

The Scandal of our Disunity – it's personal

Keynote Address

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Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

I am honored to be presenting the keynote address at this year's National Workshop on Christian Unity. When I was invited by Fr. Daniel Hamby on behalf of the members of the planning committee, I readily accepted – in part because I have been a strong supporter of the National Workshop and its work in providing information about the wider ecumenical movement and in promoting and training leaders for local and regional ecumenism across the life of our churches and our nation. I also accepted, in part because of the personal connection I feel in returning to Pittsburgh, where in 1977 I attended my first National Workshop on Christian Unity. At that time I was 31 years old, just back in the States after serving for three years on the staff of the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches. That event, for me, was a powerful moment in my own life and ecumenical formation. I believe it was the first time that the Workshop was co-sponsored by a local conciliar ecumenical organization: the Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania. I recall writing to several colleagues in Geneva, Switzerland about that gathering of some 350 Christians representing churches and confessions across the whole spectrum of the ecumenical movement. It was an amazing gathering! I went on to add in my letters (we didn't know of e-mail back then) that "unfortunately, the NWCU is probably the best kept secret in the ecumenical movement." I still believe there is more potential for Christian unity assembled in this room than most of us dare to acknowledge, or dare to dream.

So, it's great to be back to the National Workshop and to Pittsburgh, back to join again with so many longtime friends and colleagues, "Together with Glad and Generous Hearts."

- I want to thank Clare Chapman for her gracious introduction.
- I want to celebrate the magnificent opening worship service last night and the powerful sermon by Bishop Donald McCoid.
- I am excited about the breadth and depth of the seminars that are being offered in this year's workshop – which together represent the new agenda in the ecumenical movement of the 21st century. It is an amazing rich offering, along with a plenary session on the topic of racism, and a closing address by Br. Jeff Gross.
- And, I am sure that there are great things happening in the different networks and programs that are being offered in building the fellowship and shaping the future work of each of your communions in the urgent tasks of harvesting, reception, expanding partnerships between and among our churches.

It's great to be here in Pittsburgh where I hope our days together will contribute to the ongoing ministry of the Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania as it serves to be "a unifying

voice in the name of Jesus Christ for the mission of the Gospel and the wholeness of communities.”

In this keynote address I plan to do four things:

1st – to offer some reflections on the “state of the ecumenical movement today” in reviewing the landscape of our current efforts in seeking Christian unity [or rather, I would say: “in seeking to manifest God’s gift of unity, oneness, and reconciliation in Jesus Christ within the whole family of God’s people.”]

2nd – to identify what I see to be major frontiers for the ecumenical movement that call us from our current landscape into areas and challenges still before us in this journey.

3rd – to offer a specific proposal for the future of the NWCU as a way to move us from being the “best kept secret” into a new role of encouraging greater engagement by all of our churches in common witness, service and the mission of unity and reconciliation as we look to the coming decade in hope and in confidence.

4th and finally -- to present some personal reflections about the ecumenical vision, task and calling today.

I. Reflections on the state of the ecumenical movement today

Bishop Donald McCoid offered a quick overview last evening in his sermon that identified we are living in a time of new divisions within and between churches and Christians; and for some observers, we appear to be stuck in a perpetual season of winter.

As I prepared for this address I was surprised to discover the large number of articles and books that have recently been written on the current state of ecumenism in our churches by persons who have offered significant leadership in national and international settings; in bilateral dialogues and multilateral conversations; and those who are giving primary attention to confessional ecumenism and those engaged in conciliar ecumenism. And from this review of a wide variety of voices and perspectives -- from the Vatican to a local community of churches in the Eastern Area of Louisville -- what I discovered was a surprising convergence around the shape and landscape of the ecumenical movement today.

Cardinal Walter Kasper, president emeritus of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in Rome – in a recent article in Ecumenical Trends that addressed “a vision of Christian unity for the next generation,” looking back to the 2nd Vatican Council and the enthusiasm for ecumenism that was generated for the cause of Christian Unity between the divided churches – asked himself, “After 50 years of significant engagement, what did we really achieve? The ecumenical enthusiasm of the decades after the 2nd Vatican Council is over. The previous enthusiasm in our Church and in most other churches and church communities has gone; many people are disappointed and ask: ‘Does it still make sense to engage in this issue? Can we ever make substantial progress and reach the goal of visible unity?’ Is it not an unrealistic dream and a useless utopia? Is ecumenism a dead relic of the 2nd Vatican Council?”¹

