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### A Reformed Perspective on the Ecumenical Movement

by **Jane Dempsey Douglass**

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#### SUMMARY

Ecumenism as viewed by one who served as President of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

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I am honored to have been asked to speak this morning on the topic of ecumenism from a Reformed perspective shaped by my work as a church

historian and by my engagement with the work of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

At the heart of the ecumenical movement, as Reformed people see it, is the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, together with all Christians, so that the world may believe. This gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed by the preaching and teaching of the Word of God and by the visible word of the sacraments, so that a witnessing and serving community is created, which is the church. The unity of love within the church itself witnesses to its life as the one body of Christ, with many diverse members, with Christ as its head.

Our forefather, John Calvin, followed Martin Luther in identifying the distinguishing marks of the church as the preaching of the Word of God and the observance of the sacraments. Calvin explains

These can never exist without bringing forth fruit and prospering by God's blessing. I do not say that wherever the Word is preached there will be immediate fruit; but wherever it is received and has a fixed abode, it shows its effectiveness. Where however the preaching of the gospel is reverently heard and the sacraments are not neglected, there for the time being no deceitful or ambiguous form of the church is seen; and no one is permitted to spurn its authority, flout its warnings, resist its counsels, or make light of its chastisements -- much less to desert it and break its unity. For the Lord esteems the communion of his church so highly that he counts as a traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of Word and sacraments.

*(Institutes of the Christian Religion, 4.1.10)*

How different is the context in which this is heard today from that of the sixteenth -- century reforming struggle! Nonetheless, such a perspective still presents an obligation to search to identify where the gospel is being preached and heard and the sacraments administered and to express our unity visibly. Sometimes the search has been passionate and insightful, sometimes clumsy and misguided, sometimes generously warm and outreaching, sometimes too narrowly focused. For our failures we must repent. The search is, however, a response to Christ's prayer for unity, a response to the Holy Spirit's call to renew the church, to heal its

schisms, to witness more clearly to the one body of Christ into which we have all been baptized and which is not divided.

The challenge of the ecumenical movement, then, must be to enter into a persistent, loving, patient, and honest engagement with all those who preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and administer the sacraments, seeking visible unity. We are not at liberty to select only those partners with whom we are comfortable and with whom we find greatest agreement. Rather, we are called to the ecumenical engagement with all those companions in our pilgrimage whom God has called to accompany us. We cannot know precisely what form and shape our life together may take, since we believe the Holy Spirit is continually at work among us, making all things new. We undertake this engagement in search of unity, in penitence for our wounding the body of Christ, and in obedience to the call of the Spirit, fervently hoping that our witness will be made more efficacious and that before the eschaton, we shall come to the day when we can sit together at the table spread by our common Lord, Jesus Christ.

Since this gathering is an ecumenical one, with participants of many traditions, I need to provide some further context for this perspective. I shall, first, identify the people whom I am calling Reformed and sketch a classical Reformed vision of the unity of the church. Second, I shall describe briefly how the Reformed relation to the modern ecumenical movement has been shaped by that vision. Third, I shall refer to current discussions about the future of the ecumenical movement and indicate some Reformed initiatives and responses to current dreams for the future.

## I. THE REFORMED FAMILY AND ITS VISION OF THE CHURCH

The Reformed family is not a single church but rather a family of Reformed churches that are historically and theologically related to the sixteenth-century Genevan reformation, whose principal teacher was the French theologian John Calvin. Calvin was deeply shaped by participation during his student days in the Catholic humanist and biblical reforming movement represented by Erasmus and Lefèvre d'Étaples, as well as by the writings of Luther and Bucer, the chief reformer in Strasbourg. When the lines between the Catholic Church and the evangelical reforming movement in France hardened, Calvin became a refugee

and was called to serve as a teacher in the independent republic of Geneva.

