



"Reclaiming the Vision, Deepening Our Commitment, Expanding the Table"

**Report of the Ecclesiology Study Task Force
of the National Council of Churches**

This report was presented and adopted unanimously by the NCC's General Assembly on Thursday, Nov. 13, 1997.

PREFACE

At its 1992 meeting, the chief governing body of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, then known as the Governing Board, authorized that an "Ecclesiology Study" be undertaken within the Council. The mandate given for this study was:

to study the ecclesiological meaning of membership in the NCCC. This study is to involve each member church through its own processes individually and together with the intent of providing new insights concerning ecumenical life in the American churches today as well as renewed and new commitments to that life.

The NCCC General Secretary, working with member churches, appointed a task force to carry out the Ecclesiology Study. Dean Michael Kinnamon of the Lexington Theological Seminary was appointed chairperson of the task force; approximately twenty persons, representing member churches, participated in the task force's work. The task force for this Ecclesiology Study has met for intensive work twice each year, from the Spring of 1993 to the Fall of 1997.

The Occasion and the Agenda

As many as four reasons can be given for the initiation of this Ecclesiology Study:

- (1) As the final report of the task force indicates, the action in 1992 of Eastern Orthodox Churches belonging to the Council, whereby their participation in NCCC life was suspended, provided a specific event which raised deep ecclesiological questions about the basis and nature of membership in the Council.
- (2) It was seen that the kind of theological and ecclesiological reflection which this study called for was a necessary companion to the process of "transformation" in which the Council was then engaged. It should be pointed out, though, that at no time did the task force see its work in terms of NCCC structure.
- (3) It was generally felt in 1992 that ten years after its adoption, the 1982 NCCC statement "Marks of Our Commitment," should be reviewed and explored in respect to its effectiveness and continued significance.
- (4) Finally, it was also widely seen that the close of the present millenium provides a valuable opportunity for NCCC member churches to revisit the nature and depth of their commitment to the call of "the one ecumenical movement" to strive for the visible unity of Christ's church.

Conversations within the task force, and with the NCCC General Secretary, led to a three-fold agenda designed to fulfill the mandate given by the 1992 General Board: To explore the ecclesiological character of councils of churches; to ask our churches to clarify their ecclesiological self-understanding; and to reflect on the changing character of church life in the United States, and to ask how national ecumenical structures might best promote and manifest Christian unity in this context (cf. Report of the Ecclesiology Study Task Force to the NCCC General Assembly, 1996).

Questions to Member Churches

One significant method by which the Ecclesiology Study Task Force went about its work was the distribution in 1994 of "Questions to Member Churches." This document was designed both to stimulate ecclesiological reflection on the part of the member churches in order to aid them in refining their own ecclesiological and ecumenical self-understanding, and to provide the task force with information and substantive stimulation for its own work.

A first draft of this questionnaire, discussed by the 1993 General Board of the NCCC, was seen as rather too abstract and confessionally oriented. In the Spring of 1994 a clear, simple, and direct set of questions was prepared and sent to all NCCC member churches. These questions were subsumed under three headings: Reflection on the Past, Assessment of the Present, and Vision for the Future. The first section was designed to ascertain how the ecumenical life of member churches has changed in the past number of years, and what the role of the NCCC might have been in that development. The second section was designed to find where member churches discern the greatest ecumenical energy at the present time, what the most significant obstacles to ecumenism at the present time might be, and how such observations are to be coordinated with the specific ecclesiologies of individual member churches. The final section was cast in such a way as to elicit a vision for comprehensive ecumenism in the United States over the course of immediately approaching generations.

It must in all candor be acknowledged that certain groupings of member churches, each of which was represented on the Ecclesiology Study Task Force, simply did not respond to this questionnaire. Part of the reason for this may well have been a lack of aggressiveness on the part of the task force and its supporting staff in soliciting such responses. Yet other factors, more significant for the life of the Council, may also have been at play. A brief review is in order.

