

New Horizons for Christian Unity

New Horizons: A Matter of Perspective

I would like to begin my reflections with an observation on the title of this panel¹, “New Horizons for Christian Unity”. When first invited to be a part of this discussion, I accepted with some reservation. After all, what kind of research or expertise could I offer to a roomful of the most accomplished ecumenists of the last half century? Perhaps it is true that there is “nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1.9)?

A brief rumination on the idea of *horizon* offered a solution: The horizon we see is determined by our location, our proximity to what we see, our altitude (or depth), and the stability of our own position, to say nothing of the nature and orientation of the objects we see on the horizon themselves. I think it is true that there is nothing new under the Sun, if you will, but our perspective – and therefore the horizon – is always changing. Moreover, that which we see on the horizon is only the surface. Though often indicative of deeper realities, what appears on the horizon is often only in silhouette, and so some of my descriptions are merely outlines.

To address the issue of perspective I would like to address the characteristics, challenges, and opportunities of the new generation(s) encountering Christianity and the church, and more specifically, ecumenism. I will outline notable characteristics of the two “postmodern” generational cohorts typically called Generation X² and the Millennial Generation³.

Others have done tremendous work in studying the characteristics of the generational cohorts, both generally and as Christians in particular⁴. I am not proposing new research in this area, but a summary of findings and my own observations that are most helpful to our discussion about why, how, and in what context these characteristics play into Christian identity and ecclesial involvement and in terms of consequences for, and influences on, ecumenism.

Then I want to call attention to what appear to be the “big things” on the horizon. At this point it is too early to tell if they are rocks or islands, treacherous encounters or places of refuge, but they are certainly the looming pastoral and theological concerns that I see the church encountering (assuming we

¹ This paper was originally delivered as part of a plenary panel discussion of the same title at Oberlin II: NCCCUSA Faith and Order Commission 50th Anniversary on 20 July 2007, and revised for a repeat of the panel at the National Workshop on Christian Unity in Chicago on 15 & 16 April 2008

² Roughly defined as those born between 1961 and 1980; though when originally coined it referred to those born in the late 50’s and 60’s, while others mark it as late as 1968-1982.

³ Generally defined as those born between 1980 and 1999; also called “Generation Y” or “Echo Boomers”

⁴ William D’Antonio, William Dinges, Juan Gonzales, Dean Hoge, Benton Johnson, Mary Johnson, Donald Luidens, Robert Wuthnow, and the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, to name a few

do not change course!). Some of them may be very familiar, in fact, because it is the case that when you follow the horizon long enough you can find yourself very near where you started. Instead of it being an opportunity for discouragement or a chance to complain, “We’ve already been here!” it is an opportunity to re-encounter; this time with the advantage of a trip or two around the world, and the wisdom and experiences of those who made the initial journey!

A New Generation, A New Perspective

Whenever speaking of characteristics applied to millions of individuals *en masse*, it is a given that these are very general categories describing a broad swath of the population with plenty of individual exceptions brought about by personality, experience, and circumstance – to say nothing of the cultural variations of ethnicity, geographical region, gender, and religion. Every individual is an intersection of culture and experience, personality and formation, etc. These are nevertheless descriptive of the whole and helpful when not used as impermeable labels affixed indelibly to every member therein. Nevertheless, I am confident that these basic descriptions will resonate with the one hundred young pastors, seminarians, and students present here this week.