Calvin's teaching and the reforms in the city attracted enormous numbers of refugees and students from abroad, creating a very international community. For most of the formative years of the Genevan reformation, none of the pastors was a citizen of Geneva. When the Academy of Geneva, the forerunner of the University of Geneva, was created to train learned citizens and leaders for Reformed churches, by intention most of the students were from other countries. In fact, Robert Kingdon argues that Geneva's resourcefulness in finding effective ways to cope with the tide of refugees and students from other countries, providing housing and practical programs of economic and social integration of the newcomers, was essential to the success of the international program of Calvinism. As the refugees and students returned to their homelands, the Calvinist vision spread.(1)

Calvin was in conversation with the Swiss theologians who succeeded Zwingli, and their convergence increased. The family of Protestant churches in the Swiss cantons and Geneva came to be called Reformed, in distinction from the Lutheran churches. Calvin was also in touch with the reforming church leaders in France, central and eastern Europe, Scotland, and elsewhere, creating a wide network. The Waldensians, a reforming group dating from the twelfth century in France who survived persecution as heretics by retreating to the mountains of northern Italy, established close relationships with Geneva and were drawn into the family. English-speaking Calvinist people have till today generally called themselves Presbyterians, after the form of government by presbyters (pastors and elders), the most common type of government in Reformed churches. Most churches descended from continental European Reformed churches still retain the name Reformed, and the term is also widely used to designate the whole family related to the Genevan reformation.

The Calvinist or Reformed movement, then, from its origins was international and culturally diverse. Like other Protestants, Reformed teachers urged the use of the various vernacular languages in worship and theological writing so as to enable the common people's participation. Unlike other Protestants, the Lutherans, for example, the Reformed did not adopt a common Reformed confession. The confessions they had in common were the historic Apostles'

Creed and Nicene Creed. It became customary for each of the Reformed churches also to make its own confession, declaring its faith out of its own context, speaking to its special historical situation, declaring the gospel as God's already accomplished action in Jesus Christ, but also identifying the implications of the gospel for the transformation of all of life to make the reign of God visible in the world. Sometimes, daughter churches have retained their mother church's confessions along with their own. At times of crisis or change, new confessions are often made. Still, these varied confessions have been understood to proclaim the same faith. This practice of holding the ancient -- ecumenical -- creeds in common, while confessing anew in our varied situations according to the needs of a particular moment in history, has continued to mark the Reformed family, despite a long succession of discussions about the possibility of a common Reformed confession. Unity in diversity is a characteristic of our common life in the Reformed family.

Reformed churches in their different contexts went their own ways until the nineteenth century, when they began to meet each other on mission fields around the world and felt the need in 1875 to create an Alliance of churches in the Reformed family, the first and still the largest of the organized Protestant "Christian World Communions." The overarching theme of the early years seems to have been a search for Christian unity and for human solidarity, a search set in the context of passion for Christian witness and the worldwide mission of the church. The Alliance urged its members not to perpetuate the divisions of the West on the mission field, advocating that the newly planted churches be rooted in the local culture and that they be allowed to become independent as soon as possible and to join the Alliance as independent churches. The Alliance was self-conscious about its "catholicity" as well as its cultural diversity. From the outset, the Alliance also reflected the Calvinist ethical tradition of human solidarity, decrying slavery and the unjust treatment given to the native peoples of North America and to the laboring classes at the bottom of the economic pyramid in industrial countries.(2) The dual focus on the unity of the church and on human solidarity has continued to shape the life of the Alliance.

Since that time, our member churches have become even more diverse. In 1970 the International Congregational Council merged with the Alliance, creating the present World Alliance of Reformed Churches. In several countries of the South,

church leaders have heeded the urgings of the early Alliance leaders and formed united churches. Some of these, like the Church of South India, united Reformed churches with churches of traditions that hold to the necessity of the historic episcopate. Presently, there are about thirty united churches from North and South in the Alliance. They wish to honor their Reformed roots; the Alliance values their continuing participation and wishes to avoid their isolation. The Alliance, therefore, has an ecumenical component in its own structure. These churches, simply by their presence but also by their questions, provide an ongoing challenge to other members. Today, more than two-thirds of our 207 member churches are located in the countries of the South: Asia, Africa, and Latin America, bringing enormous cultural diversity. Though some of these are very large, some are too small to be eligible to join the World Council of Churches. Most of our member churches, however, are also participants in the World Council of Churches and other ecumenical bodies.

Outside the Alliance, there are other Reformed churches, which are less comfortable with this ecumenical orientation and for which I cannot speak. Often, their preoccupation with the purity of Reformed teaching has limited their broader participation. The Alliance feels a special obligation to reach out to these churches, to try to heal schisms within our own family.