It was the large, mainline, well-staffed churches which responded, with the single exception of the United Methodist Church from which nothing was heard. Not one single historic African American member church responded, nor did any of those churches with the "historic peace church family." This meant that with the exceptions of the American Baptist Convention, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and the Moravian Church, each of which responded with considerable care, nothing of the "sectarian ecclesiology" (to follow Ernst Troeltsch) is represented among those who provided answers to the questions. The absence of these voices is a very serious matter; without the voices of these churches, the ecumenical conversation is impoverished.

Why did some NCCC member churches not respond? It is not clear that the answer to that question is to be found in the judgment that the communication from the task

force was couched in alien theological terminology or represented alien theological concerns, nor is it clear that the lack of suitable staff in smaller churches makes the preparation of thoughtful responses impossible. There may be questions of priorities - when churches are being burned, who thinks of ecclesiology? Or the fact may well be that there is no agreed understanding among NCCC member churches as to what ecumenism is finally all about. These issues have not been solved by the task force.

The answers received, from nine individual communions including one Oriental Orthodox Church and from all Eastern Orthodox member churches, were uniformly affirmative and affirming. There was general acknowledgement that the NCCC throughout its history has been an instrument which has enriched the Christian presence in the United States, both as an agency for churches and as a fellowship of churches. There was general acknowledgement that these are difficult days for the ecumenical churches in America and for the NCCC itself. Diminishing enthusiasm for the ecumenical movement, reflected largely in financial retreat and in overall regional and national indifference, although often not in local apathy, seems to have had the effect of near-paralysis. There was a general conviction expressed that a new "ecumenical expression" is required which would be marked by greater ecclesial inclusivity - Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, and Evangelicals - and thus also by a wider variety of political and social ideology.

It is not possible to present a quantifiable analysis of the responses received to the task force questionnaire. As the National Council continues its reflection and its programmatic action, the 1994 questionnaire should be visited again and again for information, indications of member church self-understanding, and suggestions for renewed and enriched ecumenical life between the churches.

The Final Report

This final report of the NCCC Ecclesiology Study Task Force, 1993-97, *Reclaiming the Vision, Deepening Our Commitment, Expanding the Table*, was prepared by the task force over the course of several meetings. It represents both an analysis of the responses received to "Questions to Member Churches" and the convergence of a wide variety of ecclesiological traditions as they have been brought together, both in theological affirmations and in yet unanswered questions. Behind this report there is great gratitude for and commitment to the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, which with both its lively history and presently vital role stands as a force for unity among all the churches in this land. Most of all, there is in this report a passion for faithfulness to the unity and mission to which the one church of Jesus Christ is now being called.

I. RECLAIMING THE VISION

The members of the Ecclesiology Task Force give thanks to God for the gathering together of the scattered children of God which is God's gift to us. Through the modern ecumenical movement, churches have been called upon to manifest more fully their unity in Christ, have responded together to human need, and been challenged to face mysteries in society. Common tradition of shared theological conviction has begun to emerge; churches have witnessed together. Local ecumenical initiatives have developed. In many places and in many churches, a spirit of dialogue and cooperation has arisen through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In a

remarkably short time, centuries of estrangement and condemnation have been replaced by a growing unity and cooperation.

We the members of the Ecclesiology Study Task Force are also convinced, however, that three crucial problems undermine the ecumenical witness of the churches that make up the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. (NCCC):

1. Since 1981, the churches of the NCCC have referred to their life together as a "community of communions" which "covenant with one another to manifest more fully the unity of the church" (Constitution) and have affirmed their intent to practice specific acts of mutual faithfulness. These include the intent to "receive the ecumenical calling as essential to our own identity" and to "make the financial and human resourcing of our life and common mission undertaken in the Council a high priority" ("Marks of Our Commitment"). But despite these commitments, and despite recent changes in the NCCC's structure, the Council, in our judgment, is still often viewed as "them" rather than "us," still understood more as cooperative agency than as community of communions. Furthermore, life together as the NCCC does not seem to have fundamentally affected the way the member churches understand themselves as church. Therefore, in Part II of this report, we call for a deepened commitment of the member churches to one another based on a renewed understanding of what it means to be the National Council of the Churches of Christ.

