish between the *koinonia* that explicitly proclaims Jesus Christ and those forms of communion that exist where people form intensive spiritual communities devoted to wrestling with moral issues in the human world. From time to time we do express solidarity with such outside groups: especially those that evince qualities of loyalty, devotion, and staying-power which resemble those of *koinonia* in the Spirit of God. We feel a genuine kinship, yet not a total identification. Should such relationships be accounted for in ecclesiological categories or in some other way? And, if the appropriate categories are ecclesiological, how should they be articulated?

We may well decide that the word *koinonia* should be explicitly reserved for communities which confess Jesus Christ. Such a decision undoubtedly reduces terminological confusion. But it does not make the underlying question go away. Can we discern the work of God in enterprises which intensively seek the unity of humankind on apparently secular grounds? Do they manifest God's purposes, as it were, *incognito*? Can we see in them, and name, the presence of the very same Spirit in whose gathering and energizing power we seek to realize the *oikoumene* in Jesus Christ? My own answer, which will not be shared by everyone, is a cautious "yes." God is at work both inside and outside the visible Church. There are fragments, partial manifestations, distorted but recognizable reflections, of the reign of God out in the

world which it is the task of the visible churches to discern, and of whose meaning and ultimate direction the churches are called to be signs, sacraments and instruments.²⁹ After all, many persons engaged in these efforts toward human well-being are our members, formed in our own confessions and communions. These members of the Body of Christ long for a clearer understanding of the relation between their membership in the Body and their moral commitments in the world.

Possibly that relationship, with the distinction it entails, could be indicated by contrasting the word *Koinonia* (with upper-case K) with *koinonia* (lower-case k). The first indicates a deeper, fuller, more continuing moral-ecclesial formation in which faith in Jesus Christ is explicit. The second then refers to morally formative commitments in which some of Gods purposes can be found, efforts with which Christians can and should be critically engaged. The distinction then is parallel to the distinction between Holy Spirit (upper-case S) and human spirit (lower case s) in which Holy Spirit, by God's grace, may come to dwell.

Can serious engagement with non-ecclesial but clearly intentional communities of spiritual-moral *koinonia* help us determine if the Spirit of God is at work there?³⁰ Can such engagement, indeed, bring us closer to the unity in Jesus Christ which we seek? This question cannot be answered merely by constructing theological arguments. Only the actual experience of engagement can tell. And here the capacity most needed is another term from the vocabulary of spiritual formation: *discernment* (the Greek verb *diakrino*). The word means 'to find particular meanings, qualities or possibilities in persons or situations.' But it also means to make appropriate distinctions. Discernment itself is a gift of the Spirit of God. But we will only be discerning about that which we know at first hand, by personal experience. That is why knowing the human world thoroughly is the first step on the way to discovering how the Spirit of God may be at work there in ecclesiologically significant ways.

It is important in this connection for thinkers of the Christian *oikoumene* (or "household") to be familiar with secular attempts to construct an *oikoumene* of reason and moral discourse, and indeed to enter into conversation with them. Despite their failure to agree among themselves, they are important for our own self-understanding. It is too easy simply to assume, as some Chris-

tian theologians appear to do, that such secular attempts at a universal moral philosophy are to be discounted because the philosophers do not agree, because of the failure of philosophical coherence in this realm. Moreover, our commitment to a program focused on "justice, peace, and the integrity of creation" immediately requires attention to secular constructs of these values in particular. It will not do to speak of 'justice' without being in conversation with those concerned about it in the contemporary world.³¹ Not only are there non-Christian movements which focus on a variety of issues of human well-being, but many of these movements and organizations have their own conceptions of the "whole inhabited world," seeking to realize visions for the nature and destiny of humanity. Some of these visions appear to share certain Christian values, but they also stand as global alternatives to the Christian sense of *oikoumene*.