For a classic statement of the Reformed vision of the church, we can turn to the Second Helvetic Confession of 1566(3), widely recognized as authoritative in the Reformed family. In teaching about the Trinity and Christology, the creeds and decrees of the first four ecumenical synods are affirmed, along with the Athanasian creed, as agreeing with scripture, the authority for faith (chap. ii; cf. chap. 2). In the chapter entitled "Of the Catholic and Holy Church of God, and of the One Only Head of the Church," we hear over and over the insistence that there is only one church, that it has always existed and always will, as an assembly of the faithful, the communion of saints.

And since there is always but one God, and there is one mediator between God and men [human beings], Jesus the Messiah, and one Shepherd of the whole flock, one Head of this body, and, to conclude, one Spirit, one salvation, one faith, one Testament or covenant, it necessarily follows that there is only one Church. . . . We, therefore, call this Church catholic because

it is universal, scattered through all parts of the world, and extended unto all times, and is not limited to any times or places. (chap. 17)

Both the Donatists in ancient times and the "Roman clergy" in recent times were condemned for having too narrow a view of the catholic church. "Particular churches" are always to be seen in relation to the church catholic. The marks of the true church are "especially the lawful and sincere preaching of the Word of God as it was delivered to us in the books of the prophets and the apostles, which all lead us unto Christ. . . the only head and foundation of the Church," and the participation of faithful believers in the sacraments instituted by Christ, worshiping one God with "one faith and one spirit." Believers "joined together with all the members of Christ by an unfeigned love . . . show that they are Christ's disciples by persevering in the bond of peace and holy unity." There is "no certain salvation outside Christ," so believers should not be separated from the true church of Christ. Nevertheless there is a recognition that circumstances, especially of repression, may make it impossible for all to participate in the sacraments. There is also a recognition that "God had some friends in the world outside the commonwealth of Israel." Though the church may at times seem to be extinct, and though there are persons in the visible church who are not true members of the church, we must be careful not to make too hasty judgments about those whom the Lord wishes to have excluded.

[We] diligently teach that care is to be taken wherein the truth and unity of the Church chiefly lies, lest we rashly provoke and foster schisms in the church. Unity consists not in outward rites and ceremonies, but rather in the truth and unity of the catholic faith. The catholic faith is not given to us by human laws, but by Holy Scriptures, of which the Apostles' Creed is a compendium. And therefore, we read in the ancient writers that there was a manifold diversity of rites, but that they were free, and no one ever thought that the unity of the church was thereby dissolved. So we teach that the true harmony of the church consists in doctrines and in the true and harmonious preaching of the Gospel of Christ, and in rites that have been expressly delivered by the Lord,

that is, baptism and the Lord's supper. Once again, we hear the theme voiced of the unity of the church in the gospel despite diversity (chap. 17).

## II. THE REFORMED RELATION TO THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

Reformed Christians, both pastors and laypeople, were very much in the forefront of the early ecumenical organizations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These were largely voluntary movements made up of individual participants rather than churches, movements such as the Evangelical Alliance, the Student Volunteer Movement for missions, and the World Student Christian Federation. Leaders of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches were heavily engaged in the organizational activities leading up to the first meeting of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in

1948. They believed deeply that Christian churches sharing a common confession of Christ as Lord should work together toward making visible the unity of the church that Christ has already given. The first General Secretary, Willem Visser 't Hooft, as well as many early leaders of the WCC, such as Hendrik Kraemer and Madeleine Barot, were Reformed. Commitment of Reformed churches to the WCC continues to be strong.

The attitude of the Alliance was clearly stated at the Princeton General Council of 1954: "We believe that the deep stirring among the churches and Christian groups to surmount the barriers and to express the unity of the community of believers in accordance with the mind and will of Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church... is of God, not men [and women], a sign of the Holy Spirit." (4) This council also showed its intention that the Alliance should expect to learn from others in ways that would allow mutual correction:

The task of the Alliance is steadily to exhort the Reformed churches to have recourse to the Holy Scriptures; and then, if a renewed study of the Scriptures, pursued in common with brethren [and sisters] from other confessions, should disclose aspects of truth not yet apprehended, to be ready to accept them. If, on the other hand, the Reformed churches should become persuaded, through such a study of the Holy Scriptures, of an error in their own doctrinal positions, they should be ready likewise to acknowledge and abandon it. (5)

Again, at the General Council at Ottawa in 1982, the Alliance reaffirmed its

commitment:

