

“Pray Without Ceasing”
National Workshop on Christian Unity
4-15-08

Nothing is more gratifying for a teacher (which I have been for most of my ministry) than to see former students exercising outstanding leadership – and that certainly applies to Rev. Betty Gamble, who has chaired the planning committee for this year’s workshop. And how nice of Betty and the planning committee to invite me to offer this address on my birthday! When I was a kid, the adults never seemed very happy on my birthday, April 15, so it’s nice to celebrate it with a room full of joyous people!

In addition to thanking Betty and the committee, I also want to express my thanksgiving to God for the ministry of two men whose witness has profoundly affected me – Bill Lazareth and Lukas Vischer, giants of Faith and Order, both of whom died in the past two months. Gracious God, may the passion of your servants Bill and Lukas for the unity of your church infect us in these days together. Amen

I begin by naming a theme that will run throughout these remarks: The ecumenical movement, this movement for wholeness, is itself in great danger of fragmenting. One split is between an ecumenism that focuses on bilateral theological dialogues (a favored methodology of the churches to which many of you belong) and an ecumenism that is expressed through conciliar life. I pray that my presence, as head of a council of churches, may symbolize our common commitment to resist this bifurcation.

But, as you know, the issues run deeper. In a classic essay on ecumenical theology, published nearly twenty years ago, George Lindbeck argued that the most noteworthy development in the movement’s recent history is “the growing dissociation of two different ways of being ecumenical.” One way is defined by the goal of eucharistic communion and proceeds through painstaking theological dialogue aimed at a common recovery of the church’s apostolic faith. The other is primarily focused on interdenominational cooperation and is interested in ecclesial unity (which may grow

through shared mission) to the extent that such unity contributes to peace and justice in the world.

Almost exactly a month ago, nearly a thousand Christians gathered in Washington, D.C. for an annual conference known as Ecumenical Advocacy Days, the intent of which is to offer common (“ecumenical”) witness on social-political issues of the day. I suspect that few of you were present. Conversely, most of the Christians who met in Washington, people who regard themselves as committed participants in the ecumenical movement, wouldn’t think of attending the National Workshop on Christian Unity.

In my own ministry, I have tried to insist that unity and justice belong together in any fully adequate understanding of ecumenism. Indeed, I think this movement gets profound precisely when it says Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry and Progress to Combat Racism or Joint Declaration on Justification and Decade to Overcome Violence in the same breath. On the one hand, the search for Christian unity can end up bolstering old forms of domination unless constantly coupled with a commitment to just relationships. The unity we have in Christ is one in which those who have been marginalized find a home. On the other hand, the justice we seek is not merely the co-existence of separated communities, but a community in which walls of hostility have come down.

Professor Lindbeck acknowledges my own efforts to integrate Faith and Order and Life and Work. In fact, in an essay in the August 9, 2005 issue of the Christian Century, he refers to this as the “MK approach” to ecumenism. But, he concludes, this approach is futile. Faith and Order must take precedence over Life and Work in the same way that faith takes precedence over works in Reformation teaching. Because, he argues, whenever unity and justice are treated as equal priorities, theology ends up subordinate to politics and the ecumenical movement becomes simply another arena for pursuing political agendas.

One of the things I love about Professor Lindbeck’s article is that he never caricatures my position, just as I hope I have not caricatured his. That, of course, is an essential

condition of dialogue; and this, I believe, is a dialogue worth having. Is there a single ecumenical movement? If so, must it give priority attention to visible unity in faith and sacraments? To common work for justice? Or is it possible to regard these as equally valued, interdependent goals?

I hope that this conversation will continue in other settings throughout the week. This morning, I want to add that the National Council of Churches, to which I am obviously committed, has not always adequately maintained this tension between unity and justice. The work of the Council's Faith and Order Commission has at times been treated, by some leaders of the NCC, as esoteric and peripheral; and the Council as a whole has been viewed as a cooperative agency, as an end in itself, rather than a community of communions whose life together as council is part of their journey toward deeper unity.

For my own tenure as General Secretary, as I have already told the Governing Board, I will insist that the NCC is both a forum in which conflicting perspectives meet in dialogue and a body that boldly declares the gospel's partisanship on behalf of the excluded and oppressed. "The World Council," wrote Willem Visser't Hooft in one of its last books, "has a special responsibility to maintain the fellowship between its member churches, for the achievement of this fellowship [with all its tensions] is the *raison d'être* of the Council.... But it is a fellowship based on common convictions and called to common witness. An important element in the very substance of our fellowship is what we have hammered out together" – including a commitment to say no to all forms of racism, to bear witness that war is contrary to the will of God, and to declare the preciousness of God's creation.