Finally, we must not forget that most of us, churches and the many secular movements alike, stand together against the most powerful single force at work herding human beings into a kind of global unity which could prove demonic: the global economic and monetary network of trans-national business, supported by governments and central banks interconnected by computers across the earth. The global media, which control the flow of information to large numbers of human beings, are part of this combination. They are being captured by fewer and fewer enormously wealthy financial organizations. These great centers of wealth increasingly control political life within nations, spending enormous sums to manipulate and deceive the people. These are moral issues of the highest importance. In a struggle for human flourishing, in the battle against reduction of human beings to mere mindless consumers, the spiritual forces in this world need to make common cause. Our discernment of the presence of the Spirit of God needs to go on in effective solidarity with those who share this practical concern. We can sometimes recognize both the formation and the values concerned as analogous to those present in Christian tradition but now ramified in ways we had not imagined.

Our shared concern about the impact of a global market economy on the human life-world is a commitment to the worlds people as opposed to the worlds power structures. This in turn requires a commitment to those most likely to be left out of our

moral dialogues altogether. These are the large majority of the human race who have a vivid, if inarticulate, sense of justice and injustice, but who do not participate in sophisticated moral arguments or try to articulate the ends of human life in "ecumenical" terms. There is something elementally universal in the experience of being powerless, put upon, exploited, excluded. The well-known "preferential option for the poor" is not only a commitment to aid and support the economically deprived. It is also a strategy of solidarity with the insecurity that lies at the heart of everyone's life and is most manifest in the experience of having no control over one's life or circumstances. It is also a strategy of solidarity with the *discourse* of the poor, a human language more subjugated and yet more inclusive, indeed more ecumenical, than any other. In that language we can hear echos of the words of the Suffering Servant of God.

6. The Vision of Revelation 21

Let us sum up and complete our argument. Moving toward unity in the *koinonia* of God, the churches become *signs* of God's gathering a universal people by the power of the Holy Spirit. For us, Church and world, with the kinds of *koinonia* they offer, must be distinguished because we are in a time penultimate to that fulfillment. But on the evidence of Revelation 21, the realms of *ekklesia*, and of God's reign as universal moral commonwealth, must finally coincide. In the end, God gathers one people to the Holy City, a community in whose life the contrast between 'secular' and 'religious' no longer applies. These are constructs belonging to an unfulfilled world. Indeed, in this representation of the Beloved Community, all the usual penultimate distinctions are transcended: between the natural and the supernatural, between the clerical and the lay, between theological language and other language.

We are told of "a new heaven *and* a new earth." The two have apparently become a single habitation for the saints of God. Here, by the power of the Spirit, is the enactment in space and time of the vision of the household in which God "dwells." What are the implications of this imaginative picture of the end-time? We have here the fulfillment of the original divine purpose sketched in Genesis 3: the creation of humankind to be God's image in creation and history.³² The *imago Dei* turns out not to refer—as theologians have speculated for centuries—to some particular characteristic of the human which separates us from other living things; it is not the ability to think and reflect, the power of speech, or the "immortal soul." Rather, the entire human community is here called to make God's "glory" (in Hebrew the *kabodh* or *shekinah*) present to the universe. The Holy City becomes the locus of this presence, this glory: the place where God dwells (Greek *skēnosei*, literally "tents") in the midst of God's people, to be their God. This fulfillment of the *imago Dei* is thus the living presence of God, Godself, who gathers and constitutes the community of the end-time. This form of the "image of God" ceases to be a mere sign which substitutes for, refers to, something absent. This "image of God" is that to which it points, rendering God present by being the actual locus of God's reality. The Holy City (not only the elements of bread and wine) thereby becomes sacramental in the fullest sense of "real presence."