General characteristics

At this point, adults in Generation X are roughly in their thirties and forties, while Millennials are in their teens and twenties. The older generation, including many of our ‘young’ pastors and newer professors, was famously described in a 1990 issue of Time magazine:

. . . They possess only a hazy sense of their own identity but a monumental preoccupation with all the problems the preceding generation will leave for them to fix . . . By and large, [they] scornfully reject the habits and values of the baby boomers, viewing that group as self-centered, fickle and impractical. While the baby boomers had a placid childhood in the 1950s, which helped inspire them to start their revolution, today's twenty-something generation grew up in a time of drugs, divorce and economic strain. . . They feel influenced and changed by the social problems they see as their inheritance: racial strife, homelessness, AIDS, fractured families and federal deficits...⁵

Elsewhere, this generation has been called “the abandoned generation”, and notable as the first in more than a century to be *less likely* to achieve the “American dream” than were their parents. This is a generation that was formed with the following apparently universal realities:

- Most marriages end in divorce
- People who commit their lives to a single company get pink slips months before retirement, so expect to change *careers* 7-10 times in your lifetime
- Clergy and teachers are in the news for sex abuse more often than anything else
- “Politician” is an invective, and elections have always been a choice between two evils
- OJ proved you can get away with anything if you have enough money

Millennials can add to the list of assumed realities undermining any sense of loyalty, trust, or security:

⁵ Gross, D.M., and S. Scott. "Proceeding with caution. (cover story)." Time 136, no. 3 (July 16, 1990)

- Enron, mortgage lenders, and other big business proved corporations really are out to get you
- Even the military will not honor your commitments or contracts (consider the stop-loss actions during the war on terror)
- 9/11 proved we are not even safe at home
- Especially for Catholics, worse than the clergy sex abuse was the systematic cover-up by at least certain bishops

For Generation X, this translated into a lack of interest in belonging to anything, as any commitment to any organization or institution would only end in betrayal. Why get married if you are just going to divorce? Political parties, organized demonstrations, civic organizations and even church suffered from the unspoken axiom “while I may *believe* what you believe, that’s no reason to *belong*”.

Millenials have shared many of these experiences, and perhaps even more strongly have made it clear that friendship is the only trusted relationship. All others - including family, congregation, employer, political, even sexual – are changeable, transferable, and ultimately unreliable. Friendship is hard to earn, but once earned is absolute, and no greater honor can be given. They have also been described as an “entire generation afflicted with Attention Deficit Disorder”⁶, and the very definition of “proficient multitaskers”⁷, due largely to their formation from childhood as a generation continuously plugged in and online.

A final important consideration is the role of technology for both generations. One postmodern motto is, “If it is not online, it does not exist”. The technology has enabled a degree of interpersonal connectivity making the global local, at the same time making many important relationships mediated primarily through technology. There are some distinctions yet, however. One representative member of the Millennial generation informed me, “A.J., these emails you send out to everyone are O.K., but email is for old people and institutions. If you want to connect with [the teens], you need a MySpace page.”⁸ A week on MySpace revealed more about certain parish youth than two years of personal interactions.

New Paradigms of Authority and Respect

After presenting part of this paper at Oberlin last summer, several colleagues from the Baby Boom generation, have commented a similarity in some of my remarks to an axiom from their youth, that “you cannot trust anyone over 30”. In the interest of full disclosure, I turned 30 last month⁹.

While there is always a similarity in life cycle patterns and intergenerational conflict, the unique historical context is undeniable. This early Boomer axiom, for example, is incongruent for postmoderns. Age is not the issue, in fact, it is irrelevant. Not only is there no “respect your elders” just for being older,

⁶ Rebecca Huntley, *The World According to Y: Inside the New Adult Generation*, 2006

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Personal conversation with a high school junior during the spring of 2005.

⁹ March 2008

there is not a particular prejudice against ‘elders’. Anyone can earn respect, and become a friend, regardless of age, culture, status, or relationship.