Faced by a plurality of churches throughout the world, we have a choice between claiming to be the one true church to which all others ought eventually to come and, on the other hand, seeking the fullness of Christ's Church by entering into dialogue and fellowship with those other churches which share with us the Gospel. As we may not claim a monopoly of the Gospel, there is for us no alternative to involvement in the ecumenical movement. (6)

After the formation of the World Council of Churches, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches made the decision to operate according to the "Lund principle," that churches should do together what they can do in good conscience. Therefore, the Alliance staff cooperates with the staff of the WCC and other sister organizations in the Geneva Ecumenical Center, for example, the Council of European Churches and the Lutheran World Federation. The Alliance defers to the World Council of Churches in certain areas, for example, in refugee and emergency service and in interfaith dialogue; in these areas it cooperates with the WCC and has no ongoing or comprehensive programs of its own.

The Alliance has nonetheless seen a need to continue its work to gather together the Reformed family, to bring the witness of its theological tradition to the ecumenical movement, to represent the Reformed family in international ecumenical dialogue, to work for human rights and religious freedom, to be the advocate of Reformed churches under pressure in daunting situations, and to facilitate mutual assistance among the members of the Reformed family. Since 1989 there has also been a major initiative to encourage the full partnership of women and men in God's mission in Reformed churches and in the broader society. Increasingly in Reformed churches, the full freedom of women to be called to all ministries of the church is seen as a matter of fundamental ecclesiology, not simply a matter of practice.

Since the 1960S, when the Catholic Church introduced the pattern of bilateral dialogue between churches, the Alliance has been engaged in bilateral dialogues with all the Protestant world communions, the Catholic Church, and the Orthodox churches, some over a period of many years. We have had periodic dialogues with

the Catholic Church since 1970, on *The Presence of Christ in Church and World* (7). *Theology of Marriage and the Problems of Mixed Marriages* (with the Lutheran World Federation) (8) and *Towards A Common Understanding of the Church* (9) Discussions are now in progress about the best way for the Catholic-Reformed dialogue to proceed to a new stage.

Four years ago, we brought together representatives of the various dialogue teams here at Princeton Seminary to evaluate this experience of almost thirty years of dialogue. (10) There was an overwhelming sense that the experience had been a very rich and challenging one. We have learned much about other traditions as well as about ourselves. Follow-up plans were made to take next steps toward closer unity, steps that are different with relation to each dialogue partner. We were concerned that we had not yet reached one of the largest and fastest-growing communities, the Pentecostal churches, because there is no central international body through which to work. This year, however, we were able to initiate a dialogue with several Pentecostal groups.

One important observation made at the consultation was that the dialogues should not be focused only on traditional faith-and-order issues, ignoring other important realities in the life of the churches involved. Indeed, at the WCC Santiago Faith and Order Conference 1993, there was a recognition that issues relating to justice, peace, and the integrity of creation are essential to the discussion of faith and order as the churches move toward fuller koinonia in faith, life, and witness. (11) A second observation was that especially in the early years, the international teams had tended to be made up of male European and North American theologians. The inclusion of women and representatives from other parts of the world has strengthened the work. For example, there must be representatives from Middle Eastern Reformed churches on dialogue teams with the Orthodox, because they live with Orthodoxy in a different relation than Europeans and North Americans.

The Alliance has been pleased that other ways have also been developed by which dialoguing communions have been able to accompany one another in common work. For example, we have been grateful that Monsignor John Radano has been able to be an ongoing ecumenical consultant to the Alliance as representative of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. He has

attended nearly all of the Alliance Executive Committee meetings in recent years, so he knows us and our concerns very well. Many of our member churches have expressed great appreciation that through his presence, we have the possibility of helpful discussion of mutual problems. At our General Council in Hungary next summer, we will have the honor of welcoming Cardinal Cassidy and Monsignor Radano as ecumenical guests. In a new approach to collaborative work on issues that affect us all, in 1993 the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity sponsored jointly with the Alliance, along with the Lutheran World Federation, an international consultation on Christian fundamentalism. The Pontifical Council for Christian Unity also participated in the preliminary planning for a consultation jointly sponsored by the Alliance and the Lutheran World Federation on "Ethnicity and Nationalism: A Challenge to the Churches" and was represented at a consultation on "The First and Second Reformations." We welcome this approach to common work.

