

Address to the 57th Annual Assembly
Kentucky Council of Churches
Meeting at First Christian Church, Danville, Kentucky
October 28-29, 2004

Good morning! I want to take this opportunity to welcome you on behalf of our staff, and the officers and administrative committee of the Kentucky Council of Churches. For 57 years now, the member communions have been sending delegates to a gathering such as this to meet together for dialog, for worship, for mutual support and mutual discernment of what the Gospel is calling us to do and be in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. And for nearly one hundred years prior to that, churches in Kentucky came together as part of what was known as the old Sunday School Union to work and learn together how to make disciples and encourage faithful discipleship to Jesus Christ in this state.

I would be remiss if I did not take this opportunity to praise our officers and staff, who this year have done a tremendous job on behalf of our member churches. Yesterday was Jeanie's birthday, and yet she worked from 7:00 am until who knows how late last night, and was up again at the beginning of the morning to get set up here to welcome you and make sure that everything runs smoothly. We will take a bold and risky step in 2005 and make Chris Benham Skidmore our full-time associate director, an act of stepping out in faith. Chris does far more than the very visible work of EcuCamp and local ecumenism and stewardship of our electronic forms of communication. He spent Monday and Tuesday of this week in Atlanta, working with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship nationally in the development of their ecumenical vision and ecumenical activities. We continue to retain the nearly irreplaceable bookkeeper, Sharon Timperman, who has been with us now for twenty years, and who makes sure that we can account for every penny that you provide us. We give thanks to God for the ministry that John Kays has had among us as our KIDRP Coordinator for a decade, and now to Harper Davis who has been the acting KIDRP coordinator since June after one of the worst seasons of flooding that our state has seen since the big floods of 1997.

Throughout the past two years, the president of this Council, Rev. Ron Gaddie, has given tremendous service. He is always thinking about the KCC, he participates in our programs and has served as the co-director of EcuCamp, he is available constantly for advice and as a source for new ideas and vision, and he just accepted the presidency of yet another ecumenical body, our partner in Louisville, the phoenix-like Kentuckiana Interfaith Community that is rising from the embers of its near demise. I look forward to working with Ron for yet another year.

And for over six years, Mark Henderson, a member of Calvary Baptist Church in Lexington, has served as our treasurer. Mark, a CPA, is just launching a new private practice, and could not be with us. But we are deeply grateful for the years of service that this fine Christian has given to an organization of which his congregation is a friend, but not a member.

This is my 13th year, and 14th Annual Assembly, with you, and it is a ministry which continues to challenge me and ask for my utmost abilities.

You ask me each year to report to you on the state of the Council and the state of the churches in Kentucky. There is a written report on pages 16, 17, and 18. I ask your indulgence to add a few more thoughts.

A story is told about a church that decided to have four worship services each Sunday. There would be:

**one for those new to the faith,

**another for those who liked traditional worship,

**one for those who had lost their faith and were seeking to get it back

**and a final one for those who had had bad experiences with the church and were constantly complaining about it.

They decided to give name for each of the services:

FINDERS, KEEPERS, LOSERS, WEEPERS!

And that is where I find much of the church these days: There are fast growing congregations that are reaching people who are new to the faith...although they were born into families that once knew

themselves as Christians. They are so busy “finding the faith”, and striving for certainty, that they often wind up with just certitudes than with a living trust in a sovereign God whose way and will is always greater than human thought. There is a lot of “adolescent religion” out there for people who in spiritual years, not chronological years, are just teenagers in spiritual development.

There are keepers, those who are huddled down against the onslaught of secularity, the pressures—economic, psychological, and spiritual—of living in a time when nothing ever seems complete, who want only to hold to the past, and seem stuck in a denominationalism that was unique primarily to 19th century America, and may not be dynamic enough to allow people to live with courage and hope in ambiguous times.