2. This community of communions called the NCCC is wonderfully diverse, for which we give thanks to God. The three newest churches to join the NCCC - the Korean Presbyterian Church, the National Missionary Baptist Church, and the Mar Thomaz Church - expand that diversity. It is clear to all, however, that the Council, despite a professed desire to "reach out to all Christians in reconciliation" ("Marks of Our Commitment"), does not, and does not pretend to, represent the full breadth of Christian life in the United States. Nor is it realistic to expect that this community will attract the expanded membership that would make it inclusive of Christianity in this country. Therefore, in Part III of this report, we call for the member churches through the NCCC to seek partnership with other churches and Christian bodies in order that together they might develop a new, more inclusive "forum" for exploration of common Christian witness in the U.S.

3. Beneath both of these problems there is a third, even more fundamental, issue: the need for our churches-members of the NCCC-to recover a confident vision of our unity as God's gift, a unity which reflects God's reconciling love for all the world (see "Marks of Our Commitment"). Our churches pay lip service to the reality and calling of our oneness in Christ; yet the exhilaration known to many in earlier generations has, to a great extent, given way to an ecumenism of the status quo. "For my generation," wrote Willem Visser't Hooft, "the ecumenical movement had all the attraction of something unexpected and extraordinary. For the present generation, it is simply part of the church's design." Being ecumenical is often equated with tolerant cooperation in a way that fails to challenge us and our churches to deeper commitment and renewal. Ecumenism is generally viewed as an add-on to our "real" work and even, at times, as a threat to our identity, especially in the face of declining numbers and influence. Instead of being seen as the integrating context for faithfulness, ecumenical commitment is played off against various other priorities- e.g., social justice or evangelism. In short, life together through a council of churches is regarded as something our churches do rather than as an expression of what they are and are called to be.

The members of this task force believe that God's gift of unity-freely offered to a humanity sinfully split by such things as race, class, ideology and culture-is not a peripheral or occasional theme for Christians. It is a central, indispensable part of the gospel. But obedience to the gospel is only possible through the gracious power of the Holy Spirit. This is why Vatican II's "Decree on Ecumenism" stresses that "change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement." Furthermore, attempts at obedience to the gospel are always shaped by a particular time and place. The pioneers of the modern ecumenical movement, for example, drew inspiration and motivation from the challenge posed by confessional differences (many inherited from the Reformation), from the challenge to "evangelize the world" in the wake of colonial expansion, and from the challenge to live faithfully in the face of Nazism and other totalitarian "unities."

This task force is convinced that our churches, here in the United States at the turn of the millennium, are being called to reclaim the gospel vision of reconciliation, to recover the passion and energy of the ecumenical movement for a new day. We are faced by new challenges, including the following:

- The growing pluralism of North American life both enriches and complicates the search for a unity-in-diversity . The presence at ecumenical tables of those who were previously ignored-including women and people of color-makes the link between unity and justice inescapable.
- "Mainline" denominations, which have been heavily involved in ecumenical programs and organizations, are less sure of their future direction. Meanwhile, churches outside the conciliar ecumenical movement are growing in strength and influence.
- Ethical issues, which pose the question of how social change relates to the gospel, have created new lines of division, both within and between the churches, thus expanding the ecumenical agenda.

Our age also presents us, however, with new opportunities, new signs of the Spirit:

- The Roman Catholic Church has increasingly cordial working relationships with some member churches, and with the churches together, through the National Council. The recent papal encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint*, strongly reaffirms the Roman Catholic Church's irrevocable commitment to ecumenism.
- "Evangelicals" and "liberals" are, at least in some settings, talking to one another with new mutual respect. This offers hope for a wider ecumenism than we have heretofore seen.
- In many places, the ecumenical movement is vitally expressed through congregational relationships and shared ministries. Along with this, we see a new conviction among church leaders of the importance of the congregation as a locus of mission and theology.
- The center of gravity of world Christianity has shifted away from the West toward the East and South. There is much that we in North America might learn from vital churches in other parts of the world.

