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# Reflections of a Newcomer: A Paper Prepared for the Faith and Order Commission

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Having been recently appointed by my denomination to serve on the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, I arrived in Richmond, Indiana, March 18-20, 2004 with anticipation and apprehension: anticipation because of the nature of the appointment and the potential of serving with denominational representatives of varying Christian traditions, and apprehension because I did not know how I or the denomination I represent would be received.

Upon my arrival, I was greeted and welcomed by Martin Rock, and soon thereafter by Ann Riggs as I joined the Thursday "Orientation Meeting." Two of the first members of the Faith and Order Commission that I would meet were Lorilei Fuchs and Douglas Foster. Little did I know just then that they were co-chairs of the "Full Communion" study group that I would soon be joining.

As a representative of the Community of Christ, a movement founded in the midst of the various expressions of Christian Primitivism of the early nineteenth century, I was not sure of how I would be received and accepted. Because the Community of Christ shares a common beginning with a much larger and much more well-known group—the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints—we have often been judged by who they are and have been. But here I was!

The orientation was designed to orient newcomers, and it did that well. Not only did I garner an understanding and an appreciation of the various activities of the Faith and Order Commission, the occasion also provided me an opportunity to orient others to the Community of Christ. It was, for me, an opportunity to talk of a denomination planted in over fifty nations who, over the period of the last several decades and arguably over its entire history, has searched for a clearer sense of identity as it has been increasingly drawn out of itself and into the larger ecumenical world. From an identity once framed in terms of who we were not, of authority and absolute truth, the Community of Christ has increasingly embraced an identity which has much in common with many mainline and evangelical denominations.

During my first hours in the Full Communion study group I became aware that many of my denomination's conversations about its own identity and ministry were also conversations that were being had around the table. As O.C. Edwards, Jr. reported on the "Meanings of Full Communion: the Essence of Life in the Body," I felt welcomed into a conversation that I had not initially been part

of. What hospitality!

As various approaches and alternatives to full communion in the thought of various Christian beliefs were surveyed, I became aware that the great diversity of thought might be able to include the denomination that I represent in this significant and substantive conversation. As the report was reflected on, I sensed acceptance and respect not just for me, but for each and every denomination represented in the ecumenical conversation. That there is value in diversity was one of the affirmations. Such diversity is particularly significant when it is acknowledged by way of a mutual exchange of gifts and mutual enrichment in meetings like this.

An acknowledgement that not all voices had been heard from and that an opportunity for those voices to be heard seemed to be an important part of the agenda for the new quadrennium for the Full Communion study. Accordingly I was invited to present a paper on "The Community of Christ and Full Communion" at the October, 2004 meetings in Pasadena, California.

What was to be an hour or two conversation became a three and one-half hour conversation. Not only was there genuine interest that would lead toward mutual understanding, there were connections and clarifications of other Christian Primitivist traditions as well. Such dialogue which intends to foster understanding and unity seems to be at the heart of full communion discussions.

As I left Los Angeles for Kansas City, I reflected on what the two meetings had come to mean for me and my being a representative to the Faith and Order Commission from the Community of Christ. Three words came to mind, and have been expressed above. The three words are descriptive of my experience, but also of the nature of the ecumenical life to which we all have been summoned. They are acceptance, respect, and hospitality.

These virtues the Commission possesses. I have felt them and seen them in your interactions and heard them through your affirmations. Such virtues have provided place for us all. And for that I am most grateful.