The Pontifical Council for Christian Unity has also invited the Reformed family to share in new ways in the life of the Catholic Church. For example, we were invited to send a representative as auditor to the Synod of Bishops in Rome in 1994 dealing with "The Consecrated Life and Its Role in the Church and the World." Our representative, Sister Minke de Vries, prioress of the Community of Grandchamp, a community of women related to Taizé and sharing its Reformed roots, was then invited to prepare meditations for the celebration in Rome of the Via Crucis during Holy Week of 1995. One of her sisters participated in the ceremonies. We were also invited to be represented at the preparatory committee for the Great Jubilee Celebration of the Year 2000.

So far, we have been discussing only ecumenical work at the world level. At the regional level, some Reformed churches have been able to establish concrete, new relationships. For example, in Europe since 1973, Lutheran and Reformed churches have enjoyed the experience of full communion and mutual recognition of ministries through the Leuenberg Agreement. This agreement has now been broadened and is being recognized elsewhere, for example, in Argentina. In North America, through the Caribbean and North American Area Council of the Alliance, dialogue intended to establish a similar relationship of full communion between the Reformed and Lutheran churches has been ongoing for decades and now seems to be nearing completion.

A Presbyterian church along with the Episcopal Church in the United States initiated in 1961 the bold proposal of a Consultation on Church Union (COCU) with the intention to bring about a union of the two churches. Others were invited to join the process, and a second Reformed church, the United Church of Christ, was among those who did so. The number of participants grew to nine, but the strategy has changed. Since the goal of organic union has seemed to be impossible to attain, the goal is now to create a covenant that will permit mutual recognition of sacraments and of ministries, witnessing together to common faith, and acting together in service. The covenant has been ratified by several churches, but the process is not yet complete.

### III. CURRENT DISCUSSION ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

Our discussion so far, though severely limited by its focus on the Reformed family, gives evidence that substantial ecumenical progress has been made over recent decades. Why then is there so much uneasiness today about the future of the ecumenical movement?

Surely, it is partly because after so many years of effort, there are few dramatic examples of change in the lifestyle of our churches at the congregational level. When the World Council of Churches was formed nearly fifty years ago, and again in the 1960s, when the Catholic church entered into ecumenical life, churches eagerly expected that visible unity of the church would be created, and there is disappointment. In fact, most people in the pews are poorly informed about the very significant progress that has been made in the ecumenical movement. Remarkable shifts in attitudes toward our brothers and sisters in other churches have taken place, creating greater openness, but so gradually that people have forgotten how life used to be.

But there are other reasons for the uneasiness. Some argue that we have never really been able to identify the proper role of the ecumenical movement and of its various participants in relation to the churches. What is the proper role of the World Council of Churches and the various national councils of churches? To what extent should they be seen as having a "privileged" role in the ecumenical movement? How do they relate to the many quite informal "ecumenical" grassroots movements that have sprung up, often around special issues like the

environment or nuclear weapons or women's concerns, without any official church sponsorship? These informal groups are often vital and effective and closer to the people in the pews, who see the results of their work locally.

Others argue that ecumenical institutions are either too timid or too radical with respect to world crises and social issues. Undoubtedly, theological divisions within our churches on the proper approach by churches to social issues are as deep and difficult as on traditional faith-and-order issues.

Konrad Raiser, General Secretary of the WCC, in his book *Ecumenism in Transition*, suggests that one source of confusion may be that the ecumenical movement is undergoing a "paradigm shift," moving away from what he calls the "unhistorical and dogmatic" christocentric universalism characteristic of the early years of the ecumenical movement and from its earlier understanding of mission. In more recent years,

We are being pointed away from the concept of the cosmic Christ back to the historical Jesus and his deeds, in which, as parables, new life and the reality of the kingdom of God shine forth. And we are being pointed to the work of the Holy Spirit, who as the gift of the last days, shows up our world in its finitude, creates fellowship between the abidingly different, and precisely thus enables us to experience new life, life in its fullness."(12)

Raiser stresses the newer focus on the unity of the church as "reconciled diversity," which takes into account the actual problem of variety in the churches. He is referring not just to confessional differences but also to the new social forms of the church that have been coming into existence. He mentions base communities, action groups, and other communities.(13) He may well also mean to include such movements as the Minjung Church and Women Church, which have been appearing widely.(14) Raiser argues that the starting point has shifted from the givenness of unity to diversity, out of which unity "must be achieved, restored, preserved, or defended in face of opposing positions within the one church."(15) He therefore prefers the biblical concept of "fellowship" or "communion" as more appropriate than "unity." In proposing elements of a new ecumenical paradigm, he proposes the "household" (*oikos*) and the social understanding of the Trinity.'(16) These two elements evoke the reality of different members in relationship. Raiser

sees the changes in the ecumenical movement as signs that it is evolving and growing.

