



## General Secretary's Report to the General Assembly of the National Council of Churches USA St. Louis, Missouri, November 2004

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I want to frame my report to you in terms of this year's theme, "Weave Anew: Unity, Peace and Justice, Hope". But I confess that this is a personal challenge. My wife Merle would resonate with this theme because she is a prize-winning artist who works with fabric — not weaving, but quilting. If any of you have visited the National Council of Churches at its offices in New York, you undoubtedly have seen her work on display. And, in fact, she stitched together the pieces of the Council's quilt that we packed up and brought here to our meeting in St. Louis.

But what do *I* know about weaving? Maybe next year we could do a fishing theme. That's biblical too and it's something I understand. In fact, you should encourage me to do more of it. When I'm out on a boat with rod and reel in hand, I can't send you any e-mail. And fishing is about the only thing that interrupts what many of you have told me is entirely too large a stream of e-mail from Bob Edgar. Ask any Executive Board member.



But Weaving Anew *is* our theme. So I did a little research and what I found surprised me. The General Assembly Planning Team was right. Weaving is a GREAT theme.

You see, in weaving you've got the warp and the weft ... funny words that lend themselves to puns. But I'm not going to indulge my love of puns today. I don't want to waste time on them because our agenda is looming large.

So ... I was at the point of the warp and the weft—which you can see for yourself thanks to one of our great weavers-in-residence who is working at her loom as I speak. We can see the vertical threads, or the warp, which provides essential structure. And then the weft, as she fills in the horizontal threads, providing essential material for a seamless fabric.

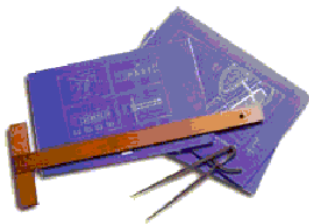
Truly, the fabric of ecumenical life is produced in much the same way. The warp has been laid down since that moment nearly 2,000 years ago when Jesus prayed that his followers “may all be one.”

Our gift of unity in Christ has provided the longitudinal thread for ecumenical life that, in this country, runs back more than a century. There were the frontier revival meetings that gathered Christians from different traditions, and the old Federal Council of Churches. There is our own National Council of Churches, and the network of ecumenical organizations that today spans this nation and the world. There are new entities, such as Churches Uniting in Christ and Christian Churches Together in the USA. It is the quest to make our unity visible that gives us the basic structure upon which we weave ever-changing and very diverse efforts. We find our unity and purpose in the revelation of God in Christ.

Our work in the Council this past year, as in every year, demonstrates a variety of contemporary concerns, as together we have worked on issues of peace, poverty and the health of our planetary home. The Council is indeed a loom on which God is weaving us into a fabric of hope and love. The collective support of our member communions — the financial and in-kind contributions, and the expertise and energy that is offered — all these gifts make it possible for this family of faith to carry out creative and effective programs in all these areas.

We are mindful of using resources wisely. Today I am pleased to report to you that for the third year in a row we have balanced the budget. We have received a clean audit for the 2003-2004 fiscal year. And our long-term investments, which at the beginning of the last quadrennium were down to approximately \$2 million, now stand at more than \$9 million.

Now that we can see a more secure future for the Council in financial terms, we are becoming more intentional about what we want that future to look like. Therefore, your Executive Board has begun a strategic planning process that involves the member communions in deciding together the directions for our programs, governance, and other key areas as we move forward. Many of you will be personally involved over the next year, and the plan will be presented to the entire General Assembly in November 2005.



Tomorrow, you will hear more about our current programs. You will have an opportunity to interact with many leaders of this work as you participate in the rotation forums. So today I will give you only a brief overview, one that also hints at the manner in which the work of our five commissions and the research and planning office are woven together in pursuit of common goals.

In the last year, our Poverty Mobilization kicked into high gear with a new campaign: Let Justice Roll. Faith and community groups in 15 cities across the country

enthusiastically embraced the campaign, which we co-sponsored with the Center for Community Change. Participants in Let Justice Roll sang, they prayed, they rallied, they registered more than 100,000 mostly low-income voters. In a political season when both parties were virtually silent on the issue of poverty, they lifted a clear voice of faith, speaking up on the scandal of poverty in this richest nation on earth. And they have more to say. Let Justice Roll activities have built a newly energized base of faithful people from Rochester to Miami, from Seattle to Philadelphia, and points in between. They will continue to work with us to bring good news to the poor.



In many states these and other advocates for low-income people will have a new and powerful tool because of the National Council of Churches—a tool called the Benefit Bank. It will help working people who live in poverty to access the \$35 billion in appropriated or entitlement funds that go undistributed every year. We are promoting the Benefit Bank, a Web-based software program that centralizes benefit information. And it has other features that make it possible for low-income people to apply for all the benefits for which they are eligible. Trained counselors are made available in trusted settings, such as churches and community centers, to help low-income people use the Benefit Bank. The program is generating great excitement. It's already operational in Philadelphia. And it's set to roll out in Florida, Ohio, Georgia, Kansas—and in Mississippi, where President Hoyt played a key role in promoting it. Hopes are high that, based on its success, the Benefit Bank will spread to other states.

