



March 28, 2008. Eds: As the presidential and other campaigns continue for the next several months, the following is offered as an alternative to partisan commentary. Please feel free to use it as you see fit, in full or in part. Interviews with Michael Kinnamon can be scheduled by calling 212-870-2228.

## Politics and Ecumenism

By Michael Kinnamon

*Editor's Note. The Rev. Dr. Michael Kinnamon is general secretary of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. He was ordained in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in 1976 and has served as a pastor, seminary professor and dean, and staff to such ecumenical bodies as the World Council of Churches and Churches Uniting in Christ. He received the Ph.D. degree from the University of Chicago Divinity School in 1980.*

THE GOLDEN RULE of Ecumenism has brought vastly different Christian traditions together for conversation and action, and the rule should be applied to American politics.

The rule: "Try to understand others even as you hope to be understood by them."

That simple axiom is a radical critique of an age in which ideological lines are hardening and real dialogue diminishing in the public arena.

Church folks, like most Americans, have strong political views, many of them based on the biblical mandate to bring peace, feed the poor, uphold the downtrodden and speak God's truth and justice in all things. We argue all the time about the best ways to fulfill that mandate. But ecumenically-minded Christians start with the assumption that Christians with different ideas are just as committed to Christ as they are.

This is an amazing reality in the 35 member communions that compose the nation's oldest and largest ecumenical body, the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. Our member churches are Orthodox, historic African American, peace churches, Anglican, Main Line. The startling fact that we continue to work and talk together is one of the most underreported stories of our time.

Contrast this with the rhetoric of political campaigns, which are often based on divisiveness, hyperbole, half-truths and innuendo. How much can politicians learn about issues or one another if their positions harden into inflexible dogmas and their ears are closed to opposing ideas?

We profess to be a nation that values diversity – pluralism – as a central virtue, and yet our leaders so often govern, I fear, by surrounding themselves with an isolating barrier of like-minded cronies. Pluralism is affirmed as a social reality and grudgingly accepted as a legislative principle, but virtually ignored as a methodological basis for executive decision making.

That strikes ecumenically-minded Christians as utterly backwards.

There are indeed divisions in political life that need to be confronted and fully discussed, just as there are genuine differences among Christians over the nature of the sacraments or the role of the Church in social struggles or the authority of scripture – difference that cannot be eliminated simply by irenic rhetoric. And it is true that all government policies are not the same; some will be more effective in protecting the rights of minorities or prompting economic growth. But from an ecumenical perspective, the most basic division in American political life may well be between those who insist on splitting the world into polarized camps and those who don't, between those who claim that they or their party (or their church) have a near monopoly hold on truth and those who acknowledge that their perceptions of complex issues are inevitably partial and that they, therefore, need the input of those with whom they disagree in order to lead this nation in safe and prosperous ways.

Doris Kearns Goodwin, in her book *Team of Rivals*, describes President Lincoln's strategy of bringing into his cabinet public figures who disagreed strenuously with him – and with one another. Lincoln's practice assured that diverse points of view were aired in the very center of the executive decision-making process. Nearly five decades ago, President Kennedy brought hawks and doves into the special committee that recommended action in the Cuban Missile Crisis, and their sharp disagreements enabled the President to choose a path that avoided nuclear war.

An "ecumenical president," instead of minimizing internal debate and maximizing external differences in the name of ideological truth, would expand the circle of internal discussion and, yes, dissent as a way of identifying those lines of division that, as a last resort, need to be drawn.

This discussion implies a particular understanding of the ecumenical vision of the Church. It is easy and tempting to approach unity as a commodity which, if achieved, would result in certain benefits. I want to argue, however, that ecumenism is much more fundamental than that. It is, as I have already suggested, a worldview that resolutely refuses to absolutize relative perspectives (a tendency that H. Richard Niebuhr identified as the single greatest source of evil). It is a biblically-grounded spirituality that dares to live trustfully with differences in community, not as a result of polite tolerance or a pragmatic acceptance of pluralism but on the basis of a common commitment to Jesus Christ. It is an approach to reality which insists that truth is seldom discovered in splendid isolation but through dialogue in community. The ecumenical movement is, indeed, a spiritual battle for truth; but it is a common battle against error and not a fight between partners in dialogue based on the assumption that one is already right and one wrong.

So long as political candidates continue to vie for votes by rendering complex ideas into misleading slogans, demeaning one another in television commercials, attempting non sequitur sound-bites in a televised debate, or submitting to television interviews aimed at eliciting faux pas or outrageous statements about an opponent, there will be very little dialogue. And without dialogue, the next president of the United States is likely to spend the next four years in an enclave of like-minded polemicists.

Yes, political decisions matter. But our willingness to live trustfully with differences, because we know that God's will is always greater than our grasp of it, is the best testimony ecumenists can make in this political season.

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