There are many losers, people who have been burned one way or another by the church, through the abuse of trust, or its failure to live out its calling. Too many fall completely away. However, a small subset within the loser bunch is particularly hopeful, interesting because their faith has been tempered by realism. Emerging among us, if we have eyes to see, are new communities of discipleship that don't give a figgy pudding about our denominational conferences, and presbyteries and dioceses. All they care about is trying to live among the people of this world, whom they see as God's children, in the manner of Jesus. Ironic, isn't it, because it was the losers for whom Jesus specifically addressed his ministry.

And then, the last category, are the weepers...the complainers, the disrupters, those who USE the church for their own self-aggrandizement or advancement, who complain about every change, for whom the seven last words of the church are: “we've never done it that way before.” The weepers especially seem more to be those who want to play at church rather than be the church. They want the church to serve them, not the world. Or, their experience in the world is so negative and so without the redeeming actions of engagement with neighbor, that they want a religion, a prosperity gospel, that will pamper and comfort them, and promise them escape from the hell that is other people with whom they don't agree.

So the story seems to be more than merely funny. It contains a lot of truth.

I've been reading an interesting book by Peter G. Peterson, called *Running on Empty: How the Democratic and Republican Parties are Bankrupting Our Future and What Americans Can Do About It*. I see lots of parallels with the church. Rather than hearing the call to citizenship as a call to serve our neighbors, people have these entitlements that they think the government is supposed to provide without anybody paying for them. When government doesn't do what they think it should, then government becomes the enemy, and tax becomes a hate crime against citizens. Similarly, in the church, rather than hearing the call to mission to follow Christ, to PRACTICE our religion, and to nurture future generations in the faith, people seem to think that church should serve their immediate needs without asking for anything much in return.

Long ago the writer of James put it this way:

[James 1:21b – 25](#)

and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. ²² But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³ For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴ for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵ But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act--they will be blessed in their doing.

By focussing at this Assembly on our formation as disciples, on what it means to be rooted in the soil of God's love, so that we might grow and branch out in love, we are trying to crack open a door whereby we might, together as churches, reclaim our calling to be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

Within a week our nation will be making momentous decisions about who will lead us, but, for most, however, the decisions are

about the short term, not the long term future of the world for our children, the long term future of our country. Peterson, in his book on the economic woes of America, quotes Livy, the eminent historian in the age of Augustus, "The people can bear neither their ills nor their cures," he wrote. Unless we in the church can be those who can look at our ills, and work for the cures, both church and nation may, like Rome, run out of years.

Bill Moyers, the great Baptist journalist and news commentator from Texas, in his recent book of essays, notes about the war on terrorism: "Yes, there's a fight going on against terrorists around the globe," he writes, "but just as certainly there's a fight going on here at home, to decide the kind of country this will be even as we fight the war on terrorism." The greatest sedition, Moyers suggests, is silence.

That fits with what Oscar Romero wrote in his treatise *The Violence of Love*: "A church that provokes no crises, a gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin, a word of God that doesn't touch the real sin of a society in which it is being proclaimed--what gospel is that? ... The gospel is courageous; it's good news of him who came to take away the world's sins."

We have some "unsettling" position papers to present to our churches at this assembly. They are not easy, yet I hope you will find them authentic efforts to practice the way of Christ.

Let me close with another story, this one from Megan McKenna, in her book *Parables*:

There was a woman who wanted peace in the world and peace in her heart and all sorts of good things, but she was very frustrated. The world seemed to be falling apart. She would read the papers and get depressed. One day she decided to go shopping, and she went into a mall and picked a store at random. She walked in and was surprised to see Jesus at the counter. She knew it was Jesus because he looked just like pictures she'd seen on holy cards and

devotional pictures. She looked again and again at him, and finally she got up her nerve and asked, "Excuse me, are you Jesus?"

"I am."

"Do you work here?"

"No," Jesus said, "I own the store."

"Oh, what do you sell in here?"

"Oh, just about anything!"

"Anything?"

"Yeah, anything you want. What do you want?"

She said, "I don't know."

"Well," Jesus said, "feel free, walk up and down the aisles, make a list, see what it is you want, and then come back and we'll see what we can do for you."

