

Current Realities in Local and Regional Ecumenism by the Rev. Rebecca J. Tollefson

I write from my perspective of 10 years as Executive Director of the Ohio Council of Churches, and 25+ years ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament. I also write from a deep conviction of being ecumenical which has evolved very naturally from my Presbyterian roots.

As I begin, I am indebted to my state ecumenical colleagues for their past research and work: especially the Rev. Dr. Nancy Jo Kemper, Executive Director, Kentucky Council of Churches; and Mr. Scott Anderson, Executive Director, Wisconsin Council of Churches. Nancy Jo outlined specific elements, which I am adapting here, in a paper she wrote for the Kentucky Council's 60th anniversary; for which I am particularly grateful. Every spring the state executives gather together for 3 days (plus) of reconnecting, learning, and community building. There are currently 44 state councils, 11 or so which are served by a president, or part-time executive, and who don't necessarily interact with the other state executives on a regular basis. We all work in ways that are unique to our own situations. We borrow and learn from one another, and bounce ideas and suggestions. Many have served in these ministries for a significant time. Others are brand new. We seek to support and uphold one another, especially when disaster strikes a state, such as with the mine disaster in West Virginia or Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana. There is blessed wisdom in the group of state ecumenical colleagues.

Let us begin with some given theological affirmations and confessions:

1. God, in Christ, has reconciled us to one another and to God's self. Our unity is God's gift.
2. The whole created universe belongs to God's oikos, the household of one God, who is ever present through the Holy Spirit, and who has been made known to us who claim to be his followers through Jesus the Christ.
3. As Christians we affirm that we are gathered into one body from the diversity of the human family and are sent in mission to bring good news to all peoples in all nations.
4. We confess, with the founders of the ecumenical movement that "The world is too strong for a divided church." In a world fragmented by fearfulness, Christians proclaim a divine love that casts out fear (I John 4:18) and binds even those the world calls enemies (Matthew 5:44). In a society still divided by race and increasingly divided into rich and poor, Christians affirm a vision of community in which every individual is valued as a child of God (Genesis 1:27) and all our neighbors have enough of the world's material goods to sustain life. In a world fractured by suspicion of those who are "other", Christians have heard a command to welcome strangers (Genesis 18, Hebrews 13:2), even as Christ has welcomed us (Romans 15:7).
5. The way Christians live together, and work together, are as central to our mission as acts of witness through evangelism and deeds of compassion and witness for justice. Relationships of "cordial neglect" and "polite tolerance" severely damage the power of our proclamation of the good news.

[The above are adapted from the Introduction to the 2007-2011 Strategic Plan of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA]

Beyond these are a few other affirmations:

6. The church is essentially a “...missionary reality, and not a frozen institution.” ...The church is sent out to the world to discern and respond to the will of God in the complexities and ambiguities of the world. It means going beyond itself, reaching out to the poor and outcast, sharing their concerns, identifying with their suffering and meeting their needs.” (Aram I, Catholicos of Cilicia, Moderator of the World Council of Churches, in his report to the 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, 14-23 February, 2006)
7. Ecumenism has always been a renewal movement, originated by the churches but it was created also to be a “thorn in the flesh” of the sides of the Christian communions, provoking them to discomfort with the status quo of their divisions, their “cordial neglect” and their courteous distance from one another.... Ecumenical organizations are not agencies separate from the churches, but integral to their life and the integrity of their witness.
[the above borrowed from Nancy Jo’s paper re: Ky Council’s 60th anniversary]

What are some of the challenges?

Another colleague, the Rev. Dr. Steve Sidorak, Executive of the Christian Conference of Connecticut notes: “...that we should feel ourselves “relationally challenged,” individually and ecumenically The growing temptation to keep our distance from one another must be strongly resisted and vigorously overcome by a heartfelt desire to keep each other ecumenical company. If the ecumenical movement is to have any future, then it will be a profoundly relational one. Consequently, it is imperative for us to recognize that our membership in this council of churches is secondary to our relatedness in Christ.” (2006 Annual Report of the Executive Director to the 31st Annual Meeting of the Christian Conference of Connecticut)