We have been charged to reflect on the ecclesiological significance of life together in the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. We have done so, and our first two recommendations are aimed precisely at enhancing the significance of life in the Council for our life as churches. Yet such reflection cannot be confined to the work of a task force. It must be the constant, purposive struggle of the churches themselves. The distinctive thing about the NCCC is neither that churches act together here nor that theological issues dividing us are studied here. Both are done elsewhere also. The true promise of our work together is that in both cases we should seek always for the way our life as churches can be transformed into one shared life. When we act together as churches, we should seek constantly for the full ecclesial implications of this solidarity, for the way we can achieve not only the goals of our actions but deepened koinonia of fuller fellowship. When we study and worship together, we should seek constantly the full ecclesial implications of this unity, the way we can experience not only the agreement of mind and spirit but the deepened koinonia of action together in solidarity. We need to think and act ethically in regard to ecclesiology and we need to think and act ecclesially in regard to ethics.

Therefore, we recommend that the member churches in the NCCC pledge to make the ecclesiological question—the question of what it means to be Christ's people together, the question that prompted the creation of this task force—a an even more prominent agenda item in their own life and in their life together through the Council.

II. DEEPENING OUR COMMITMENT

Councils of churches such as the NCCC are surely among the most significant structures through which the ecumenical vision has been expressed in the course of the Twentieth Century. It is important to remember that councils of churches of this sort are a relatively new thing in the history of Christianity. Prior to the modern ecumenical movement, there were organizations of Christians dedicated to particular tasks. But when churches commit themselves to one another for common service, witness, worship and study, something new is happening - something which our inherited categories of thought were not adequate to describe.

The National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA came into existence when the churches called for the merger of various interdenominational agencies, including the Federal Council of Churches. Given its background, it is understandable that the NCCC was initially made up of largely autonomous program units with distinct purposes and constituencies. Member churches had not come to a larger ecumenical vision and were, themselves, often content with functional church cooperation.

In 1981, however, the NCCC Governing Board voted to change the Council's self-description, found in the Preamble to the Constitution, from "a cooperative agency for the churches" to "a community of Christian communions" that "covenant with one another to manifest ever more fully the unity of the church." This change invited each member church to re-examine its understanding of conciliar relationship. A year later, the Governing Board adopted a statement, "Marks of Our Commitment," in which each member communion was asked to:

" – receive the ecumenical calling as essential to our own identity;

" – perceive the renewed NCCC as an expression of our search for visible unity and common mission;

" – encourage all our governing bodies, agencies and staff members to understand and live out unity and mission as integrally related responses to the Gospel;

" – make the financial and human resourcing of our life and common mission undertaken in the Council a high priority;

" – nurture and motivate our own constituents to engage more fully in the demanding tasks of unity and mission."

These lofty intentions have not, however, been adequately fulfilled. Indeed, many member churches seem content with a complacent cooperation, paying little apparent attention to the actual life of neighbor communions, while others pull back from deeper engagement in the face of disagreement or preoccupation with internal agendas. Some exercise power in ways that exclude the full participation of those with fewer resources or less influence on the U.S. culture; others seem indifferent to the responsibilities that come with membership.

The absence of a shared ecumenical vision was vividly demonstrated when, in 1992, the Eastern Orthodox churches temporarily suspended their participation in the life of the Council. One of the issues raised by the Eastern Orthodox at the time of their action was the significance of decisions taken within a church for its life together with other members of the NCCC. The present Ecclesiology Study is, at least in part, a result of their action. Our work began in the spring of 1993 - at the same time that the Council began a process of "transformation" - with a mandate "to study the ecclesiological meaning of membership in the NCCC." The study was also urged to provide "new insights concerning ecumenical life in the American churches today as well as renewed and new commitments to that life."

