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## Editorial

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This first issue of *Speaking of Unity* is prepared as we anticipate the ninth assembly of the World Council of Churches in Porto Alegre, Brazil, February 14 to 23, 2006 and looks toward the appearance of an assembly text. The issue is centered upon the publication of an essay giving an account of the work of the Full Communion study group of the NCCCUSA Faith and Order Commission carried out during the four year study period between 2000 and 2003: "Meanings of Full Communion: The Essence of Life in the Body" by O.C. Edwards, Jr., now co-chair of the Faith and Order Commission. That essay itself is, in part, a reflection upon the assembly text from the seventh assembly of the World Council of Churches held in Canberra, Australia in 1991. In the remaining essays of this inaugural volume, Edwards' essay is engaged and put into perspective.

The first of these accompanying essays, "Reflections of a Newcomer: A Paper Prepared for the Faith and Order Commission, NCCC," by Dale E. Luffman from the Community of Christ recounts the experience of being a new commissioner, representing a community just entering into sustained theological dialogue with others. One of the responsibilities of the Faith and Order Commission of the NCCCUSA is to provide a dialogue venue where Christian communities can become known to others, where their doctrine and community life can be explicated and understood and possibilities for deeper ecumenical relationship can be tested and considered.

Second is an article by David Wagschal of the Orthodox Church in America, "The Form and Function of Ecumenical Statements: Orthodox Reflections on the Way to Porto Alegre." "Very different ideas of the nature of ecumenical documents, how these documents should be constructed, what they should contain, and how they should function are clearly operating alongside each other and 'talking past each other' on a regular basis," Wagschal writes. His perspective challenges all in the ecumenical movement to a deeper self-awareness and to dialogue not only upon the content and implications of our common statements, but also on "ecumenical text production, including questions of text formation, intent, language, structure, and reception."

Lastly, Joseph D. Small, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), speaks from the experience of preparing the Porto Alegre statement and from his broader concerns for the on-going discussion that Faith and Order carries out and intends to stimulate in others. "How does each church discern in itself expressions of

apostolic faith and life, and where does each perceive fidelity to Christ in the faith and life of others?" Small asks. "How are perceived 'problems' in the faith and life of others understood, and how can forthright conversation and common confession be pursued?" How can we engage one another in a committed and patient process of "mutual affirmation and admonition" that is not "clouded in a premature search for generalized consensus"? The assembly statement of Porto Alegre will be most effective, Small urges, "if it moves the churches beyond theological generalities, and beyond sociological necessities, to genuinely mutual ecclesial engagement."

Consideration of the limits and usefulness of generalities, abstractions, and specificities in ecumenical texts are central to O. C. Edwards' essay, as well. Before turning to that essay, let us explore some generalities, some abstractions and some specifics in regard to this piece and its account of the work of the NCCUSA Full Communion study group during the 2000-2003 study period.

### **SOME GENERALITIES ON WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES' TEXTS AND USE OF THEM BY THE FAITH AND ORDER COMMISSION OF THE NCCUSA**

O.C. Edwards' essay "Meanings of Full Communion: The Essence of Life in the Body" uses the Assembly Statement of the seventh World Council of Churches' Assembly at Canberra as an organizing principle and analytic device. It is helpful to recall that statements of the World Council of Churches are neither "promulgated" ecclesial teaching statements nor "defined" doctrine. The churches do not "stand under" these texts and cannot be "held responsible" to them.

Rather, such texts are offered as a resource to the churches together and separately for study and consideration. The Toronto Statement or Toronto Declaration, "The Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches: The Ecclesiological Significance of the World Council of Churches," was received by the WCC Central Committee at Toronto in 1950 and commended for study and comment in the Churches. It is worthy of recurring rereading and could be transposed almost verbatim to articulate the self-understanding of the NCCUSA Faith and Order Commission of its own life and work together. The third section is of particular significance in connection with the work of Faith and Order:

#### **III. WHAT THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES IS NOT**

1) *The World Council of Churches is not and must never become a Super-Church*

It is not a Super-Church. It is not the World Church. It is not the *Una Sancta* of which the Creeds speak. This misunderstanding arises again and again although it has been denied as clearly as possible in official pronouncements of the Council. It is based on complete ignorance of the real situation within the Council. For

if the Council should in any way violate its own constitutional principle, that it cannot legislate or act for its member Churches, it would cease to maintain the support of its membership.