I have observed through the past 10 years that there is a lack of ecumenical formation on the part of bishops and executive leaders. [This is a common concern shared among my colleagues around the country as well.] Bishops and executive leaders inherit their ecumenical commitment, but they seldom have any sense of what that means for them or what it means to be in an intentional partnership. They often don’t know how their judicatory compares with another; where other judicatory boundaries exist (this in spite of being given such information.); or even some basics of what other denominations believe or how they are governed. Why not work with one another on similar training, such as on sexual misconduct/ethics, etc? A year ago, the Faith & Order Commission of the Ohio Council of Churches created a Faith Forum on the Diaconate Ministry. Methodists, Episcopalians, and Roman Catholics were invited. A panel representing these constituents was in place; but this event was cancelled due to lack of registrations.

I am constantly going around to visit the Ohio Council of Churches’ 27 bishops and executives, checking in with them, letting them know the latest, challenging them, encouraging them to invite me to bring greetings to their annual meeting venues, getting an annual report to them, e-mailing them frequently with requests that come or flyers that I’d like them to post. There are 4 bishops or executives that live outside the state of Ohio. That in itself presents a challenge. There

also are 8 major metropolitan cities around Ohio, where bishops and executives reside or have their office. They are not in one location; hence it is extremely difficult to pull them together. There has been a group in northwestern Ohio that has been meeting for more than 3 decades. They began to meet around migrant issues and have continued; however it is a mix of bishop and district superintendents, synod executive and executive presbyter, bishop and staff personnel, etc. I have sought to bring the central Ohio group of about 8 together periodically and one in northeastern Ohio, another group of about 7. But they meet infrequently.

Another colleague has observed that “Declines in membership, revenues and staff capacity have focused the attention of denominational executives, clergy and laity on internal institutional survival. These dramatic changes have resulted in equally dramatic impacts on ecumenical councils:

6. substantial cuts in staff and program
7. a number of state and local councils have gone out of existence
8. denominational participation has waned on council governing boards and in program participation.

(Darel Grothaus, Washington Association of Churches in his report to the WAC Board on the Path Forward, March 10, 2007)

Besides the institutional survival is the given that a new Bishop has to learn what it means to be Bishop, and as one of the ELCA Bishops in Ohio told me a few years ago, he had to learn ‘Bishop 101.’ And that takes awhile, usually a year or two!

Decline in financial support hurt us three years ago in a huge way. One major judicatory decided to cut \$20,000 out of their pledge to the Council. With others going through downsizing as well, it meant a reduction of 2 staff positions and an office move to a smaller office suite.

Another challenge is to be seen around the state. I am always astounded as to who hasn’t even heard of us! And we’ve been in existence since 1919! It is important to hold events at a location where people can easily access on/off the interstate and travel isn’t more than a couple of hours. And it is important for Council representatives/members to pass the information on. We are often ‘interpreted’ as a liberal organization. However, we only respond to issues or concerns that the Governing Board has passed or acted on, and these are most frequently on behalf of those who have no voice, the poor, the uneducated, the uninsured.

Should councils of churches become organizations that are interfaith? Some state organizations around the country have done this; but I agree with Michael Kinnamon, noted ecumenist and Allen and Dottie Miller Professor of Mission and Peace at Eden Theological Seminary, that both Christian ecumenism and interfaith dialogue are essential, and they are complimentary activities. They have different goals and theological foundations. The church of Jesus Christ must respond to the biblical call to be an instrument of God’s healing purpose for all humanity, and all creation.

Michael Kinnamon and Diane Kessler (Executive Director of the Massachusetts Council) in their book, *Councils of Churches and the Ecumenical Vision* note that Victor Hayward, responsible for relationships between the WCC and national councils of churches reached the conclusion in the early 1970's: The key issue is that most churches show only partial commitment to what is involved in being a fellowship of churches. Where there is commitment, it is often to the council as an institution and not to the other churches that comprise its membership. Most councils, thus, are an ecumenical facade behind which churches remain as unecumenical as ever. (Pg. 2) This still holds true. I constantly talk with Bishops and Executives about their partnership with one another. In fact, I borrowed a "Covenant" piece from another council so that this becomes a visible indication of their commitment to others in this partnership known as a state Council. The "Covenant" is simply our Mission Statement and preamble to the Constitution of the Council.