Two convictions about the "meaning of membership" have been repeatedly affirmed in the discussions and reports of the task force over the subsequent years:

1. The essence of a council of churches is not the relationship of the churches to the structure of the council, but their relationship to one another. The point is that a council has a structure, not that it is a structure alongside, or over against, the churches. Without a recognition of this point, churches tend to avoid the accountability that ought to go with conciliar membership.

Repeatedly it is said that the NCCC needs to be transformed. Of course, every ecumenical body needs periodically to be renewed; no conciliar structure should be thought of as a permanent part of the ecclesial landscape since its animating vision must be of ever-deeper communion. However, if the ecumenical witness of the NCCC is not what it ought to be, then it is not just "the council" that needs to be transformed but the churches. The Council can be restructured without ever touching the fundamental ecclesiological question of our churches' relationship to one another, but true transformation of the Council presupposes the transformation of the churches. The famous Lund Principle (first articulated by a world conference on Faith and Order in 1952), which calls on the churches to act together whenever possible, begins with a call for the churches to be together in fellowship. As long as we talk

only about what we do together and not what we are together, we are failing to live out our ecumenical calling.

This point about the essence of a council of churches can provide important criteria for the churches' assessment of their organizational life together through the National Council. For example:

- ▶ Do the work and structure of the NCCC serve to build up fellowship among the member churches?
- ▶ Does the structure enable us to know one another better by providing space for continual conversation about the nature of our fellowship and the impact it has on our particular ecclesiologies?
- ▶ Does the structure reflect the conviction that every member church is an equally valued contributor? (If the Council is essentially a fellowship of the churches, then the contribution of each member is not the function of its size and resources, but of its being in Christ.)
- ▶ Does the work and structure of the NCCC challenge the readiness of any church to pursue its life and mission independent of the other member churches?
- ▶ Do the work and structure of the NCCC demonstrate the oneness of the ecumenical movement through relationships with local, state and world ecumenical bodies? (If the Council is a fellowship of the churches, then the national fellowship expressed through the NCCC will seek expression in other places.)

Just as the churches have not fully lived out God's vision of unity, so "the NCCC" has not been all that it should be. Just as representatives of the churches have, at times, mistakenly thought of the Council as "them" rather than "us," so representatives of the Council have, at times, mistakenly acted as if the Council were a structure over against the churches. The Council's program life is frequently identified, whether justifiably or not, with a particular ideological agenda. *Diakonia* and *koinonia* have often not been fully integrated in the Council's vision and programs. Congregational life has been too little affected by the work of the churches together through the NCCC. Our task force has discussed these problems and even considered alternative models for the structuring of a council of churches. But it is still our conviction that a new structure will be of little help unless and until the churches gain a renewed sense of commitment to one another.

2. The fellowship that is the essence of a council of churches is not something static but a dynamic, relational reality. One obvious implication of this claim is that the churches' recognition of, and relationship with, one another ought to intensify by virtue of ten, twenty, or forty-seven years together - as in the NCCC. To put it another way, the fellowship experienced in conciliar ecumenism is not only rooted in what the churches are but in what they are called to become. Through their mutual engagement in a council, the churches should expect (should demand!) to be challenged to deeper and more costly ecumenical commitment-by the staff and, more importantly, by each other. Where this expectation is missing, a council's very success at fostering cooperation may institutionalize our present separations.

Ecumenical leaders have often argued, over the past half century, that councils

should be instruments not only of the churches but of the ecumenical movement. A council should be "a thorn in the flesh" of the churches, prodding them to go beyond what they initially see as their favored agenda. We agree. But the work of "the council" will likely be dismissed or resisted unless the churches recognize that the challenge, the thorn, comes from their mutual commitment to one another-not from some group of professional ecumenists (no matter how essential their role may be). The role of a council's staff is to help hold its members accountable to commitments they make to one another grounded in the claims of the gospel.