Such commitments are not a pre-requisite for ecumenical participation; rather, they are part of the fabric of witness now woven through our life together as a result of our common submission to the gospel. My task as General Secretary is to help the churches build up their relationships with one another and to hold them accountable to the commitments they have made to and with one another. As long as I am General Secretary, Faith and Order will never be marginalized in the work of the National

Council of Churches. And I will encourage our Faith and Order Commission to help the churches receive the results of bilateral dialogues. But as long as I am General Secretary, I will insist that racism, sexism, poverty, and violence are church-dividing issues that belong on the agenda of Faith and Order - and that our unity as Christians, though an end in itself, is also part and parcel of our witness to God's work of liberation and reconciliation in the world.

Thus far, I have been talking about the familiar tension between Faith and Order and Life and Work. I want now to shift gears slightly and speak about another split or tension in the movement, one that brings us to our wonderfully-biblical theme for this year's National Workshop on Christian Unity: "Pray without Ceasing." Before naming the tension, however, I need to give a bit of background.

I doubt that this group needs much convincing that the heart of this movement (with its dialogues and assemblies and councils and documents and general secretaries) is prayer. The image often used is a simple one: Since God is the center, the closer we draw to God (or better, the closer we are drawn to God), the closer we draw to one another. Which is why the great Catholic theologian, Yves Congar, once wrote that the way through the door of unity is on our knees.

The bishops at Vatican II made this point in the Decree on Ecumenism; Pope Paul II made it in Ut Unum Sint; Philip Potter and Emilio Castro made it during their years as World Council of Churches general secretaries. But the source I want to cite is the late Lukas Vischer. Lukas, as you probably know, was a long-time director of the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission; but less well known is the fact that it was Lukas who introduced the idea of mutual intercession, using an ecumenical prayer cycle. Intercession, he wrote in 1980, begins with giving thanks to God for one another. It is a way of holding fast to the relationship God has already given us and, thus, is "the only safeguard against cynicism." If the churches are to pray for one another, he wrote, then we need to know one another far better than we generally do. We don't simply pray

for the other when they are in special difficulty, as if our prayer is dictated by what happens to be in the headlines. No, we are called to pray for one another in our totality – in that sense, “without ceasing.” Such intercession is never a substitute for practical acts of solidarity. Rather, intercession “is the mobilization of our imaginations on behalf of the others,” signaling a constant readiness to help. The point, however, is deeper. Churches, especially our western churches, find it much easier to give than to receive. We intercede for others, however, we realize that we, too, are in need of intercession. And we ask: What changes are called for in our own life and witness if we are to be of real service to other churches? Most importantly, of course, intercession forces us to submit our will to God’s – a point I will return to in a moment.

All of this underscores why the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, whose 100th anniversary we celebrate this year, is so important, and why all of us owe such a debt of gratitude to the Graymoor Ecumenical and Interreligious Institute for its tireless promotion of ecumenically grounded prayer.

But this focus on prayer stands in real tension with both Life and Work and Faith and Order.

On the Life and Work side, there is a strain of activism that sees a focus on prayer as too withdrawn from the world, too quietistic. No one, I take it, denies the importance of prayer, just its centrality. But, surely, this is mistaken. At Ecumenical Advocacy Days last month, I suggested to the participants that Christians are not activists, if by this we mean a conscious human effort to create a better world. Our advocacy grows out of a confidence that in Christ, God has acted to overcome evil and even death. As Henri Nouwen once put it, “an activist wants to heal, restore, redeem, and re-create; but those acting within the house of God point through their action to the healing, restoring, redeeming, and re-creating presence of God.” And that means, of course, that we are grounded in prayer. I like the way M.M. Thomas expressed it at the World Council of Churches Nairobi Assembly in 1975: The ecumenical movement is marked by a “spirituality for combat,” a “holiness in action combining struggle with contemplation.”

