

Kentucky Council of Churches
Oct. 28, 2004
Rev. Peg Chamberlin

I am honored to be with you tonight. And I bring greetings on behalf of the more than a million brothers and sisters in Christ who through their denominations constitute the table that is the MCC.

We are struggling in Minnesota as I expect you are here with a sense of the loss of community. You have heard it said, that it takes a village to raise a child but we are quickly losing our sense of village. We seem bound to isolated separate enclaves, silos of special interest.

The seeds of loving community – the community that is our congregations, our neighborhoods, our cities, our state, our country, our world – the seeds of loving community are scattered and being overrun by special interest weeds that cannot *bear* a commitment to the common good. Our community is feeling the social earthquakes of deep-seated mistrust, vitriolic slander, and broad apprehension about any common *ground* from which to seek the common good. We seem inextricably drawn into adversarial finger pointing and blaming, which holds no one accountable for the necessity to act on behalf of the whole. There are few places that provide a vision for an inclusive, worldwide common good. Today everywhere we go we hear accounts and see the images of fragmentation, alienation, and isolation.

The culture holds out a number of responses to this social disintegration, some more hopeful than others. One response to fragmentation is to become the dominant fragment, to do those things which put one in charge enough to control the decision-making, the resources, the values, the enforcement institutions in a community.

A second response is to try to secure oneself *against* the other fragments. Walled communities, increased security measures at every level of life, expansion of conceal and carry gun laws, and a preponderance of larger and heavier cars and homes may be signs of this fear filled response.

And, thirdly, the culture holds up, as it often does, advanced technology as a possible salvific response. More and better communication tools are touted as a hopeful sign. But each development seems to leave us with more anonymous communication not more actual community relationships. And a sense of being related to anyone drops from sight. Alienation, fragmentation, co-modification, isolation are on the move among us.

This lack of relationship leaves us without structures of accountability. Without community structures to which we will allow ourselves to be held accountable the garden of community will continue to soon become barren soil. Accountability has become a commodity. Our relationships of accountability are increasingly only with the ones who

sign our paychecks.

It is not only accountability and intimate relationship that have become commodities; even our notion of church is being commodified. I am often heard to say that, “increasingly congregants think of themselves as consumers of church and not producers of church. (This is the point at which pastors are often seen shaking their heads, “oh yes, oh yes.”) And then I say, “And increasingly congregations think of themselves as consumers of denominations and not producers of denominations.” And now the bishops and executives all go, “Oh yes, oh yes.” And, increasingly denominations think of themselves as consumers of councils of churches, not producers of councils of churches.

The point is that we in the Church have taken on the key metaphor of the dominant culture, that of consumer. In our public life, as well, we all too quickly think of ourselves as taxpayers first and obligated citizens a far second. This self-identification stunts the growth civic life and diminishes the social harvest - inside the church as well as out. And we are left with little capacity to act together for the common good. The very *soil* needed for our growth - a community of development needed to learn to be ethical, responsible, loving disciples - is eroded. Without a community of love, the love of Christ cannot be known.

Hidden in this Ephesians passage is an assumption. The writer presumes a community context for the development of our understanding of Christ’s knowledge-surpassing love. Did you see that? Did you assume the community? In a world so fragmented, so fixated on the individual as the prime entity it is easy to forget that the writer is talking about the plural “you”. The writer speaks about “your hearts”, ‘hearts’ plural.

Does a radical vision of community offer anything of transcendent meaning to the world of our future? Does an ecumenical worldview have anything to do with our being able to know the love of Christ? As we attempt to grow in our faith, is there any reason to look to the ecumenical movement for the growth needed for the future?