Another challenge to note is that there is a major realignment within and between American denominations unfolding. "Based in convictions about the authority of scripture, denominations are experiencing internal conflicts over issues related to human sexuality and human reproduction, gender roles, and the mission of the church in society. Some groups advocate the literal truth and inerrancy of each verse of holy scripture while at the other end of the spectrum, others within the same denomination, or in other denominations, may emphasize the broad themes of scripture: exodus, liberation, hospitality, reconciliation that overcomes all sources of division, and grace. (Nancy Jo Kemper's paper)

One denomination that has been a member of the Council for over 3 decades recently withdrew its membership. No reason was given; however I had several conversations with the new executive over 1 ½ years, and went before their executive board to talk with how a judicatory/denomination becomes a member of the Council. One of their own, who has served on the Board on their behalf for several years, presented the issue of partnership. One pastor, irate with his judicatory's decision to withdraw membership called me later to tell me that this was an issue of inclusion - that of other denomination's stances on the gay/lesbian issue who happen to be members of the Council. This Council has added two new members in the 10 years I've been here; but now we've lost one.

Communication is crucial; but I've been encouraged to not send too much. Several bishops have their assistant receive communication from e-mail. I designed special purple colored stationary so that when they see 'it', they are aware that this is something they especially need to pay attention to. And as soon as a new bishop or executive is present, I request to meet with them, giving them a packet about the Council and letting them know the expectations.

Current Strengths

The Ohio Council of Churches downsized its Board from 118 members to 27 (one person/judicatory) a couple years ago, and created a new Mission Statement. We identify in our quarterly newsletter on a rotating basis, 6 of the judicatories to hold in prayer as well as note annual meetings. We 'borrowed' a prayer card from the Kentucky Council of Churches where there is a generic prayer on one side and all the judicatories listed on the reverse side. These all

have been intentional in order to make the Council more relevant/visible to the bishop or executive leader (and constituents), more on their radar screen. Bishops and executives are strongly encouraged to attend at least one of the three board meetings/year because they are the primary representative. Last October, one Bishop agreed to serve as an officer of the Council. This was crucial, in my estimation, to the significance of helping bishops and executives 'see' the importance of their leadership and partnership in the life and witness of this Council.

Being present at annual conferences, synod assemblies, district meetings is a good time to become more visible to constituents. I am grateful for the numerous opportunities to visit and be in fellowship with judicatories. I am always personally blessed by these encounters. However, out of 27 judicatories, I only get invited and attend up to 8 annual meetings.

Sharing resources with one another as state council executives happens on a regular basis. The Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns of the Kentucky Annual Conference, United Methodist Conference, put together a curriculum One In the Bond Of Love. This curriculum has come in handy many times when I've gone out to talk/educate about ecumenism to various groups or constituents around Ohio. I've borrowed another couple pieces from my colleague with the Pennsylvania Council of Churches from their board meetings. After a judicatory leads worship, they then share their ecumenical understanding(s) and commitments as a denomination. Additionally, we've added an ecumenical intercessions prayer time at the end of meetings, at which time any one is able to lift up joys and concerns for themselves personally or for their judicatory . These are again relevant and viable ways that partners are seen in a refreshing and vital link to one another.

We co-sponsor events with organizations or judicatories. This becomes important so that the word gets out to a wider audience. Plus, many of us are limited financially, so it works to the advantage of all, to pool our resources: people, time, and money!

From Regional to Local

Scott Anderson backs up Nancy's premise about missional reality by noting: "We have come to see that mission is not merely an activity of the church. Rather, mission is the result of God's initiative, rooted in God's purposes to restore and heal creation. We have learned to speak of God as a missionary God. And thus we have learned to understand the church as a "sent people." (Furthermore) "...our challenge is to move from an ecclesiocentric missiology to a missional ecclesiology, or in simpler terms, from "church with mission" to "missional church." A missional ecclesiology would ask: "What is God's mission in our worldly context; where is the harvest now plentiful? And how are we to collaborate with God in fulfilling this mission, as we are sent into the world?" (Biblical Images and the Future of Mainline Christianity as lived out in State Councils of Churches, State Ecumenical Executives 2007 Retreat)

Even in my own presbytery, Scioto Valley, congregations have been identified as missional outposts. So what does this mean for us ecumenically? The task of state councils of churches is to assist and work with local churches and judicatories in finding those answers.