The tension within Faith and Order is more subtle but no less real. When the Decree on Ecumenism and Ut Unum Sint speak of prayer, it is in the context of naming a spiritual orientation that involves “interior conversation,” repentance, metanoia. But way of contrast, the Faith and Order and bilateral texts usually speak of the passage from division to communion as one gradual growth. Let me quote once more from Lukas Vischer by way of example. He points out that the famous Canberra Statement, “The Unity of the Church as Koinonia,” written by the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission, makes only passing reference to repentance and none whatsoever to conversion of mind and heart. Unity will increase through the patient accumulation of consensus until the day when the churches can recognize in one another the church in its fullness. But, asks Lukas, does this correspond to reality? Will unity really be brought about by adding to it drop by drop until the vessel is full? Isn’t it more likely that unity will be achieved only if the churches, all the churches, undergo repentance, renewal, metanoia. Isn’t that the point of saying that prayer is the soul of this movement?

The Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order (Santiago de Compostela, 1993) felt to me quite schizophrenic. The worship was dominated by a haunting refrain written, poignantly, by a Serbian Orthodox priest: “Tell us Lord. What has happened to us? Where did we go astray?” Nearly all of the speeches, however, concentrated on the gradual increase of communion through mutual recognition.

I don’t want to be misunderstood. Ecumenism requires patience and sustained effort. I am an advocate of and participant in this work. If communion grows, however, it is surely because the Holy Spirit has convicted us of our sinful separations and converted us to see one another differently. Our task, if I can put it this way, is to clear space (through our dialogues and councils and repentance) for the Spirit. “The idea that a time could come,” wrote Lukas Vischer, “when all the churches recognize in the others the fullness that they find in themselves is somewhat appalling – a fellowship of churches which lack nothing!” Spiritual ecumenism puts both Life and Work and Faith and Order ecumenism in proper perspective.

It is time to preach. I don't really lament the tensions I have tried to outline. They are the sign of a movement that has life. But none of these tensions can be sustained if our focus is not on God's initiative – to which we respond, in which we participate. That is the fundamental tension at the heart of this movement, at the heart of Christian faith. Mission is an activity; but as ecumenical conferences have insisted for at least fifty years, it is God's mission in which we participate – which means that prayerful discernment is essential for a missionary church. In the same way, unity is a calling; but beneath that it is a gift for which we pray. That is why the language of “growing” in agreement is problematic; it suggests that unity is something we create or achieve, which is only secondarily the case. As William Temple once put it, “we could not seek union if we did not already possess unity.”

Given this, it is ironic that the focal point for this year's Week of Prayer, taken from I Thessalonians 5, on first reading sounds so human-centered, as if the most important thing about our faith is what we do: “We urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them.... Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.” The apostle sounds human-centered in this passage because he is exhorting a new church to stand firm in the face of persecution. So he instructs them: be constant, be disciplined, be patient.

It doesn't take much reading between even these lines, however, to see Paul's overwhelming God-centeredness. For example, he urges his readers (us) to be patient (the biblical phrase is “slow anger”) because that is God's very nature. Think of Psalm 103: “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” He urges us to give thanks in all circumstances because life itself is a divine gift. Remember his pointed question to the Corinthians: “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?” No, to read this passage as a checklist of things for us to do – encourage the fainthearted, help the

weak, pray without ceasing – without seeing this as a response to the One who has created, called, and encouraged us would be a great misunderstanding.

God’s initiative of grace and our human response. Prayer is crucial, indispensable, foundational because unity is a gift, but it is a gift that must be received. Isn’t our prayer also for the strength and courage to act upon what God has given? Isn’t that the point of this ecumenical movement: to be ambassadors of the reconciliation accomplished by Jesus Christ?

Two weeks ago, I was speaking with a fine, younger colleague who heads the young adult program for the World Council of Churches’ US office. “The problem with ecumenical dialogues,” he said to me, “is that they don’t seem to make any difference in the way we live with each other as churches. But even when the churches agree, things don’t seem to change – and so the young people I deal with want to know, ‘why should we care about of this?’ ”

His comment obviously overstates the case; our churches have changed as a result of this movement. Think back to the state of Protestant-Catholic relations fifty years ago and give thanks both for the work of the Spirit and for those who were willing to receive the Spirit’s gift. But you know as well as I that there is also truth in his complaint. We, this generation of ecumenists, have allowed the passion for unity to be tamed and its urgency reduced.