But then immediately he answers these questions with a fundamental answer: “Ecumenism is not a human invention, not a political issue of interest. Ecumenism is founded on the words of our Lord, himself – ‘may they all be one.’ ”²

Dr. Michael Kinnamon, the current General Secretary of the National Council of Churches (who was the keynote speaker for the 2008 National Workshop) offered a theme that he believes runs throughout the ecumenical movement today. He stated, “The ecumenical movement is itself in great danger of fragmenting. One split is between an ecumenism that focuses on bilateral theological dialogues – and an ecumenism that is expressed through conciliar life. One element focuses upon the goal of Eucharistic communion that can be achieved through painstaking theological dialogue aimed at the recovery of the Church’s apostolic faith; the other element focuses upon inter-denominational cooperation, and is only interested in ecclesial unity to the extent that such unity contributes to greater peace and justice in the world.”³ Faith and Order, Life and Work – and for many, Mission and Evangelism – continue to operate in isolation (or at best, they exist in an uneasy tension).

Dr. Kinnamon also does not leave it there for he too affirms that “none of these tensions can be sustained if our focus is on God’s initiative – to which we respond, in which we participate.”⁴ Kinnamon concludes with a quote from the message of the First World Council of Churches Assembly in Amsterdam, “It is not in our power 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. By our acts of obedience and faith we can set up signs which point to the coming victory.”⁵

And there are other voices, other challenges, that continue to be expressed both from within the ecumenical movement and from those outside.

Dr. Douglas John Hall, a retired professor of theology at McGill University in Montreal, has written that in the ecumenical movement today we must recognize where the real divisions are within the church-- and they are no longer in the 16th century theological and ecclesiological disputes, but in the realities of our 21st century world.

- Issues of personal, institutions and systemic racism.
- Issues around our understanding of human sexuality and relationships – especially those related to homosexuality, the ordination of gay and lesbian persons, and gay marriage.
- He also notes the growing division between Christians and churches around the whole range of issues surrounding war and violence, support of one’s national policies, and what it means to actively seek peace.
- Finally, there are the urgent issues of stewardship of the earth, the ecological crisis, and care for our environment as a matter of our faith.

For Hall, and for many Christians, these are not side issues or secondary issues, but are central to our pursuit of, and witness to, Christian unity in today’s world.

Theologians from racial/ethnic communities here in North America and from the southern hemisphere (Latin America, Africa, and Asia) are calling for the solidarity with the poor, the oppressed, women, minorities and those on the margins of society – voices that see liberation and justice at the heart of the ecumenical agenda if the church is to be a faithful witness to the

Good News proclaimed in Christ-- not for the sake of the church, but for the sake, salvation and liberation of our societies and world. [The scripture text in last night's worship service from Isaiah 58 reflects their primary agendas: to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to feed the hungry, to cover the naked, then your light shall break forth like the dawn.]

Dr. William Tabbernee, the new Executive Director of the Oklahoma Conference of Churches and host of the 2012 National Workshop in Oklahoma City, has written about a "new ecumenism" that has emerged, not so much built upon agreement but one that focuses upon differences as a way to move our churches to greater unity in Christ: the differences between unity and uniformity; between built comparative ecclesiology and ecumenical theology; between ecumenism and interfaith dialogue; and between full koinonia and cooperation. This new ecumenism embraces diversity and accepts controversy as part of our understanding of the ecumenical quest today.⁶

One final insight about the current landscape of the ecumenical movement – and it is a word from Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, the Roman Catholic Archbishop in England who presented a paper on the occasion of the 40th Anniversary of the promulgation of the *Decree on Ecumenism*. He identified three complementary approaches in the church's ecumenical witness: the ecumenism of truth, spiritual ecumenism, and the ecumenism of life. He then went on to identify the inhibiting factors today that often undermine our ecumenical efforts: the "three enemies" of ecumenism are suspicion (the fear of a diluting of the truth), inertia (where we pay lip service to ecumenism but we do not live it out in our daily life), and impatience (wanting to move ahead without the sanction of the authorities and without the education of the people).⁷

II. Frontiers on the horizon

With all of this as background – words both of caution, hope and commitment – where do we see the major frontiers that call and challenge us to new agendas and relationships in our journey to unity in Christ?

1st frontier, where work has already begun, but must be carried further if it is to give new life to the ecumenical venture, is in the area of harvesting and of reception.