In Wisconsin, all of their ecumenical work has shifted towards the local. “From congregational study-action resources on hunger, affordable housing, and the death penalty, to quality continuing education programming for clergy through workshops and conferences, to advocacy work which seeks to train individual Christians for faithful citizenship, we are now completely focused on equipping the local church, raising the importance of ecumenical engagement at the grassroots level. The faith and order component of conciliar ecumenism must also shift downward. What has largely been a game of insider baseball– denominational staff and academics in bi-lateral and multi-lateral dialogues leading to doctrinal reconciliation - now needs to devolve to the local level. ...While there have been a handful of interesting experiments with Presbyterian pastors serving ELCA congregations, and ELCA pastors serving Episcopal parishes, the clear consensus is that we have yet to engage the grassroots with these (Formula of Agreement and Called to Common Mission) or other agreements which impact the churches of our state.” (Departure Points for a New Ecumenism, by Scott Anderson)

Scott further goes on: “His Holiness Aram I, the former Moderator of the World Council of Churches’ Central Committee, has recently called for a “people centered ecumenism.” This framework may well serve as the theme for the emerging ecumenical paradigm. By shifting our focus to the life and ministry of local congregations, bringing the considerable gifts of the conciliar movement to bear on the missiological imperatives of this historical moment, building collaborative relationships with other ecumenical partners, loosening conciliar structures to invite broader participation, and forming a new cadre of lay leaders with passion, we begin to see the contours of a “people centered ecumenism,” a movement in its conciliar form that is more able and ready to respond to the gospel’s ecumenical imperatives in the 21st century.

The Ohio Council constantly seeks to network with local councils around the state. In Ohio there are some 15 other organizations such as Toledo Area Ministries, Greater Dayton Christian Connection, and the Akron Area Association of Churches. Directors of these groups used to meet a couple times a year; however dwindling resources and becoming part-time, or even less, has led to only email correspondence. I seek to be present for meetings when possible (maybe once/year) in order to lift up a wider vision of ecumenism. In September of 2007, we will co-sponsor an event featuring Diana Butler Bass with NewSource Transforming Christian Ministries ecumenical resource center.

A perspective with CUIC

The Local and Regional Task Force of CUIC (Churches Uniting In Christ) has worked hard and diligently to stir up interest in CUIC around the country. We have worked to construct/create the webpage with contents, the newsletter with articles of local and regional events, a reproducible brochure, sought avenues to test CUIC 2-week and 4-week curriculum, and generated participation in articles for the These Days publication during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity for 2007 (presently working on 2008). Currently we are also in the process of seeking local contacts for an initial CUIC program that would generate interest among CUIC congregations within an area. Each CUIC communion has been asked to identify one congregation or pastor for this program. This Task Force has met on seminary campuses, engaging in a time of conversation about CUIC. In the spring of 2007, we met with folk from

Illiff Seminary and had an evening conversation also focused on the issue of racism. This has proved productive and very worthwhile and we will continue to do this in the fall of 2007 when the Task Force meets in Columbus, OH.

There are currently CUIC activities in Missouri and Massachusetts. The Missouri Churches Uniting in Christ and the Missouri Christians Against Racism and Poverty held a press conference on April 23rd to issue a united call for social and economic justice. This Missouri group has been active in several venues through the past few years. In Massachusetts, the Council of Churches of Greater Springfield has coordinated several ecumenical services that highlight the relationship among members of CUIC. In the past, there was a Denver pilot program. Pastors of downtown CUIC churches met for a couple years.

Members of the Local and Regional Task Force are optimistic about CUIC; however much also depends on the emphasis given by a bishop or executive leader and the support of ecumenical officers.

A final note

“Together, ecumenical people are continually weaving a new tapestry of beauty and value, pulling and tugging their larger communities to new life and purpose. That is the role of beauty - to challenge the soul of the community.” (A Tapestry of Justice, Service, and Unity: Local Ecumenism in the United States, 1050-2000, Arleon Kelley, General Editor, Pg. 423)

Ecumenism is moving along. Can you hear the rustling of the Spirit? May God continue to do a new thing in spite of us.