A few years back, after the Berlin Wall had fallen, the other George Bush was talking about a new world order. The National Council of Churches of Christ decided that maybe the Church should be in on this discussion and held a conference called “A World Made New”. Leadership gathered in downtown Indianapolis. The meetings were being held in the Episcopalian Cathedral downtown. Now central Indiana is not known for being a bastion of blooming liberalism either politically or theologically. And one morning I happened to walk over to the meeting with William Sloan Coffin, a well-known, self-avowed, practicing ---- liberal leader in the Church. As we walked up to the church doors there was a small crowd gathered outside holding signs which said things like, “NCC is the anti-Christ” or “NCC=666”. I turned to him, “Well, Bill,” and then I repeated those well known words that are written in the next few verses of Ephesians, I asked Coffin, “One Lord, one faith, one baptism?” He turned and looked at me as if I had just asked the most annoying question. Turned and looked at the crowd, lifted his glasses

up above his forehead and pondered. I thought, “Ah now, some insightful words from the great orator.” He lowered his glasses, turned to go in the doors, shrugged his shoulders and said, “That’s what they tell me.”

We are all related, ‘that’s what they tell me’. This is the radical witness that we know we have when, in Christ’s love; we are welcomed back to the heart of God. We are related in that all embracing love. Like it or not, we are related, and that, my friends, is a counter cultural notion in these days and times. We are related. Like families of origin, perhaps even more than our families of origin, we don’t associate with each other because we like each but because we’re related. If we like each other it just makes it more fun.

The Body of Christ is one, even as the Son and the Father are one. The gift of unity is already given in Christ. It is not based on our agreement or affinity or even votes taken at assemblies, the gift is *already* given in Christ. The gift precedes the vision of the gift. This is the gift we have been given and a gift that is intended for the whole world. And a gift that is deeply needed. Our relationships with each other are meant for the redemption and reconciliation of the whole world. How desperate the world is to know this witness. It is the witness to the promise of God’s reconciling power for the church and the world. It demonstrates a community which values each member, makes decisions which honor diversity, is able to hold each other accountable while building up the community, a community which knows, expresses, teaches, and discovers Christ’s love. We are in desperate need of models of community in which there is an expression of relatedness beyond agreement on issues.

Gary Peluso, in a study on local and regional ecumenism for Lilly in 1995 has said that “...[M] any peoples on this planet are ready to observe groups with differences [as they] learn how to discover, speak, and live the truth in love together...”¹ Can the Christian ecumenical vision and practice of relatedness offer a transcendent meaning to the world of our future?

As we grow this new crop of expressed relatedness, build the new stain glass window we will be successful only as we engage this work together for it is precisely in the witness of our ability to work together that a witness to the common good can take shape. And when we do it together our achievement will exceed our resources. Our work must be marked by the daily tending to the things that divide us, so that our work and witness together might be made strong for the building up of the new flowering of community.

We are related in the church to Christ and through Christ to one another. In the second person of the Trinity we are knit together into an extraordinary oneness. And the eye cannot say, “I have no need of the hand.” And the hand cannot say, “I have no need of the foot”, and the foot cannot say, “I have no need of the ear”. Because each part of the Body of Christ is needed to know the whole Body of Christ. To be the church is to be the

church with others, to be out of fellowship with any part is to be missing a part we need in order to know the whole body.

Because this body is the Body of Christ, the one, we must pay attention to each other, each part revealing a deeper understanding of the whole Christ. To be church is to be “church with”, that is, to *be* the faithful, disciplined church is to be the ecumenical church. To be the church in any of its forms, congregational or denominational, is to be the church ecumenical. The ecumenical calling is essential to our own denominational, congregational and individual Christian identity. At the Minnesota Council of Churches we have said, “Unity is of the church’s essence, more than it is a worthy goal to be pursued if time and resources permits”² The body of Christ is one, one lord, one faith, one baptism. And we are one because Christ cannot be divided, in Christ God has already prevailed against all division of Christ.

This is perhaps the most important theological assumption of our work and our life together in local ecumenism, and may be for our lives as congregations and denomination and disciples as well. In Christ, God has already prevailed against all division of Christ. For we are brothers and sisters, related by blood. We are “blood kin”, as Michael Kinnamon has taught the ecumenical movement to say. The blood of Christ makes it so not anything we do or do not do. We are related -- that’s it the story is told, the seal is set. Washed in the blood of the lamb, whether you wander the world like the prodigal or tend the fields like the faithful older son, still you belong to God and if you are Gods then we belong to each other, like it or not. If you say you love the lord, if you call yourself a Christian, if you have been baptized in the waters of baptism, then you are part of the one body, you are family, you are kin.