In his review of the past 40 years of ecumenical work and dialogue since the 2nd Vatican Council, Cardinal Kasper observed,– "It may be useful to bear in mind that the ecumenical documents produced during the last decades at the international level (leaving aside the many regional and local documents) now comprise three thick volumes, all together 2,310 pages." He asked, "Who can read all this stuff? And indeed, who wants to?"⁸

Most of this documentation is not really received in the churches, neither at the hierarchical nor the grass roots level. Often it is only destined for the bookshelf. And Cardinal Kasper says he can well understand lay people who disappointedly ask: "Where and what we are the concrete results, and what is the visible outcome of your illuminated discussions and documents?"⁹

Harvesting the fruits is a first step -- but the next step, the *next frontier*, is to make the results of the harvest available and accessible to people in our churches. Harvested fruits -- no matter how good -- must be made available, or they will soon spoil and rot and lose their value.

2nd frontier is that of interfaith engagement and dialogue.

Back in the summer of 2007 when Muslim leaders from around the world issued their open letter to the Christian world -- “*A Common Word Between Us (Muslims) and You (Christians)*.” It was fascinating to see how and to whom they addressed this letter: first to the Pope, then to the Archbishop of Canterbury, to the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Orthodox Churches, the General Secretary of the WCC; and also to heads of Christian World Communions (Lutheran World Federation, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Methodist, Anglicans, Mennonites, Disciples and Baptists). It was interesting to see how they understood their Christian counterparts. For me, it was even more interesting to see how the Christian world might respond together -- to make a common response “to their common word.”

Somehow the challenge, the frontier, of interreligious engagement presses all of us to understand how we are viewed by other faiths -- and to discover our common Christian voice and witness.

3rd frontier is the emerging encounter, dialogue and relationships with Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians and communities. This encounter has found a new expression here in United States in a body known as Christian Churches Together [and on the international level, this same dynamic is taking place in the Global Christian Forum].

Msgr. John Radano has identified this development as one of the promising initiations in the ecumenical movement in the last decade: serving as a “neutral place where Christians who generally had not spoken to each other before, or had negative contact in a form which one side would call proselytism, could come together in an unthreatening context.”¹⁰ And in that encounter, Pentecostal /Evangelical Christians and “mainline Christians” (Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican, Catholics -- together) have begun to build mutual trust and to see each other for the first time as a brother or sister in Christ.

Dr. Wonsuk Ma, a Korean Evangelical who teaches at Oxford University in England, delivered the keynote address at the first international gathering of the Global Christian Forum in Limuru, Kenya, where he identified the image of two siblings who had been separated at birth who were now meeting for the first time - and finding their shared, common identity as brothers and sisters in Christ. Two siblings: the Pentecostal movement that had its focus on ‘spreading out’ in faithfulness to the Holy Spirit; and the ecumenical movement that had the dynamic of ‘gathering in’ in faithfulness to the call to our unity as Christians and as churches, now coming together in shared life in the Triune God.

The challenge to us is not to bask in the glory of these international and national encounters, but to bring to this same dynamic for our local communities.

These three frontiers are competing tasks that would pull us in different directions out on the horizon, but are complementary and interrelated: (1) harvesting, making accessible, and the

reception of the fruits of these past 50 years; (2) interfaith dialogue and interreligious engagement; and, (3) reaching out and opening ourselves to encounter Evangelical and Pentecostal brothers and sisters as one family in Christ.

III. [A Proposal](#)

I want to turn briefly to a proposal for the future of this body, the National Workshop on Christian Unity. And, I'm going to get specific. Three years ago Michael Kinnamon in his keynote address to the 2008 Workshop asked, "What if this body (and he recognized that the National Workshop is not an organization) – what if this body issued a statement to all of 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 call and the urgent necessity of our human response?" Such a statement could build upon the statement quoted by Bishop McCoid last night from Pope Benedict XVI, in his declaration that "Christian unity is a moral imperative of the Gospel," which echoes the words of the *Decree on Ecumenism* from the 2nd Vatican Council that "division among Christians contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages that most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel to every creature."

Can we together, next year in Oklahoma City, issue a statement to all of our churches together – urging this holy cause – inviting them to receive the fruits of the harvest; to discover our common witness as Christians in an interfaith world; and to seek out our Evangelical and Pentecostal brothers and sisters in Christ beginning in common prayer, praise and worship?

IV. [Personal Reflections](#)

Let me conclude with three brief personal reflections on my own personal ecumenical journey for over 38 years of active participation and leadership within the ecumenical movement.