Bearing in mind the survey of the generations in the previous section, consider the consequences:

- **Security** is not offered by the institution, so you must find it within yourself, your own experience, only what comes from within judges what you encounter.
- **Recognition** and promotions are expected for merit, skills, and performance, not on loyalty or longevity. As I heard one young professional put it, “seniority just means someone has been around awhile and was not motivated enough, creative enough, or smart enough to move up, on, or out.”
- **Loyalty** to an institution – including, if not especially, the church – is inherently misguided; instead loyalty is due your friends as they are the only group not proven false. Notably, this does not mean dissent or disagreement with the values, priorities, or beliefs of the institution, just a reluctance to commit.
- **Obedience** (of the blind sort) is a vice, not a virtue. A lifetime of formation for critical thinking, problem solving, independent self-direction and multitasking does not translate well to faithful execution of orders for their own sake.
- **Respect** based on position or title gives way to respect based on integrity and contribution to the community, to friends. Like Christ, the greatest honor I can bestow on someone is to call him *friend*. To call someone by their first name is to invite them into my circle, and thus a sign of respect. To use a formal title is to hold them at arm’s length, and beyond a first introduction could even be an act of disdain.

An Emerging Christian Ecumenism

Believers, not belongers. Spiritual, but not religious. No longer post-Christian so much as post-ecclesial. Several now clichéd terms describe the religiosity of the postmodern seeker for truth. Community is the craving, rather than confession or denomination. In many ways young adults today treat church just like family: you want them there in times of tragedy and triumph, in crisis for support and moments of joy for celebration, but really do not come home to mom and dad’s for dinner every Sunday night.¹⁰

When it comes to ecumenism and the differences of church and churches, I happen to like the phrase “benign whateverism”, which I first heard from Jeff Gros in January during his Keynote at the 2007 NWCU. What association there is, is about community. And the recipe for the emerging model of Christian unity is this: If it is about community, go where your friends are, where you feel truly a part of something. Just bring your beliefs with you. Then, together, create a *bricolage* of the most meaningful experiences, traditions, and worship styles from each member’s previous encounter with church.

¹⁰ This helpful image was used by Ron Rolheiser, OMI at an address at Seattle University I attended in early 2007. After including this reference in the Oberlin presentation, a friend and colleague from Rolheiser’s generation commented he “cringed every time he heard one of us [young adults] quoting from older voices”. It is still an accurate assessment, and as I said before, age is irrelevant!

The postmodern faith experience is to seek out what resonates with one's soul, one's experience, and apply it with all else that resonates. Whether it comes from the tradition of East or West, whether Wesley or Calvin or Aquinas, is far less important than whether or not it speaks to us, here, now. If it does, use it. If not, discard it. Instead of "lowest common denominator theology", think of an ecumenical "best-practices theology".¹¹

Some have ascribed this simply to religious illiteracy as a result of faulty (or completely absent) faith formation through the 70's and 80's. It is not that simple, though this may play its part. Certainly one advantage to a generation or two of religiously illiterate young adults is that they have not inherited the cultural and historical closed-group reinforcement that went with "traditional" religious identity. The gap allowed by parents unable or unwilling¹² to pass on their faith tradition has opened opportunities for the Holy Spirit to create an organic unity of a church that can truly be called evangelical, catholic, and reformed.

We are the product of 50 years and more of ecumenical effort, and some of this is the fruit of your labor. A very real but imperfect communion through baptism and belief may not be articulated by your typical Christian, but it is certainly integrated into their experience of the emerging church. Praying together, studying together, being free to be church together, even the Lund Principle ... these are givens. So much so, that there is a real danger of ecumenical illiteracy as well.

As products of these decades of growing cooperation and collaboration, it is easy to remain viscerally unaware of the changes in ecumenical relations just in the last half century.¹³ Vatican II and the Catholic entrée into the ecumenical stage was history, so was Dr. King's "I Have a Dream Speech"; denominational divisions make about as much sense as racial segregation to many of my cohort, and are seen as a similarly grave sin... one that can generally be avoided by simply ignoring the divisions!

Ironically, one result of the tremendous effort of the ecumenical movement in the 60's and 70's is that in the twenty-first century, a young ecumenist might have to spend more effort convincing one's peers

¹¹ At Oberlin, I used here an image of a "contemporary, unintentional restorationism" to describe the benign exuberance of "recreating genuine Christianity for the first time in 2000 years, no disrespect intended!" It still seems awkward, but I am not sure "best-practices theology" is much better!