In the same manner we cannot avoid, (if our growth as Christian ecumenists comes from our focus in the oneness of the body in the second person of the trinity) we cannot avoid, nor should we, the call of the unity we have with the whole world in the first person of the Trinity. We have a witness to bring together; it is a witness to the oneness of this creation. For the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof. It is not just a few who are held in God’s hand but the whole world, the fullness of creation. Every man, woman, child, rock, tree, and mosquito belongs to God. And if the world is hell bent on splintering itself into more and more pieces, if the culture all around us continues to praise the individual and divide the community, if the whole creation groans under the divisions among us then we have a different message to tell.

We have a different word, a word of hope to tend and to develop. In the face of fragmentation we must grow an understanding of the all-encompassing love of God as known and expressed in the community that is related through our shared creation. We must witness to what we have learned and are learning in our beloved Christian community, that we belong to each other. The left hand cannot continue to ignore the pain of the right hand. Is it not family business that 20,000 Iraqi civilians are dead because of our invasion? Is it not a family matter that AIDS in Africa is leaving a new

generation of orphans? The imaginary lines of national sovereignty blind us to the created oneness of the whole oikoumene.

One of the most important historical images from the 20th century is that first picture taken from the moon, of the earth rising. It was a new view of the world and indeed it was a new worldview. It was a worldview of the whole-inhabited earth, the one garden, what the Greeks call the “oikoumene”. To see that wholeness puts a new claim upon us as we come to regard our planet home with a broader eye.

The ecumenical Christian is also called to grow his/her witness to the Oneness of Christ Body for the sake of the one world. The ecumenical Christian is also called to develop an ecumenical worldview, which presses us beyond the confines of a Christo-centric understanding of ecumenism to include a Creator-centric revelation. The word ecumenical, of course, comes from this Greek word “oikoumene” which means the whole-inhabited earth, or the whole earth household. The word “ecumenical” captures that image of the earth rising and the new world view offers.

This new worldview relativizes all national claims of sovereignty. Neither nation nor denomination can carry a claim apart from this whole earth image. The new view of the earth-rising calls us to hold the earth in all its diversity as a single entity, whole, connected.

Out of the Christian tradition, we understand that the first question is not whether the tradition of the other is right or wrong. The first question is, “As a Christian what is my response to be to the other?” Well there are many answers to that question, but the greatest of these is love. The ecumenical worldview, to quote Langdon Gilkey, “Assumes that love takes precedence over purity” and that “God will be honored less by the purity of our beliefs than by the visible truth of our love for each neighbor.”³ Or as Mark Twain said, “Some of us have enough religion to hate, only a few of us have enough to love.”

It is very hard to talk about love in this culture. This Ephesians passage reminds us again of the centrality of love. Not a love that has been trivialized; as when we say, “I love your dress.” Not a love that has been reduced to a commodity which we attempt to win, purchase, or hoard. Not a love thought of as a private feeling which has no public life. But the love of Christ which is an obligated public action for the sake of the whole creation.

This love is the result of having been first loved. Its legacy requires the building up of communities in which this love can be rediscovered. Because we are loved by, and love, the one who is Love, we are obligated to live first and foremost out of love, to build communities which can witness to that love in communal ways, in the common good.

As we recall that picture of earth rising we see for a moment a hope, a vision of connection, a new worldview. And join the farmer/poet, Kentucky’s own Wendell Berry,

who said, “The divine love summons the world toward wholeness.” Let us bear witness to a fragmented world that the divine love even this moment, even in the midst of the fragmentation and alienation all around us, this love summons the world toward a wholeness that we can only begin to imagine. Growing communities of loving wholeness for the sake of the one oikoumene, for the sake of the whole, created order is a weighty calling. But this is a calling worthy of our time, talent, and resources. A calling deeply needed in our time. A calling worthy of our life’s work. A calling worthy of Christ’s love, born in Christ’s loving witness for the whole creation.

May it be so for each of us. Amen.

1. Peluso
2. Minnesota Council of Churches= ecclesiology statement
3. Ibid.