

"Moving On: Toward a New Future of Ecumenical Life"

Kentucky Council of Churches Sixtieth Anniversary

Hebrews 11:8-16; John 15:9-17.

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I hope the utter irony of a text like this is not lost on you. Here we are—a room full of ecumaniacs fresh from wandering all over the great state of Kentucky and beyond, some of us—in search of a land called “unity.” Why? Because we know there is more for us the world over; because we know there is a better homeland—a homeland that transcends the borders that keep us at war with each other; land, nation, religion, oil, and profit.

We know in this land called unity, peace and justice prevail, we see each other with the eyes of faith, of God, and we know the love of God and neighbor as God knows us. It’s there, this land of unity; Jesus prayed to see us there. So we pack our bags and go...by faith. We move on toward a new future of ecumenical life. What’s in the way?

To use a phrase from Philip Jenkins in The New Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity, “...perhaps the great political unknown of the new century, the most powerful international wild card, will be that mysterious non-Western ideology called Christianity.”¹

Jenkins describes the characteristics of this “Southern Christianity,” as “...enthusiastic and spontaneous, fundamentalist and supernatural-oriented...”² As the population in Asian, African, and South American countries explodes while Christianity in the west declines, it is this Christianity that may well come to be predominant. A less

¹ Jenkins, pg. 161

² Ibid pg.78

objective view of the Christianity of the South would describe it as “...fanatical, superstitious, demagogic...politically reactionary and sexually repressive.”³

We can't embrace a new ecumenical future if we will not see the changing face of Christianity, defined not by our classical terms/norms, but the children of our missionary missteps and excesses, no matter how well intended.

In A Multitude of Blessings: A Christian Approach to Religious Diversity, Cynthia Campbell reminds us that God's first covenant with humankind, the covenant with Noah “...precedes the selection of one group to be ‘God's own people’ and is for *all* creation and *all* humanity, for *all* time. In the biblical view...there was a universal covenant before there was a particular relationship with Israel.”⁴ She quotes the Jewish theologian Irving Greenberg who, based on the covenant with Noah, concludes that, “every religion that works to repair the world---and thus advance the triumph of life—is a valid expression of this divine pact with humanity.”⁵ From the New Testament, Jesus says in John (10:16), “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.” And Peter, “our rock” says in Acts: 10:34-35, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”

We can't enter into a new ecumenical future if we continue to define the terms of debate on narrow biblical turf that ignores the breath of revelation/truth throughout the whole of the written word of God and that resides in other faith traditions. Our ecumenical movement and future has an interfaith sibling.

³ Ibid. pg. 161

⁴ Campbell, Cynthia, A Multitude of Blessings: A Christian Approach to Religious diversity, Westminster John Knox, 2007. pg. 24

⁵ Greenberg, Irving, For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004, pg. 57

Worldwide: 2 billion people live on less than \$2 a day; that is 7 times the population of the United States.⁶ 150 million children are malnourished. 10 million children under 5 die each year. There are 33 million people infected with HIV/AIDS in the world. Do you know that in Washington DC, 1 in every 20 persons is infected with HIV/AIDS? And that in Harlem, 1 in 7 black males is infected with HIV/AIDS?

We can't begin to be serious about ecumenism and interfaith relations if we do not see the world as it is and are not actively engaged in tending to the needs of "the least of these" in Christian terms in whom we encounter the image of God. And does it need to be said that to confront the problem of the economic disparity that poisons the human family and affects us all, whether or not we acknowledge it, we must act cooperatively—across religious and national borders? What are the Methodists going to do about poverty? The Lutherans about global warming? The Presbyterians about the proliferation of illegal arms? We're going to solve these global crises together or be overwhelmed by them together.

We can't move into a new future if we leave behind us a landscape littered with disease, lost children...Jesus himself will bar the door to the reign of God. If the earth is itself is diseased by future generations because we could not give up our SUV's, our McMansions, our insatiable lust for material things in our disposable society.

The Rev. Byron Bland is a fellow at the Stanford Center on International Conflict and Negotiation and the Center for Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law at Stanford University. He's been a part of the back channel diplomacy efforts that brought

⁶ Campbell, Martha, Cleland, John, and others, "Return of the Population Growth Factor" Science, Vol. 315 March 16, 2007

resolution to the “troubles” in Northern Ireland. He was asked about the possible of finding a “Palestinian Mandela.”

Israelis need to find a Palestinian Mandela, and Palestinians need to find an Israeli Mandela. However, the Mandela they need to find is not the leader who will make the concessions they seek but the one to whom they can make the concessions they say they cannot offer, Mandela was this kind of leader because his repeated actions and unequivocal words gave witness to a future that Afrikaners could embrace without fear.