Such analyses are helpful in gaining perspective on the current uneasiness in some circles about the ecumenical movement. But one cannot avoid the fact that there are also very practical problems. To some extent, the ecumenical movement is the victim of its own success. The number of official ecumenical bodies has multiplied, so that a given church may be a member of the WCC, its own international confessional body, a regional confessional body, a regional council of churches, and a national council of churches. United churches may be related to two or three confessional bodies at both the regional and the international levels. All expect some financial support and human resources to be made available. The majority of churches active in the ecumenical movement comes from the countries of the South, where sending a delegate to an international meeting may cost several times more than a pastor's salary for a whole year. Ecumenical commitments have multiplied just as churches all around the world, including the European and American churches, which have heavily supported ecumenical institutions, are experiencing fiscal strictures, making participation more burdensome than formerly. The global economy plays its role in ecumenism, too.

Where then is the ecumenical movement to turn? What direction does it need to take for the future? Please understand that my comments represent my personal view and not an official position of the Alliance.

1. From the discussion above, I would suggest that the move toward thinking about unity in terms of fellowship or communion in the gospel within which there are nonetheless differences is very congenial to the Reformed spirit I have earlier described, where a sense of unity in diversity has been important.

2. In general, there seems to be a move toward multilateral conversation, away from the earlier bilateral conversations. Bilateral dialogues will certainly continue, and they may be important for certain purposes. But increasingly, we have to ask about the implications of the understandings we are developing with one confession for our relations with others.

3. Many new initiatives are coming that will encourage ecumenical work. In this context one must certainly point to the 1995 encyclical of Pope John Paul II, "That All May Be One" (*Ut unum sint*). Both Catholics and Protestants have been heartened by this strong affirmation of the significance of ecumenical engagement, drawn out of Christ's own teaching. The spirit of openness to dialogue in frankness and fairness has been received with warm appreciation, as well as especially the emphasis on prayer with and for each other and the positive focus on ecumenical texts of the scriptures. While the agenda of theological issues identified there for dialogue is very substantial and challenging for ecumenical partners,'(17) the sense of urgency to undertake the task is of great significance. Those concerned for the ecumenical movement also note with appreciation that Pope John Paul II, in his apostolic letter concerning the preparation for the Jubilee Year of 2000, calls for examination of conscience for sins that have been detrimental to Christian unity. For preparation in 1997, he particularly notes the importance of renewed interest in the Bible and an ecumenical understanding of the meaning of baptism.(18)

4. Another major initiative has recently come from Konrad Raiser. He has proposed that families of churches -- Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal -- should begin with the new millennium a process of preparation for an ecumenical council. At least since the Uppsala WCC Assembly in 1968, there has been discussion of the possibility of such an ecumenical council, but it has been agreed that its precondition is the ability to commune together at the Lord's table. Raiser agrees, but he calls for a preconciliar process to deepen the discipline of fellowship so that such an ecumenical council could take place. Raiser refers to the Pope's invitation, in the encyclical "That All May Be One," to other churches to discuss papal primacy. Raiser argues that only in such a comprehensive conciliar process can the subject be adequately dealt with. "Individual agreements between churches unavoidably affect other partners with whom there are other relationships of dialogue." (19) This proposal is quite a new departure, since it involves the church world communions, families of churches rather than the individual churches that are members of the WCC. Raiser challenged the church world communions in their upcoming general assemblies to take action on this proposal. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches' Executive Committee, at its meeting in August, acted willingly to place the matter on the agenda of our General Council next August. Raiser cautions that this may not yet

be the dramatic act of reconciliation that has been hoped for, "But it would be an expression of confidence that the Holy Spirit can and will lead the churches to a reconciled fellowship."(20)

The recognition that the WCC should develop structures to work not only with its member churches but also with the Christian world communions and other Christian communities outside its membership is embodied in a preliminary study document discussed in September at the WCC Central Committee meeting as part of its envisioning of the future of the WCC. The nature of those relationships has not yet been clarified, but Raiser's conciliar proposal seems to reflect this thinking.