Our distinctively ecclesial language then becomes one with the moral language of the heavenly city where God dwells with God's people. In the consummatory vision there is no longer any special faith-language separate and distinct from the discourse which constitutes the beloved community itself.³³ On the way to that end, church and theology fulfil their function by keeping space open in the human community for the seeds of this fulfillment—those possibilities hidden in the human community's grace-enabled capacity to respond to God's calling—to take root and grow. In the penultimate time, our time, any confusion between the faith in which we are ecclesially formed and our attempts to live moral lives in the world runs the risk of works-righteousness, or even idolatry if we make some worldly cause the object of our faith. But when the end is attained, the special functions of "theology" and "church" will have been fulfilled, and as such they will have disappeared. In the Heavenly City, the distinction between ecclesiology and ethics, between the community of faith and its worldly witness, or even the existence of these as distinct categories, will have become inconceivable. There—as in the Holy Trinity which already incorporates our humanity in and through the ascended Christ—God will be all in all.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ I have adapted this fable from MacIntyre's book *After Virtue*. MacIntyre is arguing the case that we have lost the sense today of what it once meant to be morally principled; that we cannot grasp the old vocabulary of the "virtues" because the living tradition no longer exists.
- ² See, for example, the exposition of this theme in the WCC publication *Costly Unity*, ed. Thomas F. Best and Wesley Granberg-Michaelson (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1993)
- ³ See Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs*, Summer, 1993. Huntington's article is summarized by Peter Steinfels, "Beliefs," *The New York Times*, April 16, 1994. Huntington argues that future wars and global tensions will no longer be primarily based on conflicts between nation-states but on clashing civilizations defined by history, language, ethnicity, and religion. In fact, we could be headed back to a pre-Enlightenment age: to something like the era of the Thirty Years' War.
- ⁴ See Robert D. Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy," *The Atlantic*, February, 1994. And see Anthony Lewis's reaction to this piece, "A Bleak Vision," Op-Ed page, the *New York Times*, March 7, 1994. Kaplan thinks that the twenty-first century will see radical environmental degradation and tribal violence in an effort by communities and cultures to survive in an increasingly anarchic human situation. The distinction between state-sponsored warfare and gang-type violence by members of religious and ethnic groups will virtually disappear. Hordes of refugees will pour over the borders of the privileged nations. The legal and economic structures of our world will break down once again into a war of all against all.
- ⁵ See Lukas Vischer, "Koinonia in a Time of Threats to Life," in *Costly Unity*, ed. Thomas F. Best and Wesley Granberg-Michaelson (Geneva: WCC, 1993) 72f. Vischer writes, "...how do we cope with the evidence of an increasing degradation in history? Do we not have to admit that the historical future is radically hidden from our eyes? We must always be prepared for life *and* death" (Vischer's italics)

- ⁶ Emilio Castro, "Ethical Reflections Among the Churches: A Free Church Perspective," *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 47, No. 2, April 1995, 170ff.
- ⁷ Geneva: WCC, 1991. Parts of Raiser's proposal are derived from the writings and reports of a former General Secretary of the WCC, Philip Potter.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 86-87.
- ⁹ Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992. This manuscript was virtually complete when Raiser's book appeared in English.
- ¹⁰ The present member churches of COCU are the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Episcopal Church, the Methodist Church, the United Church of Christ, the Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ), the International Council of Community Churches, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church Zion, and the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church.
- ¹¹ A set of such proposed changes was offered to the 1995 General Assembly but was remitted back to our COCU delegation for further development and clarification in light of criticism.
- ¹² Adapted from the Foreword of *Churches in Covenant Communion*, pp. 2-3, paragraphs 5-6.
- ¹³ Ed. Thomas F. Best and Martin Robra (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1995).
- ¹⁴ *Costly Unity: Koinonia and Justice, Peace and Creation*, ed. Thomas A. Best and Wesley Granberg-Michaelson (Geneva: WCC 1993) 86f.
- ¹⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (London: SCM Press, 1984, 99, quoted by Duncan Forrester in "Ecclesiology and Ethics: A Reformed Perspective," *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol 47, No. 2, April 1995, 149, italics mine. One can find this quotation provocative without adopting all that Hauerwas appears, from this and other writings, to mean by it.
- ¹⁶ Konrad Raiser's book *Ecumenism in Transition* seeks to move us in this direction. Based as it is on several Central Committee reports by Philip Potter, the basic idea has an ecumenical pedigree, but has yet to stir much understanding among church leaders. My own book, *The Sense of a People: Toward*

a Church for the Human Future (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992) seeks to move in the same direction.

