



Witnesses of These Things: Ecumenical Engagement in a New Era

2010 Centennial Ecumenical Gathering
and
General Assembly of the
National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA
and Church World Service

A Description of the Studies October 1, 2010

The 2010 General Assembly of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA and Church World Service takes place November 9-11 in New Orleans, Louisiana. This unique assembly has been expanded into a Centennial Ecumenical Gathering, including other ecumenical partners. The Centennial Gathering celebrates the one hundredth anniversary of the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, which marks the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement. In preparation for this event, the National Council of Churches and Church World Service initiated a series of five studies on crucial issues of our era:

- 1) Christian Understanding of Unity in an Age of Radical Diversity
- 2) Christian Understanding of Mission in an Age of Interfaith Relations
- 3) Christian Understanding of Creation in an Age of Environmental Crisis
- 4) Christian Understanding of War in an Age of Terror(ism)
- 5) Christian Understanding of the Economy in an Age of Growing Inequality

Study groups were formed, each comprised of members from various Christian traditions. Their task was to write vision papers which would be reviewed and discussed prior to and during the Centennial Gathering and thereafter in the churches. These papers are study documents, not position papers. Written in different styles, each paper does three things in its treatment of the issue:

- 1) assesses the past: what the churches have said and done, and what they have not;
- 2) acknowledges the present: what the churches are currently saying and doing, and what they are not;
- 3) envisions the future: what will the churches say and do in the next hundred years, and what they will not.

Study 1, Christian Understanding of Unity in an Age of Radical Diversity, identifies the goal of the ecumenical movement as celebration of the wondrous diversity of our God-given oneness as the people of God, the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit. The study contends that the ecumenical movement must find new ways of holding unity and diversity in appropriate and creative relationship. In so doing it claims that the church must turn again to scripture and tradition in order to hear what the Spirit is saying to us.

Study 2, Christian Understanding of Mission in an Age of Interfaith Relations, puts forth the thesis that ecumenical Christians do not enter into dialogue and cooperation with neighbors of other faiths merely on pragmatic grounds, but out of a deep sense of mission as followers of Jesus Christ. It does this in the context of the ecumenical movement's recognition of the importance of Christian relations with people of other living faiths.

Study 3, Christian Understanding of Creation in an Age of Environmental Crisis, addresses the churches' concern for and commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation. Doing so, it reports on the activities of various people and institutions whose commitment to eco-justice embraces a multitude of initiatives – from crafting policy statements, launching media campaigns and hosting conferences to action programs, educational activities and spiritual exercises.

Study 4, Christian Understanding of War in an Age of Terror(ism), confronts the issue and the age head-on. It begins by naming the open and painful wounds in the church. It then recalls the Pauline appeal of putting on the mind of Christ and being led by the Spirit as the source of Christian peacemaking. Tracing the past, our present moment and the future, the paper then confronts painful issues of terrorism v. peacemaking as Christians are called to be the body of Christ across divides of war and peace in a post-Christendom context.

Study 5, Christian Understanding of the Economy in an Age of Growing Inequality, names the crisis of the current financial fall in the context of creation, ecology and economic ethics. Doing so, it draws on the 1908 Social Creed of the Federal Council of Churches and the 2007 Social Creed of the National Council of Churches. This study challenges the churches not only to confront the hard issues before us, but also to take a moral inventory of principles and practices that will result in action towards a sustainable future for all.

In their assessments of the past, acknowledgement of the present, and vision of the future, each paper in the series draws on the common heritage which Christians and their churches share, the richness of which is found in scripture and tradition.

After the Centennial Ecumenical Gathering these vision papers will be refined and sent to the member communions of the NCC/CWS General Assembly, other Christian communions, other councils of churches, regional ecumenical organizations, and other interested groups and individuals. In these settings the vision papers are recommended for prayerful study and reflection – i.e., in Sunday school, Bible study, adult formation, local dialogues, ministerial associations, etc.

The purpose of this undertaking is action oriented. The vision papers serve to galvanize U.S. Christians so that what they read in the papers and take from their conversations on these topics will compel them and their churches to respond in two ways: first, to make common witness on these issues; and second, to take concrete steps together to act on the issues in such a way that it makes a difference in our life together as God's people.