In speaking of "member Churches," we repeat a phrase from the Constitution of the World Council of Churches; but membership in the Council does not in any sense mean that the Churches belong to a body which can take decisions for them. Each Church retains the constitutional right to ratify or to reject utterances or actions of the Council. The "authority" of the Council consists only "in the weight it carries with the Churches by its own wisdom" (William Temple).

*2) The purpose of the World Council of Churches is not to negotiate unions between Churches, which can only be done by the Churches themselves acting on their own initiative, but to bring the Churches into living contact with each other and to promote the study and discussion of the issues of Church unity.*

By its very existence and its activities the Council bears witness to the necessity of a clear manifestation of the oneness of the Church of Christ. But it remains the right and duty of each Church to draw from its ecumenical experience such consequences as it feels bound to do on the basis of its own convictions. No Church, therefore, need fear that the Council will press it into decisions concerning union with other Churches.

*3) The World Council cannot and should not be based on any one particular conception of the Church. It does not prejudge the ecclesiological problem.*

It is often suggested that the dominating or underlying conception of the Council is that of such and such a Church or such and such a school of theology. It may well be that at a certain particular conference or in a particular utterance one can find traces of the strong influence of a certain tradition or theology.

The Council as such cannot possibly become the instrument of one confession or school without losing its very *raison d'être*. There are room and space in the World Council for the ecclesiology of every church which is ready to participate in the ecumenical conversation and which takes its stand on the Basis of the Council, which is "a fellowship of Churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour."

The World Council exists in order that different Churches may face their differences, and therefore no Church is obliged to change its ecclesiology as a consequence of membership in the World Council.

*4) Membership in the World Council of Churches does not imply that a Church treats its own conception of the Church as merely relative.*

There are critics, and not infrequently friends, of the ecumenical movement who criticize or praise it for its alleged inherent latitudinarianism. According to them the ecumenical movement stands for the fundamental equality of all Christian doctrines and conceptions of the Church and is, therefore, not concerned with the question of truth. This misunderstanding is due to the fact that ecumenism has in the minds of these persons become identified with certain particular theories about unity, which have indeed played a role in ecumenical history, but which do not represent the common view of the movement as a whole, and have never been officially endorsed by the World Council.

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5) *Membership in the World Council does not imply the acceptance of a specific doctrine concerning the nature of Church unity.*

The Council stands for Church unity. But in its midst there are those who conceive unity wholly or largely as a full consensus in the realm of doctrine, others who conceive of it primarily as sacramental communion based on common church order, others who consider both indispensable, others who would only require unity in certain fundamentals of faith and order, again others who conceive the one Church exclusively as a universal spiritual fellowship, or hold that visible unity is inessential or even undesirable. But none of these conceptions can be called the ecumenical theory. The whole point of the ecumenical conversation is precisely that all these conceptions enter into dynamic relations with each other.

In particular, membership in the World Council does not imply acceptance or rejection of the doctrine that the unity of the Church consists in the unity of the invisible Church. Thus the statement in the Encyclical *Mystici Corporis* concerning what it considers the error of a spiritualized conception of unity does not apply to the World Council. The World Council does not "imagine a Church which one cannot see or touch, which would be only spiritual, in which numerous Christian bodies, though divided in masters of faith, would nevertheless be united through an invisible link." It does, however, include Churches which believe that the Church is essentially invisible as well as those which hold that visible unity is essential.<sup>1</sup>

The Faith and Order Commission of the NCCCUSA, likewise, includes churches that hold very different positions on core theological, doctrinal, and ecclesiological matters. The Commission's task is to create a venue in which representative scholars and theologians from the churches and other appropriate sending bodies, such as the Society for Pentecostal Studies, can engage these differences and one another in lively, creative, responsible dialogue. Its work is not based on "any one particular conception of the Church. It does not prejudge the ecclesiological problem." Participation does not imply that Commissioners treat the ecclesiological self-understanding of their own churches as merely relative, nor imply acceptance of a specific doctrine concerning the nature of Church unity.

Participation in the on-going life of relationship and dialogue that is Faith and Order implies a commitment to seek God's truth on these matters together. The hope is there that by diligence in scholarship and care in writing, we will not seek a shared voice in speaking the truth together in vain. We trust that the Holy Spirit, enlightening our minds and guiding our words, will lead us into all truth (Cf. Jn. 16:13). Yet, the NCCCUSA Faith and Order Commission treats any particular text of the World Council of Churches or of its own creation as articulations that the diverse Christian communities, both those that are members of the councils and those that are not, are free "to ratify or to reject."