In other poverty-related work we are forming a network of seminarians for social justice. We are pressing for quality public education for all children, and are working for justice for children and their families in other ways. And we brokered a television documentary on hunger that is now airing on ABC affiliates. It showcases communion efforts in the struggle against hunger and takes the position that there will be hunger no more if enough of us act on our faith.

In the last twelve months, we have worked for peace in a time of war. At this moment in our history as a nation, that means working for better interfaith relations—by teaching dialogue skills, and by drawing on religious sources of healing—even as



there are those who manipulate religion in ways that add fuel to conflicts. It means publishing books and holding conferences in support of the World Council's Decade to Overcome Violence, which this year focuses on the role of churches in the United States.

It also means defending civil liberties threatened by wartime fears. For a long time we have been disturbed by the situation on Guantanamo where the right of due process has been held hostage. In March, with the Supreme Court set to review the due process rights of Guantanamo detainees, the time was right to speak out. Working with others we took

our campaign to the steps of the Supreme Court, generating media attention to the issue. In June when the Court affirmed the basic right of detainees to challenge their imprisonment, we rejoiced. Our faith affirms that all God's children should be equal in the eyes of the law.

We do live in a dangerous world that becomes ever more perilous. But the Council has kept a spotlight on the need for multilateral international approaches that will help defeat terrorism while avoiding the kind of chaos generated by the Iraq War. It has been a focus of our communications—and of our teaching. We have field-tested a curriculum on Faithfulness in Foreign Policy. And, with foundation support, we are embarking on a multi-year effort to bring communion leaders together to work on this great foreign policy issue of our time.

We also stand with people who suffer in a violent world. This year I went with other religious leaders to the Sudanese Embassy in Washington. There we committed acts of civil disobedience to draw attention to the genocide unfolding in the Darfur region of Sudan. This year President Hoyt has represented us well, as he visited with people in Colombia who long for peace after decades of conflict. And we have worked in many other ways to follow the Prince of Peace who assures us “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.”



War and poverty are compounding the crisis that threatens the Earth, our only home—the household in which our Creator God charges us with the responsibility of stewards. We must do more to meet our responsibility. The signs of our failure to do so are everywhere—in melting ice caps, in rising seas, and in unpredictable and extreme weather patterns. This fall we convened eminent theologians to make a response to the degradation of God's Earth. They have called it “*the* unique moral assignment of our time.” They compare it in significance to Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s, the worldwide movement to achieve equality for women, or the on-going efforts to control weapons of mass destruction in a post-Hiroshima world.

These theologians have wrestled seriously with a false gospel that many continue to live out in daily life. That false Gospel says that God cares for the salvation of humans only, and not Earth itself; and that our human calling is to exploit Earth for our own ends. We are guided instead by the biblical call to tend God's Garden. We promoted this theme in recent newspaper ads across the country in support of public policy that protects Creation. In addition to public policy efforts, we are training clergy and lay leaders to bring environmental stewardship into the community, the congregation, and the home. Trainings on water resources were a highlight in 2004, as were Earth Day Sunday materials on clean air, the life-giving breath of God.

That's the warp and woof of the tapestry of the Council's life in 2004—daily efforts around peace, poverty and planet Earth woven on the threads of Christian unity that bind us. It is the sum of all our work—the work of the member communions and of

your staff at the Council—that comes together in witness and service to the world that God so loved.

Together we are the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA—with a special calling to seek the common good in our country. Today, more than ever, our nation needs to hear the message that we bring—a message of unity and of reconciliation based on justice and peace in all relationships.

But we are a nation divided. We have just come through what is perhaps the most divisive political season in living memory, and one that tore at already deep differences among those in the faith community. The challenge that I lay before us now is to tap sources of healing for our nation, to lift up goals that unite us. There are in fact issues with moral and ethical dimensions on which many Americans find agreement. There is a large consensus on the need for universal access to health care, though we may differ on the means to achieve it. Most Americans treasure our tradition of public education, even though many public schools struggle along—crowded, poorly equipped and understaffed. And there are other issues that could bring people and churches together.

We have a brand-new e-advocacy service to help us reach out broadly in this way: FaithfulAmerica.org. It launched in June with a highly successful campaign to let the Arab-speaking world know—through TV ads—that the American people are appalled at the torture of prisoners—as happened in Abu Ghraib. In just a few weeks more than 100,000 Americans grasped this opportunity to turn their horrified reactions into a positive response. Media praise for the campaign included the Boston Globe comment that such efforts “may yet unite the world in transcending politics.” Let us use this and other means within our reach to engage with growing numbers of people.



Let us become as numerous as the leaves of the tree of life, which are for the healing of the nations.

And if we are able to work together on these issues, there is one more thing that we must do in the process. We must tell the rest of the world what we already know, what we sometimes take for granted and fail to proclaim boldly: that poverty, peace and the health of the environment are deeply moral issues. When we fail to act on them, real people—people whom God loves dearly and equally—are hurt, and the world, which God declared good at its creation, is injured.

Framed in this way, the concerns that we hold in our hearts may touch many more hearts. Together we might make some real breakthroughs.

If we accept this challenge and work at it diligently, I believe God’s gift of hope will surge through us and our common work. We will experience anew the one hope of our calling.

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