What marks of fellowship can the members of this Council claim at this point in our common life? Are we able to say, for example, that membership in the NCCC means a willingness:

- to pray regularly for other members and for the strengthening of our fellowship;
- to share resources needed by other members for unity and renewal;
- to take it seriously when members identify issues they feel are threatening to the unity and mission of the church;
- to take seriously differing understandings of the Gospel presented by other members;
- to speak and act together in common witness to the good news of Jesus Christ, rejecting competition and implementing actions agreed upon through joint study and decision-making;
- to confess a "holy dissatisfaction" with present divisions, to repent of complicity in them, and to be challenged to greater ecumenical clarity, honesty and faithfulness;
- to recognize that the Council, while taking full account of differing views within and between its member churches, must make public witness on critical issues of the day, and to treat contentious issues as matters for common theological discernment rather than allowing them to divide us;
- to be held accountable to affirmations made through the Council that racism, sexism, classism and discrimination against those who are disabled are sins which divide both church and world and must therefore be opposed;
- to accept the inevitability of disagreement, and to commit ourselves to model disagreement within the unity of Christian love;
- to know the other members as fully as possible, and to share as widely as possible, particularly locally and in seminaries, information about the life, witness and struggles of churches worldwide and our fellowship in the Council?

If these marks were taken seriously, it would represent a marked shift from seeing the Council as a program agency toward seeing the Council as a community of communions. The Task Force recommends that the churches of the NCCC study these marks of fellowship carefully in preparation for a public ceremony of

"deepening our commitment" in connection with, or anticipation of, the Council's fiftieth anniversary.

III. EXPANDING THE TABLE

As the preceding section indicated, our task force believes that the ecumenical vision requires deeper commitment on the part of NCCC member churches to one another. We are also convinced, however, that the vision of Christian unity calls us to broaden our view of the ecumenical challenge.

Our horizons must expand in two senses. First, we must face the new divisions that separate Christians, divisions that are often as intractable as anything inherited from the fourth or sixteenth century. These conflicts over such things as sexuality, mission, race, economics, social policy and culture rend individual communions, strain relations among Christians of various traditions, and make our common witness both complex and exceedingly difficult. Such tensions exist within each NCCC member communion and within most other Christian communions in the U.S., even though corporately our faith communities may identify themselves on one side or another. The real threats to unity within our communions are unlikely to be effectively addressed until and unless the same differences are seriously engaged among our communions.

Second, we must recognize the dramatic ecumenical activity that is happening in many places, including outside the traditional U.S. ecumenical agencies. Transdenominational movements and para-church activities have brought Christians together across historical boundaries. The ecumenical spirit appears to be as lively as ever when we consider its manifestations beyond, as well as within, its traditional vehicles.

We believe this current context requires some new directions for ecumenical life, and we discern the possibility for such a new departure. From their varied ecclesial perspectives, the pioneers of the modern ecumenical movement reached out to initiate engagement with the widest range of Christian diversity they could then imagine, even accepting the painful acknowledgment that all participants might not accept each other as true Christian churches. The spirit of these pioneers is expressed in the following passage from the 1920 encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate:

Our own church holds that rapprochement between the various Christian churches and fellowship between them is not excluded by the doctrinal differences which exist between them. In our opinion such a rapprochement is highly desirable and necessary...

Even if in this case, owing to antiquated prejudices, practices or pretensions, the difficulties which have so often jeopardized attempts at reunion in the past may arise or be brought up, nevertheless, in our view, since we are concerned at this initial stage only with contacts and rapprochement, these difficulties are of less importance. If there is good will and intention, past difficulties cannot and should not create an invincible and insuperable obstacle.