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1 <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/morges-01-e.html>.

## SOME ABSTRACTIONS RELATED TO THE NATURE, THEORY, AND METHOD OF ECUMENICAL TEXTS AND THE CHANGING INTELLECTUAL LANDSCAPES OUT OF WHICH THEY EMERGE

What are ecumenical documents? What is their literary genre? What is their logical status? How might one study them effectively? How might a community “receive” them appropriately? These wide ranging and complex questions are much larger than we can fully open here. And as David Wagschal’s essay below makes clear, the answers with regard to any particular set of texts can vary considerably among the Christian communities involved in preparing them. Yet, a few remarks and observations can serve as useful back-ground to reading the essays in the present issue of *Speaking of Unity*.

At the center of the Canberra text is what might be described, as Edwards’ article does describe it, as a “model” of “full communion:”

a *koinonia* given and expressed in:

the common confession of apostolic faith;

a common sacramental life entered by the one baptism and celebrated together in one eucharistic fellowship;

a common life in which members and ministries are mutually recognized and reconciled;

a common mission witnessing to the Gospel of God’s grace to all people and serving the whole creation.

This is an abstraction. It assumes that the details of what the apostolic faith is, what the ministries of Christian communities are, what service to the whole of creation might be will be explicated more fully elsewhere. The presentation of this abstraction is made in trust that it will be useful to the churches to have such a model, such an abstract, a compact statement defining “full communion.”

As is clear from Edwards’ essay, the “full communion” study group seems to have found this form of abstraction uncomfortable, unhelpful, confusing. To this readers’ eye, there is nothing that the group found absent from the Canberra text that is not, in fact, included in the Canberra model. The ministry of the bishop of Rome, the overcoming of structures of white privilege, the territorial conception of the Orthodox churches, the points of the Lambeth Quadrilateral, these are to be found in highly abstract form in the Canberra model, especially under the category of the Apostolic Faith, which different communities still understand and interpret in very different ways.

But it is highly significant that the group did not see these elements to be present within the abstraction in as vigorous and clear a form as they felt to be necessary. This is a very important piece of information about our contemporary ecumenical climate.

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One might see in this discomfort with a text that is now only fifteen years old, a shift of emphasis that is often perceived as characteristic of the shift from a “modern” intellectual perspective to a “post-modern” perspective. The preference for abstraction, simplified forms and universals that many have come to associate with the intellectual vision on the mid-twentieth century, has in more recent years given way to preferences for more specificity, more emphasis on the particular and a greater hesitation in trusting generalities. Theology and the ecumenical enterprise are rarely separate from the intellectual and cultural climate of their times but move in the environment in which the ecumenists themselves live, read and think.

### **SOME SPECIFICS ABOUT THE ONGOING NCCCUA FAITH AND ORDER “FULL COMMUNION” STUDY GROUP’S WORK**

Further description may be useful to the reading for understanding the context of the present report from the 2000-2003 quadrennium. Edwards’ essay, “Meanings of Full Communion: The Essence of Life in the Body,” is not a formal text of the Faith and Order Commission or its study group on “full communion.” It is a report by an individual member of the study group on the Commission’s first quadrennium of work on the subject. While it was discussed with the study group, it remains the work of the author.

In the present quadrennium, 2004-2007, the study has continued, with some continuity of participants and some new participants. Essays on the meaning of “full communion” or related concepts in an addition group of churches are being presented and considered. The Greek Orthodox Church, the Alliance of Baptists, the Moravian Church, the United Church of Christ, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the International Evangelical Churches, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church are among those being considered in the present quadrennium.

Additionally, the group has planned sessions at Commission meetings in March and October 2006 at which many of the existing “full communion” agreements among US churches will be engaged by theologians from these churches and from quite distant churches exploring a variety of dimensions of the agreements. These sessions will be taped, transcribed and published. As is the case with all NCCCUA meetings, Faith and Order meetings are open to auditors and guests. These sessions directly engaging the existing agreements may have particular appeal for visitors to the Commission.

The processes of reception, encounter, exploration, use and, in some cases, disuse and replacement of ecumenical texts is an on-going process. The Canberra statement on “full communion” will not be the most pressing and obvious of our shared theological resources after the churches’ encounter with the Porto Alegre text. But it will remain a living gift within the ecumenical heritage as

long as it continues to serve the processes of relationship building and dialogical exchange.