¹² The Boomer revolt against their parents included the rejection of the forced religious identity. It was essential for many to not impose any kind of religious upbringing on their children, so that they could "make up their own minds". While this has led to a growing identification with the "spiritual but not religious" moniker noted above, there is also a significant minority, of the Millennial generation especially, that is rebelling against *their* parents by *embracing* "traditional" religious identity with a new zeal that puts an interesting twist on teenage rebellion!

¹³ I also have to admit to the temptation to envy the "first generation" of modern ecumenists, those who were at the cutting edge of the movement at a time when it seemed like unity was only months or short years away. There is a great deal of "looking back to the golden age" of ecumenism as the 60's and 70's in the same way others in my communion look back to the golden age of Catholic Identity as the 40's and 50's. Mel Robeck's presentation at Oberlin and subsequent conversations there and at Graymoor in August 2007 brought home to me that it was not always so easy a time for the many pioneers of the contemporary ecumenical movement. In all my comments, I hope my deep gratitude for the debt of that great work is abundantly clear.

that it is still necessary, and one's supervisors that it is worthwhile, than in dialogue with ecumenical partners!

Forming Young Ecumenists *and* Ecumenical Formation of Young Church Leaders

Formation in ecumenism needs to be twofold. First, we clearly need to continue and improve the ecumenical dimension of the formation of pastoral leaders, whether ordained, lay ordained, or lay ecclesial ministers. Some churches are better at this than others. With nearly 100 theology students and seminarians here today, something is working. Even in the last 5 years, there has been an increased attention to this concern, expressed by Mark Hansen in Savannah¹⁴, Archbishop Aykazian yesterday¹⁵, and many others. But, there is still much work to be done.

In a 2004 survey by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, with only about 50% of bishops' conferences responding, little more than 1/3 of seminaries appeared to be offering the degree of ecumenical formation called for by the 1995 document, *The Ecumenical Dimension in the Formation of Those Engaged in Pastoral Work*.¹⁶ Though, at least the need for better formation was recognized by most of the respondents.

In 2005, a survey of seminaries and other ministry formation programs was conducted in preparation for a panel on the formation of the next generation of ecumenists at the 2005 National Workshop on Christian Unity. Only about 1/3 (31%) of reporting institutions indicated offering a basic course on ecumenism. Fewer institutions offered a course on the history of the ecumenical movement (18%) or another course concentrated on ecumenism (17%). Where any course on ecumenism was offered, only 1/3 of respondents reported that the course was required.¹⁷

While there is a reasonable concern in some quarters that developing a greater professionalization of ecumenism would disenfranchise non-specialists from their very important role in ecumenical reception, failing to do so relegates ecumenism to "extracurricular" status. In addition to assuring that a basic introduction to ecumenism and an overall ecumenical sensibility in the pastoral formation of our ministers, we need to also form vocational ecumenists.

I often tell people that I fully intended to major in ecumenism during my undergraduate years, only to find that there was no such thing and I would have to 'settle' for theology and philosophy instead. Even finding a graduate program designed for a would-be full time ecumenist entails heading to Rome or Bossey. We need to be intentional about calling, supporting, and promoting the next generation of Jeff Gros', Michael Kinnamons, Mary Tanners and Lorelei Fuchs'. It is no longer sufficient to hope that the

¹⁴ Closing Luncheon at the 2003 National Workshop on Christian Unity, Savannah, GA

¹⁵ 19 July 2007 during the NCCUSA Faith and Order Commission 50th Anniversary in Oberlin, OH

¹⁶ Bishop Brian Farrell, *Ecumenism today: the situation in the Catholic Church*, 2004

¹⁷ This survey remains unpublished except as part of the panel discussion by A.J. Boyd, Melanie Gibbons, Jason Renken, and Whitney Walton at the 2005 National Workshop on Christian Unity in New Orleans.

right person will simply fall into the movement, as seems to be the story of so many of my predecessors, friends and colleagues.

