**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

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***ECUMENISM: A LOST CAUSE?***

In 1954 the World Council of Churches (WCC) held its general assembly in Evanston, Illinois. I was a young college student at the time, recently called into the ministry, and had some time at the end of the summer. My pastor told me that attending the assembly would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. So I went. Not only that, I got a job in the cafeteria where many of the committees and subcommittees were meeting, so I got to listen in to the discussions while pouring coffee. The theme of the assembly was “Christ, the Hope of the World.” A spirit of optimism, if not exuberance, characterized the assembly. There was the conviction that the ecumenical efforts of the World Council with its churches could Christianize the world. I did observe that most of the discussing was done by white, English-speaking males. I also observed that my crowd, the evangelicals, was conspicuously absent.

Those were heady days for the ecumenical movement. The National Council of Churches (NCC) had in 1950 been formed from the former Federal Council of Churches. The NCC had copyrighted the highly regarded Revised Standard Version of the Bible (RSV). Church World Service, the relief arm of the NCC, was widely supported around the world.

One of the assumptions of the ecumenical movement in those days was that Christianity, or more precisely, Protestant Christianity, needed to be united to make an impact in the modern secular world. In 1948 Charles Clayton Morrison, editor of the influential *Christian Century*, wrote a book entitled, *Can Protestantism Win America*? Morrison claimed three forces were vying for the soul of America: Catholicism, Protestantism, and Secularism. Protestant chances rested on its ability to overcome the sectarianism, denominationalism, localism, and individualism that beset Protestantism.

In 1962 ten major denominations--or, more correctly, the bureaucratic “leaders” of ten major denominations--came out with a bold proposal that seemed to be built on Morrison’s thesis: The Consultation on Church Union (COCU). What if the major Protestant denominations could work out their differences and unite to form powerful church for good in the world?

COCO was a very bad idea--for many reasons. For one it presumed that doctrinal differences did not matter. For another it presumed that polity differences did not matter. Even more troubling was a suspicion that what did matter for COCU was a fascination for a progressive agenda in areas of morality, economics, and social matters. The World Council (WCC) had already bought into the radical spirit of the 1960s. It was supporting revolutionary movements around the world, including some not adverse to violence. The ecumenical movement, which had grown out of the missionary conferences of the early 1900s, and which once spoke about winning the world for Christ, was now beginning to act like another political and social activist group. And in the process of acting just like another political and social activist group it divorced itself even further from the larger part of Christendom, namely: evangelicals, Pentecostals, para-church groups, Roman Catholics, and independent churches. For ecumenists these groups represented the forces that Morrison had criticized: sectarianism, localism, individualism, and, in doctrine, fundamentalism.

The fledgling Good News movement, the only evangelical renewal movement in existence at the time, saw this clearly. One of the very first issues Good News addressed, before missions and homosexuality and the seminaries, was COCU. Evangelical United Methodists believed that COCU, if ever successful, would be a disaster. Criticism was directed toward Good News for being disruptive and not denominationally loyal, but in fact it was love for Methodism that precipitated the Good News actions. That which had made Methodism great--its doctrine and polity and mission--would be severely compromised if anything ever came of COCU. Evangelicals had problems with UM liberalism but they were nothing like the problems they would face if linked with the liberalism of the denominations UMs proposed uniting--or at least cooperating--with. For five General Conferences Good News submitted petitions urging the church to withdraw from COCU. To no avail. The future was with ecumenism, according to our church bureaucrats, despite the signs that the whole movement was unraveling. COCU changed its name at least twice, to Churches of Christ United to Churches of Christ Uniting, but the name mocked the reality. COCU, like the ecumenical movement itself, was out of touch with where local churches were. Whether the WCC or the NCC or COCU, or state councils of churches, “ecumenical” groups seemed narrowly focused on matters such as racism, sexism, ageism, handicappism, capitalism, militarism, and whatever other ism that needed to be resisted.

When I was a district superintendent in the 1980s the NCC issued the *Inclusive Lanugage* *Lectionary.* Seven of the first nine charge conferences in my district that fall brought up the *Lectionary*, wondering, among other things, what was going on and was apportionment money supporting the NCC. Some of the other superintendents urged the complaining churches to get with the program. I told my churches, first of all, that they weren’t using lectionaries of any kind so why were they so upset. However, I would write to the NCC on their behalf and ask the NCC to get in touch with its constituents. The churches were also concerned about the Indiana Council of Churches for some of the same reasons. My counsel: forget the Indiana Council of Churches; it had no clout. One day, several years later, the Indiana Council of Churches died. That is to say it closed its doors for lack of money and interest.

In the 2000 General Conference I made more impassioned speeches in the legislative group and on the floor of the conference than I had ever made at any General Conference urging the church not to commit to the next big phase of COCU. But disagreeing with anything ecumenical was politically incorrect. The general conference affirmed the church’s commitment to COCU and committed more resources and effort toward a supposed bright ecumenical future even when there were no signs of any future at all.

Soon afterward the Indiana Council of Churches tried to revive through a new group, Indiana Partners for Christian Unity and Mission (IPCUM). I was interested and became part of the board because the vision was right: inclusion of Catholics, evangelicals, and para-church groups, plus the Nicene Creed as a basis for unity. Alas, however, by this time ecumenical efforts of this type held no interest for evangelical groups or para-church groups. At one state-wide rally celebrating our unity in Christ there were more on the program than there were worshippers in the congregation.

COCU is an even sicker today than in 2000. State councils of churches are floundering. The National Council of Churches is in financial crisis. At one time the NCC could claim that 40% of American church members were in denominations belonging to the NCC. Now that figures is closer to 20%. One of the NCC’s greatest contributions to the churches, the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*, has not been printed for several years.

The mission statement of the NCC is telling: *a community of communions called by Christ to visible unity and send forth in the Spirit to promote God’s justice, peace, and healing* *of the world*. The statement says a lot: a focus on social and political action, but nothing about witness to the saving power of Jesus Christ. What the NCC has become is revealed in the fact that new executive head of the NCC is Jim Winkler, who just spent 14 years leading the UM General Board of Church and Society. It is natural also that the NCC has moved its headquarters into the UM Church and Society building in Washington. It is no wonder that the NCC lacks credibility.

None of this is to suggest that real church unity and cooperation is dead. It is rather to lead to a point that much of the real Christian ecumenism these days is being carried on locally and by evangelical groups. In my community, Kokomo Urban Outreach, a UM-created ministry to the inner city, is supported by over 100 churches and groups of every theological persuasion.

There is a place for agencies like the NCC and the WCC. Christians need each other and need an arena to find areas of common cause. But not under the old ecumenical corporate mind-set. The ecumenical groups have narrowly lined up with a progressivism that alienates evangelicals and many others in the Christian world.

Evangelicals in mainline denominations can help here. We live in both worlds, the evangelical and the mainline. We could help bring these worlds together if given he chance. .