We need to return to such basics, to seek to gather as the most comprehensive possible assembly of Christian communions and to renew the journey together

toward the fullness of one body in Christ. If ecumenical dialogue is to prefigure in some small way that feast of full unity, it must engage the entire breadth of actual Christian communities. That means that the deepest and most intractable divisions should be manifest in that dialogue, which must include as many voices as possible. Existing ecumenical structures, while they can be facilitators, are not fully adequate for this task. An expanded ecumenical forum will be a place where these divisions are honestly, steadily and hopefully faced, even if they are not completely transcended.

The member communions through the Council must continue to acknowledge that the NCCC is one of many instruments of Christian unity; and thus, they must stand ready to join with other Christian communions in a new and larger forum, as partners and not proprietors. This new "assembly of unity" is needed not only out of respect and fairness toward those groups who were not present or empowered to set the original ecumenical agenda in this century; it is also needed for the reform and renewal of all our churches and transdenominational agencies whose witness to our society has been partial and distorted when they had to proceed without their missing partners.

The Task Force has specifically in mind a place where Roman Catholics, Pentecostals and Evangelicals, as well as the Orthodox Christians and Protestants who have traditionally participated in the NCCC, would gather. For this reason, the Task Force is grateful to the General Secretary for the steps her office has taken to foster the development of these relationships. In such a forum, participants will come to acknowledge that the fullness of Christ's church is larger than any isolated group or communion. Each group must have the liberty to maintain its own truth claims and understanding of the gospel, including the frank judgment that other Christians are in dangerous error. Such a forum would provide an opportunity for engaging contemporary divisions, just as traditional confessional differences were engaged by an earlier generation. Such a forum would have a trinitarian basis which would reinforce the common testimony to Jesus Christ as Lord, without prejudging more specific debates.

One of the precious vocations of the Council is to see that the levels of unity, mutual accountability and affection that have been attained between its member communions are deepened within this new chapter of relationships. What the Task Force envisions, to put it another way, is a series of concentric circles--the intimate communion experienced as a result of union or full communion agreements; the fellowship known by churches that commit themselves to one another through conciliar membership; the growing relationship that, with God's leading, could occur through dialogue at this table of churches and movements--all part of our response as God's people to God's gift of unity in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Social and ethical issues that divide U.S. Christians are in large measure the same issues that divide the U.S. itself. We need not believe that Christians have the answers to our social crises to affirm that even a small measure of Christian unity, civility and forbearance would go far to help our nation face its ills more honestly and effectively. We can see how many disagreements between Christians denominations over confessional issues have been overcome in the last fifty years through the efforts of the ecumenical movement. What if the next fifty years were to see a movement bringing the same profound healing to the "culture wars" that now rend our church and society? What if the next fifty years were to see a more credible and

unified testimony to Jesus Christ and Christ's transforming grace? This is a calling for all who would offer a living Christian witness in our nation.

The proposal outlined above would be a step in this direction.. As we come to the threshold of a third Christian millennium, we encourage the member churches through the NCCC to move toward this vision of wider ecumenical participation, and we recommend that the General Secretary:

- Take appropriate steps to foster the development of the wider Christian forum outlined above;
- Seek to establish two on-going "working groups," one of NCCC churches with the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and one of NCCC churches with Evangelicals and Pentecostals;
- Invite the National Association of Evangelicals, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Pentecostal Conference of North America and perhaps others to work with representatives of the NCCC in drafting and publishing a statement on "Living the Gospel in the U.S. in the Third Millennium."

We end our report by stressing that the ecumenical vision of Christ's one church, living as a sign and instrument of God's intended wholeness for all creation, is central to the gospel to which we are called in every generation. The particular challenges of our age may be different but they are certainly no less urgent than those felt by persons who helped form the National Council of Churches of Christ nearly a half century ago. Like them, we know it is very good and pleasant when brothers and sisters live together in unity (Psalm 133). Like them, we feel the weight of Jesus' prayer that his followers may all be one as he is one with the Father (John 17). Like them, we glimpse the vision of God's plan to gather up all things in Christ (Ephesians 1). Like them, we long for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22), when those now estranged are joined in God's household of life.