In many communities this is still the *modus operandi* for finding ecumenical officers or members of dialogues, despite a growing number of well-formed young people with a vocation to ecumenist. Given budgeting cuts both in judicatories and in ecumenical agencies, one means of combating the marginalization of ecumenical workers would seem to be an increased professionalization, denominational certification standards, hiring standards, and an academic track alongside systematic, church history, and liturgy, et al.

The Spirit will continue to call ecumenists from a variety of paths, no doubt, but strategic support is still needed. Some denominations have responded better than others, many in different ways. In the last few years many new opportunities have opened for which every young ecumenist here is grateful, but more are still needed.

Peering into the Horizon

In closing, I want to simply mention a few of the hazy images I see on the horizon of the ecumenical journey. As I said in my reflection on the horizon-perspective metaphor, this are only in silhouette.

There remains a tension between “Faith and Order” and “Life and Work”¹⁸, and who participates in them. In many locales, this means councils of churches are focused on social programming and advocacy, and the occasional pastor support group engaged in formation or faith sharing. Cooperation with other Christians to “do good” is what we call a “no-brainer”. More can be done together than separately. However, as an end in itself, simple toleration and cooperation is inadequate. More is expected. Reception requires not only the practice of spiritual ecumenism and a greater connect between these two lungs of the ecumenical movement, but perhaps a wholesale integration.

Despite admonitions that ecumenism is not simply comparative ecclesiology, we are once again reminded this last week¹⁹ of the centrality of the need to continually deepen and develop our ecclesiology, together and individually. Much of what remains to divide us is the result of practical, applied ecclesiology. This is especially true at the level of local reception and local perception of each other. A little comparative ecclesiology could go a long way, after all, to ease cross-communion reactions when intraecclesial documents enter the fray.

While it has been true for some time that the ‘center of gravity’ for the global church has shifted south, from a Euro-American locus to a boom south of the equator, I think this will be even more of a poignant

¹⁸ This is my first opportunity to be present at an official “Faith and Order” event, so I am using the terms in the general sense regarding the nature of ecumenical activity, rather than to specific efforts of the Faith and Order or Life and Work Commissions of either the NCC or the WCC.

¹⁹ This is a reference to the publication of *Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church* by Cardinal William Levada of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in late June 2007

and personal reality for our younger generations. The effect on the global church conversation is certainly being felt by my brothers and sisters in the Anglican Communion and elsewhere. But I am thinking of even more direct encounters, both in the virtual world and in the local congregation. The likelihood of an African, Asian, or South American bishop of either Rome or Canterbury would certainly have an effect on ecumenical conversation, too!

Related to that is the emerging importance of the Pentecostal/charismatic population of Christians. Nearly 25% of all Christians are Pentecostal or Charismatic. This is radical growth from just 6% of all Christians 30 years ago, according to a recent Pew Forum study. This Pentecostal wave is the fastest growing religious movement, particularly in the global south.

On one hand there are new doors that could be opened for ecumenical dialogue here. One-tenth of all Catholics now describe themselves as charismatic, and will probably continue to move in this direction. In Brazil alone, the world's largest Catholic country, almost half the population self-describes as charismatic. At the same time, this poses potential new resistance to ecumenical encounter. For example, a study commissioned in the late 1990's by CELAM (the Latin American Episcopal Conference) indicated that an estimated 8000 Latin American Catholics were departing the Catholic Church for Evangelical Protestantism every day. (Whether these were intentional departures, or done within the context of the widespread assumption that all churches are Catholic is an important question). All told, this indicates a larger movement than occurred during the 16th century Reformations.

I claimed no expertise, only a perspective. I hope in it, you have found some resonance with your own faith and experience. I look forward to our continued conversation together!

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." John 3.8