- ¹⁷The term "thickness," popularized by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, is now widely used by human scientists to mean the full and multi-layered complexity of cultures. It admirably links up with the concept of "formation." We are "formed" in rich and enveloping environments, not merely by the "thin" concepts scholars derive from those environments.
- ¹⁸See Duncan Forrester, "Ecclesiology and Ethics: A Reformed Perspective," *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol 47, No. 2, April 1995, 148ff. Of course, as Forrester points out, major ecumenical figures such as Karl Barth and Willem Visser t Hooft, were always clear that what we would now call a *koinonia* ethic must be at the center. In effect they asked, with Paul Lehmann, "What am I, as a believer in Jesus Christ and a member of his Church, to do?" But, rather than exploring actual formation, they *reasoned out* what the ethics of the *koinonia* ought to be.
- ¹⁹See Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr., *Prospects for a Common Morality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 3, *et passim*.
- ²⁰These paragraphs are from the report of the Tantar Consultation on ecclesiology and ethics to the Faith and Order Standing Commission (Faith and Order Paper #170: Minutes of the Faith and Order Standing Commission, Aleppo, Syria, January 5-12, 1995, paragraphs 97-98). An edited version of this material has been published in a booklet titled *Costly Commitment*, ed. Thomas F. Best and Martin Robra (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1995), paragraphs 72 and 73.
- ²¹Thus many American congregations seem today to suppose that a message of personal freedom and self-development lived out in an individualistic consumerist culture is a tolerable translation of the gospel. This assumption is, in fact, a form of captivity. It limits, if it does not negate, the potential witness of a Christian moral formation.
- ²²The most prominent of these are probably Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, although there are many others, e.g. George Lindbeck, Geoffrey Wainwright, Carl Braaten, Robert Jensen, Thomas Oden.

- ²³The evolution of "rights" claims toward socially destructive expressions has been well set out in a paper by Duncan Forrester at the International Academy of Practical Theology in Princeton, June, 1993.
- ²⁴I am thinking here of Alasdair MacIntyre's eloquent closing words to his book *After Virtue*, as well as numerous warnings by Stanley Hauerwas that as churches we should not confuse what principles such as "freedom" and "justice" have become in many modern cultures with what these terms mean in the Christian story. See *After Christendom* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1991) 45ff., 69 ff.
- ²⁵The idea that under the influence of the gospel justice can become generosity comes from the same paper by Duncan Forrester.
- ²⁶Again, this is a term used by anthropologists for the ensemble of details and relationships in a culture which forms us. See footnote 9.
- ²⁷John Zizioulas has written a book titled *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993) which argues this case. He writes, "Ecclesial being is bound to the very being of God" (p. 15).
- ²⁸The acts of worship during World Council of Churches Assemblies and other major events have often had this sense about them. The writer remembers the worship under the tent at the Sixth Assembly at Vancouver and the Syrian Orthodox bishop who was asked afterward if he was not tempted to go forward to receive the elements. "Almost, he replied, almost!"
- ²⁹The reference, of course, is to *Lumen Gentium*.
- ³⁰I John 4:1ff is of course the classical passage for discerning the spirits. "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God."
- ³¹Simply to speak of justice, peace and integrity of creation as abstract ideas is to cover over the multiplicity of things "justice," "peace," and "integrity" may mean depending on the sphere of life one is talking about. So just as focusing on "formation" in the Church thickens the base and puts comprehensive theological theories in their place, so emphasis on

formation in society casts doubt on simplistically thin social concepts.

³²Jürgen Moltmann treats the *imago Dei* not only as a *description* of humanity's created nature but also as a *calling* to be lived out in Jesus Christ and a *glorification* to be fulfilled in the eschaton. See Moltmann's 1984-85 Gifford Lectures, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 215ff.

³³Certain contemporary theologians picture this consummation as a swallowing up of secular social constructs into an essentially *ecclesial* nexus. John Milbank, for example, in his influential *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1990) writes, "...the social knowledge advocated is but the continuation of ecclesial practice." (p. 6). Is the church then all in all? I believe that this picture could be misleading. It ties the end too closely to what we mean by "church" in our present, penultimate, ways of speaking. In contrast, I see the fulfillment as that of the human community as a whole.