Again, it won’t do to forget the tension. Vatican II was surely correct in warning of “imprudent zeal,” of calling for a holy patience that waits prayerfully on the Lord and refuses to substitute schemes of our devising for the unity God wills. But that Council also reminds us that our present state of visible disunity “openly contradicts the will of God, scandalizes the world” and damages our capacity to preach the gospel. Surely, we have reason to speak of a holy impatience that deplores the tendency to domesticate the Spirit that would lead us in unity. As Pope Benedict once put it, “the churches should not

be forever asking if union or recognition of the other is justifiable, but rather if continued separation is justifiable. Not union but division requires defense.”

In my lifetime, I have watched my church (and yours) “up the ante” or shift the agenda or regard “official response” as fulfillment of ecumenical duty. As a consequence, the results of dialogue make too little difference in actual fellowship. And as my young friend suggests, this has led many seminarians, pastors, and laypersons to turn away from the ecumenical movement in anger and frustration. “We cannot proclaim our unity again and again,” declared the great Lutheran ecumenist, Edmund Schlink in 1952, “and at the same time remain divided... If we do not manifest the unity which has been given to us, God’s grace will become an accusation. The inspiring vision of unity will itself place us under the judgment of God.”

I realize that we are not an organization, but I still want to ask: What if this body, these workshops, issued a statement to our churches insisting that unity is not an option and that it remains an urgent priority? What if we issued a statement that lifted up both God’s gift and the urgent necessity of our human response?

God’s initiative of grace and our human response. In my judgment, the first assembly of the World Council of Churches, sixty years ago in Amsterdam, got it just right. “It is not in our power”, said the delegates in the official message, “to banish sin and death from the earth or to create the unity of the holy Catholic Church. But it is within the power of God. God has given us at Easter the certainty that his purpose will be accomplished. But by our acts of obedience and faith we can set up signs which point to the coming victory.”

I will end by noting that this is obviously a year of ecumenical anniversaries which help remind us that our wrestling with these tensions is not new and that we can profitably build on what has gone before. We have already noted that 2008 marks the 100th anniversary of the origins of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. It is also, however,

the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Federal Council of Churches, the predecessor body of the National Council of Churches.

At its first assembly in 1908, the Federal Council adopted a highly-influential Social Creed that called, among other things, for an end to child labor and for laws protecting workers. This was the basis for the United Methodist Social Principles and for similar statements in other communions. In remembrance of that event, the NCC has sent to the churches a new Social Creed for the 21st Century which is available on our website. Please check it out.

I have mentioned that this is the sixtieth anniversary of the World Council of Churches' first assembly in Amsterdam. It is, as well, the fortieth anniversary of the Council's fourth assembly in Uppsala where, in the tumultuous year of 1968, the tensions we have been reviewing became almost unbearable. "It seems to many people," in the words of the Uppsala Report, "that the struggle for Christian unity in its present form is irrelevant to the immediate crises of our times. The church, they say, should seek its unity through solidarity with those forces [struggling for liberation] and should give up its concern with patching up its own internal disputes." Sound familiar? By the way, the preacher at the opening worship for that assembly was to have been one Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – a reminder, if we needed it, that the ecumenical movement cannot avoid the crises of our times.

Finally, appropriate to our theme, this is the twenty-fifth anniversary of the World Council of Churches' sixth assembly in Vancouver – sometimes referred to as "the praying assembly" because what went on in the big, striped worship tent was seen as every bit as important as what went on in the plenary hall.

I was on the staff of the WCC at that time, and it happened that my brother, Richard, a physician in Seattle, who hasn't darkened the door of a church since he was a kid, came to see me in Vancouver on the day that the assembly gathered for the eucharist, using for

the first time the Lima Liturgy. I suspect you know it, this liturgy based on the theological convergence text, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry.

Please picture the scene: four thousand people from six continents packed into the tent ... music in a dozen languages ... leaders from Orthodox, Anglican, and Protestant traditions ... a respectful incorporation of non-western materials... and wonderful prayer. I don't know how long it lasted; I just know I didn't want it to end – to pray without ceasing! But it did end, and as we were leaving the tent, Richard turned to me and said, “That’s not how I remember church to be”!

Indeed! It was, at least for me, a glimpse of the church we were called to be. But, as you may know, some churches felt that worship at Vancouver went too far, too fast. And maybe that was also true. Holy patience, holy impatience. Pray without ceasing, set up signs. In all things, thanks be to God!

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