



# National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA

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To Participants in the New Orleans Centennial Ecumenical Gathering,

Grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ! May the Spirit who moved among us in New Orleans, giving us momentum for the ecumenical journey, fill you with joy and gratitude in this season of thanksgiving.

The final evaluations have not yet been tabulated (it is not too late to send yours, if you've not done so!), but it is certainly not too early to say thank you to all who worked so hard to make this an effective assembly. Nor is it too early to offer a few preliminary observations on the Gathering.

Many participants from whom I have heard have spoken very positively about their experience in New Orleans. Several mentioned a new sense of energy and higher levels of engagement compared with previous recent assemblies. There was wide-spread appreciation for the presence of sisters and brothers from Cuba, as well as from Canada and Latin America, and affirmation of the diversity and substance of the plenary speakers.

It was wonderful to welcome a new member communion, the Community of Christ, into the NCC/CWS family of churches! I, personally, look forward to the spiritual and material gifts they have to share with the rest of us, including even fuller participation on the boards, commissions, and committees of the Council and CWS.

Several persons applauded the public witness made through the Gathering, both through engagement with the New Orleans' community and as a result of the actions taken at the business session on Wednesday afternoon. Letters have already been sent from my office, or that of John McCullough, 1) urging the Senate to ratify the New START II agreement during the lame duck session of Congress; 2) expressing concern for the situation in Sudan, as that country moves toward the January 9 referendum on possible independence for the south; 3) asking the US government to do all it can to protect the Christian population in Iraq; 4) calling on the State Department to promote an international investigation of human rights abuses in Myanmar; and 5) urging the President and the Congress to recommit themselves to comprehensive immigration reform in the next legislative session. This is a good opportunity for me to invite your involvement in the New Year's Resolution Campaign, which asks people of faith to make a New Year's resolution to call their members of Congress, urging immigration reform.

Another part of the Centennial Gathering has received more mixed reviews. Many people with whom I spoke affirmed the Corinthian Café approach; it helped move the assembly from a mode of "talking at" to one of "talking with." Many were disappointed, however, that the conversations did not more directly engage the vision papers on which so many had worked so hard.

With that in mind, I want to assure you that the papers will have a life after New Orleans! We will collect comments from the Gathering and share them with the drafting groups as a basis for possible editing. The papers will also be posted, inviting additional dialogue, and widely distributed, hopefully along with study guides that will promote their educational use. In the meantime, feedback is welcome to my attention via [registrar@nccusa.org](mailto:registrar@nccusa.org). These papers were meant to stimulate serious conversation about serious topics that are central to the ecumenical agenda. The conversation should, by no means, stop with the assembly!

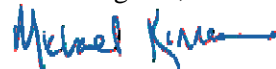
This leads me to the theme that ran from Tuesday morning through Thursday afternoon: What can we say together about the future of the ecumenical movement, if the movement is to be dynamic? As I read our time at the Centennial Gathering, several answers began to emerge:

- We can no longer be content with business as usual, including NCC/CWS assemblies! As Scott Anderson put it, what we are doing now is unsustainable. That reality must not be papered over.
- The ecumenical future will be as much (or more) a matter of networking as of formal structures. The Centennial Gathering gained real energy, I am convinced, from the presence of ecumenical partners, including ones from outside the United States. Perhaps one of the NCC's roles is to help facilitate interaction among various parts of the movement. The relationship between the National Council and local and regional bodies seems particularly crucial as we think about the future of the movement in this country.
- There is an obvious need to expand the range of churches that are involved in ecumenical life and mission. The presence of non-member communions, even those that may have no desire for eventual membership, was a blessing to the Gathering.
- Several themes will likely be prominent on the NCC agenda for years to come, including ecological responsibility, a more radical witness of peacemaking, and interfaith relations. The response I heard to the vision papers suggests that there is a hunger for each of these themes to be grounded theologically, to maintain what Bishop Maxim called an integration of the vertical and the horizontal.
- The importance of emphasizing the contextuality of each church's witness surfaced in surprising ways at the assembly, and strikes me as an ongoing source of insight and tension. Archbishop Karim, for example, reminded us that not all Christians share the same history of imperialism and that, as a result, interfaith relations look differently to different churches. Dr. Glory Dharmaraj stressed that what each of us considers universal is likely quite provincial when seen in larger perspective. This, of course, makes common witness even more challenging.

I want to close this letter with two further challenges. First, you will help determine whether New Orleans will be successful in providing new energy and direction for our churches in their life together. In the past, there has often (usually) been a disconnect between what participants experienced at an assembly and their life back home. I strongly urge you to talk about what you did and heard in New Orleans; share the vision papers with colleagues; call on your communion to follow up on decisions made in the business session.

The other challenge comes from the Bible study by Archbishop Demetrios. Our theme text from Luke 24, he reminded us, does not say, "You should be witnesses of these things." Rather, "You are witnesses...." The goal of the whole ecumenical movement is to become what we are—the one body of Christ, witnesses by what we say, what we do, and what we are (the way we live with one another) to the astonishing grace of the Triune God. May God give us strength to be what we are in the days ahead.

Warm regards,



Michael Kinnamon  
General Secretary