Mandela presents leaders today with a twin challenge, first, how do we find the person on the other side to whom we can make the concessions that we feel we cannot afford to make? Second and much more important, how can we become the persons to whom the other side can make the concessions they say they cannot make? Both are important, but the second is critical in a time when each, standing back, looks to the other to perform the difficult actions needed to move the peace process forward.⁷

The basic negotiating principle at the heart of this strikes me as in the spirit of Christ. How do we find, how do we become the person to whom the other side feels they can sacrifice something precious and yet feel safe, respected, and provided for? The intractable ecumenical divides, in CUIC for example, between Episcopalians and Presbyterians suggest themselves as in need of something like this principle. And of course in such a context we may not be talking about an individual--but traditions that offer some sense of security to others that fear the loss of something precious.

Presbyterians followed Eugene Blake into COCU knowing Bishops, in some form, were in the future. In the mid-nineties, representing the Presbyterian delegation to COCU, Dottie Barnard (an elderly lay white woman from the south—what an odd couple

⁷ Bland, Byron, *Finding Mandela*, Presbyterian News Service, April 12, 2007

we were!) and I took a proposal for a corporate Bishop to the catholicity committee of the General Assembly. We were very well received and the proposal very thoroughly defeated. We couldn't get it out of the committee and onto the floor of the assembly. Presbyterians couldn't "lose." Episcopalians can't lose, AME's can't lose. None of us can lose what it is we think makes us who we are—though our savior lost it all on a cross.

In a very interesting new book written by a young 30-something pastor named Carol Merritt, its called Tribal Church, pg. 66, she writes: As young Christians approach religion, we know that Christianity is true; yet, we also have the humble sense that our infinite God could never be contained in our limited creeds or our most voluminous theological libraries. We sense that God reveals Godself through other cultures and other systems of thought.

“...if our churches keep up the fights, if we engage in fortifying our own systems of belief while invalidating and belittling the convictions of others, younger generations will not tolerate the intolerance and simply opt not to be a part of such churches.” Tribal Church, pg. 68

We can't move into a new ecumenical future if we aren't willing to speak and to listen; to give and to receive; to be transformed by the truth of God in others; to be worthy of trust; to risk loss for the greater gain God has in store for us.

Oh, if we could only value this great sovereign God of all as highly as we value and guard our particular perspectives. Remember Paul's remarks to the Athenians in Acts 17:24ff, “The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands...from one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth...For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’”

And there is Abraham—father of three great religions—exemplar of faith. The cynic could ask what did that faith get him? A meandering search for a greener pasture that he never found. But what a journey!

CONCLUSION

I was on cruise control in yet another ecumenical consultation, when about 15 minutes into our first small group gathering, the Korean theological and educator Young Bok Kim said something like, “ecumenism is about overcoming the limits of Christianity.” That got my attention. Well, now I wear my Christianity pretty loosely and comfortably and of course that’s part of our problem, this radical faith descended from a thoroughly Jewish carpenter (what a disguise) has been domesticated by those of us who follow in his footsteps.

But thank God every now and then, and I HOPE it’s happened with some regularity since you’ve been here, something bold, emerges, an idea, a person willing to walk in a kind of ecumenical wilderness in search of a promised land that seems ever out of our reach. As often as we call our own denominational names we must name the world of others outside our well defined and defended neighborhood. “They” are variously, strangers, enemies, friends, Muslims, Jews, Orthodox, Pentecostals, Christians we can’t recognize, and ultimately they are our brothers and sisters created in the very image of God.

This world of neighborhoods and nations is deeply conflicted; humanity is boxed and bordered by walls of hatred masquerading as security, crushing poverty, ancient hostilities, and old forms of evil administered by lethal new technologies. Children suffer: for lack of clean water, orphaned by disease, adult preoccupation with war. We

are talking about life and death here. Religious faith and perversions thereof, are at the heart of this morass. Reconciliation with other faiths? My God, yes! A new ecumenical future is unthinkable without it.

So, I don't know if you can hear it in what I'm saying but I would be comforted by a measure of humility in our work. This is urgent, daunting and all our gifts, the abundance of God that is ours, still require that we give, yes—ever more generously—and that we open our arms to receive the gifts of wisdom, spirit and love that so fully reside in others different from ourselves; they are loved and claimed by God.

We must attend to this healing of memories and live in ways that create life sustaining, life generating memories for tomorrow; the old scars cover enough of our bodies, haunt too many corners of our minds. Then: I can look at your faces and our past is present and the future is a good place, the desire of our hope. Our relationships are precious and they reflect the promise of a reconciled humanity, the family of God at peace with justice. We want to live into that hope, by the grace and in the providence of God. I trust that what we've shared and done together, will help that blessed day come. Amen.