She did just that, walked up and down the aisles. There was peace on earth, no more war, no hunger or poverty, peace in families, no more drugs, harmony, clean air, careful use of resources. She wrote furiously. By the time she got back to the counter, she had a long list.

Jesus took the list and skimmed through it, looked up at her and smiled. "No problem." And then he bent down behind the counter and picked out all sorts of things, stood up, and laid out the packets. She asked, "What are these?"

Jesus replied, "Seed packets. This is a catalog store."

She said, "You mean I don't get the finished product?"

"No, this is a place of dreams. You come and see what it looks like, and I give you the seeds. You plant the seeds. You go home and nurture them and help them to grow and someone else reaps the benefits."

"Oh," she said. And she left the store without buying anything."

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
to the 57th Annual Assembly of the Kentucky Council of Churches
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- *To work for the visible unity of the church;*
- *to provide opportunities for branches of the one vine, the tree of life*
- *to learn and grow together;*
- *to work for peace, justice, and the preservation of the earth together;*
- *and to coordinate our ministries of service to the people of Kentucky:*

these are the declared callings of our Council of Churches. Our Vision Committee, last year, managed to express these callings more succinctly: **The call and ministry of the Kentucky Council of Churches is to enhance and strengthen the relationships among the churches of the Commonwealth of Kentucky for the sake of more effective witness and ministry.**

How have we done? Have we addressed one of these four callings to the detriment of others? Have we felt any urgency to address any of them?

This is my thirteenth report to the member communions of the Council of Churches. You should know that each year I routinely write about three drafts of this report: the first reflects the difficulties, and the frustrations of one who is called by all of our denominations to enhance our life together; the second often flips to speak of the vitality and strength we share in our life together; and the third draft attempts to blend the two.

Make no mistake: we may give lip service in every single one of our denominations, and occasionally in our congregations, to the belief that the search for Christian unity is not optional, but a Gospel imperative. Actions that speak louder than words, however, suggest that the cause of Christian unity and shared conciliar life in Kentucky are among the last things on the minds of most of our denominational leaders. In fairness, I also acknowledge the heavy burdens on time, energy, and attention, that simply managing denominational life requires. I wonder, however, where the expression of Christ's visionary understanding of human life might be found, where is the voice of Christ speaking today to stir us beyond comfort-giving, which is much of what I perceive our churches to be about in these days, to true discipleship. Our world is imploding with violence and greed, poverty is increasing, and the gap between the rich and the poor continues to expand, destroying the middle class not only in America but also around the world.

Our theme for this assembly is "Planted in Faith; Growing in Love". The hope is always that the Assembly itself will be an occasion for renewal, for recommitment to one another as churches in need, in these terribly stressful days, of mutual support and of mutual accountability. The Council's role may be to put as much fertilizer on the tree as we can and occasionally to be the source of a thorn to prick the conscience, or the scissors to suggest that a bit of pruning is in order in the life of our churches.

We hope that by talking together and sharing our testimony in the day and a half that the Assembly offers, we may practice ecumenism, be equipped for our common calling as ambassadors of reconciliation in a world that doesn't remember what reconciliation might look like, and find strength to keep standing tall in a world of ethical miniatures.

Perhaps we have been fallow in order that we may discover anew our common roots, the single vine of Christ that nourishes us all, and that we may branch out in new forms of love in the coming years. I hope that is the case. I certainly pledge myself to keep opportunities for us to grow in love available and challenging for us all.

Meanwhile, what about those troublesome questions with which this report began: How did we do this past year in living out that special vocation of a conciliar body? Answer: not very well. Part of that is my fault, and this is not an excuse but an effort at explanation—I found myself with less energy after the assembly, in part because of my mother's move into my home, and then her death in less than 9 weeks after her move. I suspect also that Chris has known the lingering effects of the grief from the loss of his mother at a far younger age in the summer of 2003. The other part of the reason for my low evaluation of the effort to live up to our high calling, however, must be placed at your door. Chris, Jeanie, and I and a mere handful of officers and commission participants can't do it alone, especially if all of our denominations are not represented at the tables where we meet to plan our work. We need you, the delegates to the Assembly, those who share the fervor for things ecumenical, to be advocates for ecumenism at every level of church life in Kentucky.