5. I have commented on the burden for churches of multiple relationships to ecumenical bodies. Responding to these concerns, the staff of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches has proposed that after the year 2000, the WCC and all the world communions hold their major world assemblies in the same place at the same time, doing their major theological study together but allowing time for each of the groups to have its own business meetings. There has been positive response to informal discussion of this proposal, and the Alliance Executive Committee in August formally approved further exploration of the proposal. Such an assembly would, of course, be helpful in reducing the financial burdens of ecumenical participation. But it could also foster greater ecumenical sensitivity and knowledgeability in our church leaders. It would also represent a new way for the WCC to relate to the Christian world communions.

6. Coming from a quite different perspective, one of the most common themes I hear is that the future of ecumenism is local. Sometimes, the explanation given is that people are simply rebelling against the global bureaucracy and returning to local activity that they can understand and for which leaders can be held accountable. To the extent that such an analysis depends on the assumption that people are turning inward, withdrawing from the global community, becoming isolationist, I find this a grim future. We see some parallels to this in the political world today.

Nonetheless, there is a positive sense in which I see local ecumenism as one important component of the future. If a weakness of international ecumenism

today is that people in the pews cannot see the result of the efforts made, local ecumenism is flourishing and bringing a vivid sense of the life and vitality of Christian encounter across denominational lines. Local ecumenism serves as a model where congregations can become involved, feel the strength of genuine participation, see significant change in their own congregational life, and then also be better able to conceive of the significance of worldwide ecumenism. So long as ecumenical conversation and action do not touch the local churches, they are failing to achieve their purpose. I remember with a bit of awe an experience of a small town in the West where all the churches together undertook a study of the WCC document *Baptisni, Eucharist, and Ministiy* (1982). In a series of weekend events, people from all the churches in town gathered to discuss the document and learn about each other. Their intense engagement in the study and their excitement were remarkable. I have been told that their church life was genuinely invigorated. Projects of common work for justice in the community can be similarly transforming for those who participate with new partners from other churches.

In another sense, the ecumenical aspects of our Christian faith must be regularly made visible in all local church life. Every baptism, for example, is an opportunity to help the congregation grasp that the one being baptized is entering the church universal. I was visiting an international and interdenominational congregation in Sweden, where the world community was vividly illustrated in the diversity of dress and accent. On that Sunday a child was baptized. Afterwards, the grandfather of the child declared with enthusiasm how delighted he was to realize that his grandchild had been baptized into a community that includes Christians in all the world, of many Christian traditions. But then he reflected soberly, "But of course that is true of all baptisms! Why did I never realize this before?" Why indeed?

Such a question turns our attention to the development of Christian identity in baptized Christians through our local programs of congregational Christian education. Clearly, our church members should have a sense of their Christian identity rooted in the local church and in their own confessional traditions, but that is insufficient. How can we help church members gain a broader sense of Christian identity rooted in the one holy catholic church, where there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism? Surely, personal contact with Christians of other lands and of other communions is essential and should be fostered with care and imagination.

Strengthening our engagement with our ecumenical networks at the local, national, and international levels will facilitate these contacts, offering opportunities for many kinds of exchanges.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we turn once more to the nature of the ecumenical movement. It is not an organization but, rather, a loosely connected collection of organizations and activities responding to the movement of the Holy Spirit among us. Christians sense that the Spirit is moving us toward each other to heal old schisms and renew our life. By its nature, this renewing force wells up in our churches and in other surprising places, disrupting our familiar patterns of life, raising new questions, giving poor and marginalized people in our churches and outside them the courage to cry out for justice. The very creation itself seems now to be crying out for justice.

Not all cries in the church or the world today are from the urging of the Holy Spirit. We must try with prayer and the guidance of the scriptures to discover what is of God. The scriptures tell us that the reign of Christ is a reign of unity, of peace and love, but also of justice, of wholeness for the entire restored creation. The modern ecumenical movement, bringing together the movements toward unity from "faith and order" and "life and work," calls for a profound renewal of the church and its message for the world.