1st: I am convinced that the ecumenical movement in the future must recapture a sense of the scandal of division built Christians. Ecumenism is not just one more program on the churches' agenda; it is related to the very core of what it means to be church today! And from this sense of scandal, we need to recapture the importance of confession as individuals and as churches for the sin of our division.

The most memorable and powerful moment in my involvement in National Workshops on Christian Unity took place in 1980, in Seattle, at the opening worship service in the Roman Catholic Cathedral when each of the "bishops" of the various churches and judicatories in the Seattle area began that service by stepping forward (led by Roman Catholic Archbishop Hunthausen) to declare, "I confess before God and before this gathered community that my church has participated in the sin of dividing the church, the Body of Christ." True ecumenical engagement begins in confession. It is often said that "confession is good for the soul." I believe deeply that confession good for the "soul" of the ecumenical movement. It changes how we meet one another – as fellow sinners - standing in need of God's grace and forgiveness and love.

2nd reflection: I continue to believe that a growing divide within the church today and within our separate communions and churches is between those who hold a basic approach that is either

inclusive or exclusive. This attitude, this approach, impacts how one reads scripture, undergirding the nature of the Church, of salvation, of the truth of Jesus Christ. And this attitude and approach is not only found within the churches, but within our society.

Jesus prayed that “they may all be one so that the world may believe.” My question is: “What part of ‘all’ don’t we understand?!”

Finally, and very personally, in my own life one of the strongest motivations in my ministry in seeking Christian unity has come as my daughter, who was brought up as a member of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), married a Roman Catholic. And in her marriage, for many reasons, she decided to join the Catholic Church (all with my blessing). Eleven years later, she and my son-in-law have given birth to three beautiful children – the joy of my life. (I will be glad to show pictures later.) And each of them, two grandsons and a granddaughter, have been baptized, not into the Catholic Church, but (as all of our traditions affirm and teach) baptized into the one holy catholic and apostolic church. As I have attended those services of baptism, they took place in relation to the regular morning Mass. And in each service where the priest celebrated the Mass and distributed the bread and wine as the body of Christ offered “to all believers,” it came home to me again that I could not officially receive – I could not share in that meal – I could not witness to my deepest conviction that we have been made one in Christ.

My friends, it’s personal. Our division within the church is personal. It divides families. It breaks my heart -- and I believe it breaks God’s heart. And it denies the power of the Holy Spirit to bring resurrection and new life.

Sometimes people will ask me, “Robert, do you really believe that all these denominations and churches will actually come together and be one?” My answer is quite simple, “Yes.” They say, “Robert, that’s impossible.” I say, “I don’t know who you are following as Lord and Savior, but the Lord and Savior I follow specializes in the impossible.” They say, “It’s not going to happen in our lifetime.” No, probably not. But it’s amazing how far we have come in the past 50 years.¹¹

You see, I believe that one day the church will be visibly and authentically one, and that God will receive the glory. Jesus prayed a prayer for our oneness and unity so that one world might believe, and I don’t think God will leave that prayer unanswered.

Like a grandmother who loves all of her grandchildren with unique intensity and yet also loves to see them gathered together around her dining table as a single family, so God loves each of us with a unique intensity, yet longs for us to sit together at a common table – as sisters and brothers in Christ.

This is my prayer for this National Workshop on Christian Unity – for each of the congregations and dioceses and communions represented – that we may be one in the Apostles teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer.

For me (and I hope for you) that dream, that vision, that passion, begins with a deep confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit – and it’s personal!

¹ Walter Cardinal Kasper, “May They All Be One? But How?,” *Ecumenical Trends*, April 2011, 40:4, p.1.

² *Ibid.*

³ Michael Kinnamon, “Pray Without Ceasing,” National Workshop on Christian Unity Keynote Address, April 15, 2008, p.1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.9.

⁶ William Tabbernee, “Sailing the Ecumenical Boat in the Twenty-First Century,” *Call to Unity: Resourcing the Church for Ecumenical Ministry*, 2004, Vol. 6, pp. 1-17.

⁷ Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor, Address at the Conference on the 40th Anniversary of the promulgation of the Conciliar Decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, Rocca di Papa, November 13, 2004.

⁸ Kasper, *op.cit.*, p.5.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ John Radano, “Ecumenical Dialogue in the 21st Century: Some Steps Forward, and Some Continuing Concerns,” *Ecumenical Trends*, November 2009, 38:10, p.7.

¹¹ Adapted from sermon by Andy Mangum, “Disciples, People of Unity,” *Call to Unity*, No.8, October 2007, pp.43-44.