Moreover, what this also means to me is that our job (staff and officers) is to plow the fields and put the fertilizer on the ground—in the form of communication and programs that bring people together to experience ecumenical life and to know the relentless tug of conscience about the brokenness of the church, and Christ's prayer for our unity. We pledge ourselves to that end in the coming months. Perhaps then some new life will manifest itself.

Among the things that we have done in a satisfactory manner this past year, I would suggest the following as worthy of note:

- The KCC continues to be a respected voice for justice and peace.
- We have created a new means through our Cap-Wiz program to allow Christians to act individually on matters of public policy where the Council has an existing policy statement.
- We had a richer experience at the Executive Board meeting in March, since implementing some of the suggested changes from the Vision Committee. In particular, the Administrative Oversight Committee meetings have been well-attended, and led with a sense of ministry on behalf of all to give attention to the more mundane side of our conciliar life, the maintenance of the institution.
- In response to an Executive Board discussion, our Justice Ministries Commission has been more active in the past few months and has produced a policy statement on Tax Justice, at the behest of the Executive Board, along with several other projects.
- Justice Ministries also sponsored a legislative workshop in Owensboro, taking the "Council on the road". More such events are planned in 2005.
- We have had another successful EcuCamp, a program that is winning accolades all across the country in state ecumenical circles.
- The staff has saved the Council money by moving our offices to smaller space, an event that cost us about two months in terms of time expended by staff. In fact, in the projected budget as announced at the 1999 Annual Assembly, we expected our office operation costs to be approximately \$44,259. Now five years later, we are projecting that our office operations will cost approximately \$34,959. This represents significant stewardship on our part.
- The staff has articulated its goals for the coming year, both in terms of personal professional development, and for the KCC, and those are the measures that we will use to hold one another accountable.
- We have begun to explore some new directions for concrete ministries, especially in the area of health ministries, and were the recipient of a \$5000 grant from the Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky. We are preparing for an ecumenical conference for Kentucky's parish nurses; and we are beginning to explore ways in which the KCC might initiate amongst all our churches programs that will both enhance local ecumenism and address the growing problems of obesity and ill health and dental health in Kentucky. I believe this grant opens the door for even more grant moneys to work on issues of healthy living among the churches.
- The Commission on Christian Unity, largely dormant through much of 2003-2004, has begun to meet again, and has plans for events that will contribute to the education of present and new ecumenists. We hope to have, in early January, a daylong symposium celebrating the 40th Anniversary of the Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism.

I continue to be grateful for the opportunity to minister among you, and with such a happy comradery among our staff members. We work well as a team, accepting one another's gifts and weaknesses. I applaud the officers and Commissioners for their hard work this past year, and for their support of staff members.

Finally, many of us worry that the world is teetering on a precipice of extreme danger. The dangers are the increase of injustice, poverty, disease; the reliance on violence the nurturing of hate; the developing oligarchy of politics in America that is making our representative form of government into the best government money can buy; the confusion of the place of religion and the place of patriotism in our hearts. Too many people in power are using religion to secure their own prerogatives and too many people in the pews seem concerned more about getting and keeping what they think is "theirs" by some divine right, than they are thinking about being followers of Jesus. It often feels to me as if the churches are twiddling their thumbs over matters of inconsequence, while the matters of greatest need are ignored. What are we doing about poverty and the growing numbers of our neighbors who are joining the ranks of the poor? What are we doing about the on-going damage being done to the earth and our environment? Are we being peace-makers? Are we as people of faith, asking for honesty and truthfulness in public affairs and politics? Are we advocates for human rights and justice? Either our roots go deep into faith that Jesus was right in his teachings, in his ministry of care, and in his sacrificial death; or we will wither and die, as we should.

Again, thanks for the opportunity to serve among you.

Respectfully submitted,

Nancy J. Kemper, Executive Director