Reformed people have come to prize the seventeenth-century dictum "The church reformed according to the word of God is always in need of reformation." This reminder of the fallibility of our institutions does not necessarily make us more eager to change than others! But it shapes our perspective on the ecumenical movement. The institutions we have created will have to be continually renovated as our vision grows and our churches change. The WCC is now engaged in such revisioning, and others will do so. It seems clear that many of our structures are not largely, broadly enough conceived for the task to be done, though they may have grown too big in size and cost.<sup>(21)</sup> They must be hospitable to the whole family of God, enabling the family members in their diversity to address with integrity the whole range of issues that divide us, issues of Christology and ecclesiology, issues of culture, race, and gender, issues of

social justice and the integrity of creation. Our reconciliation is integrally related to our witness to the world, the church's calling.

Structures themselves, however, do not reconcile. Faithful Christians must design and inhabit those structures. While not losing the momentum of progress already made among churches active in the ecumenical movement, we must reach out to include churches now on the margins. We also need to identify and respect the vital voluntary reforming movements outside formal structures, asking what word of God they may have for the churches. It was the energy of movements like these that launched the modern ecumenical movement a century ago. Yet we must not lose our focus on the role of the churches themselves in expressing the mutual interdependence of the members of the body of Christ. All churches are constrained by the gospel to work for the full mutual recognition that will permit us to sit together at the table of our Lord.

The methods of work of the ecumenical movement will surely continue to change, but the Holy Spirit's call to the churches for unity and renewal remains ever present to us. May God give us grace, courage, and wisdom to respond faithfully.

## **NOTES:**

(1) Robert M. Kingdon, "Calvinism and Social Welfare," *Calvin Theological Journal* 17, (1982) 230.

(2) See Marcel Pradervand, *A Century of Service: A History of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1875-1975* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) chaps. 1-5

(3) Quotations from the Second Helvetic Creed are taken from *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century*, ed. Arthur C. Cochrane (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966).

(4) Lukas Vischer, "The Ecumenical Commitment of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches," *Reformed World* 38 (1985) 262.

(5) *Ibid.* 274

(6) Ibid, 267.

(7) (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1977).

(8) *Final Report: Theology of Marriage and the Problem of Mixed Marriages, 1971-1977* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1978)

(9) (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1991).

(10) H. S. Wilson, ed. *Bilateral Dialogues* (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1993).

(11) *Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order: Santiago de Compostela 1993*, Faith and Order Paper no. 164 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993).

(12) Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement?* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), 78.

(13) Ibid. 74-75.

(14) See, e.g. H. S. Wilson and Nyambura J. Njoroge, eds. *New Wine: The Challenge of the Emerging Ecclesiologies to Church Renewal* (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1994).

(15) Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition*, 75.

(16) Ibid, 79-111

(17) Noted are the relation of scripture and tradition, the eucharist as "sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, an offering of praise to the Father, the sacrificial memorial and real presence of Christ and the sanctifying outpouring of the Holy Spirit"; ordination as sacrament, "the magisterium of the church, entrusted to the pope and the bishops in communion with him"; and the Virgin Mary: "Ut unim sint," *Origins: CNS Documentary Service 15 (June 8, 1995): 66-67.*

(18) *Tertio millennio adveniente; Apostolic Letter of His Holiness Pope John*

*Paul II to the Bishops, Clergy and Lay Faithful on Preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), 38-41, 48-49.

(19) *Ecumenical News International*, June 20, 1996. See Konrad Raiser, "Überfuellige, realisierbare and wuenschenswerte Schritte in der Okumene," *Okumenischer Informationsdienst* 2 (1996): 20-23.

(20) *Ecumenical News International*, June 20, 1996.

(21) This is a common theme in current writing about the ecumenical movement. In addition to Raiser, see, e.g., Teresa Berger: "Ecumenism: Postconfessional? Consciously Contextual?: *Theology Today* 53 (1996) 213-19; S. Mark Heim, "The Next Ecumenical Movement," *The Christian Century* 113 (August 14-26, 1996); 780-8; Lewis S. Mudge, *The Sense of a People Toward a Church for the Human*

*Future* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992, idem, "Renewing the Ecumenical Vision, ": *Theology and Worship Occasional Paper* n0. 7 (Louisville: Presbyterian Church (USA), n.d.)

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