Something to declare: Checkpoint for Christian unity

by S. Mark Heim in the December 9, 1998 issue

Over a weekend in November, veterans of the ecumenical movement gathered in Indianapolis to celebrate the career of the dean of North American ecumenists, Paul A. Crow Jr., who retires at the end of this year from his post as president of the Council on Christian Unity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

The event was also an occasion for reminiscences, frank talk and informed dreams about the search for Christian unity. Crow invited some 25 participants to submit brief papers outlining what they view as the crucial issues, and these comments formed the basis for a symposium.

One evening session was given over to sharing memories of personal--and often hilarious--experiences in the ecumenical movement. It was perhaps not surprising that many of these stories involved travel, and more particularly encounters with customs officials bemused at or suspicious of people whose stated work was Christian unity. One person who had been so incautious as to list "ecumenist" on the line provided to specify occupation received the dry observation, "Well, we certainly need more of *those*, don't we?"

Participants used a number of different pictures to characterize the current ecumenical situation. Some likened it to assembling an enormous picture puzzle while the table on which you worked was continually jostled, rearranging the pieces and scrambling parts you had believed assembled. Others pictured the toy that comes with the notation "some assembly required," and invariably lacks a crucial part, or requires a tool you do not have. The symposium itself was perhaps a kind of figurative border check on the ecumenical movement itself, asking where it had come from, where it was going, how it proposed to get there, and what it was carrying on the way. Customs officials are not the only ones who frequently suspect that the messengers of Christian unity may be purveying some kind of contraband or traveling on a fool's errand.

On the borders of the millennium, three concerns and four challenges stand out. The first concern is the goal of the visible unity of the church. This aim has defined the ecumenical movement, but its focus may blur in two directions.

On one side, the goal is blurred by success. As "full communion" agreements like that between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in American and the Reformed churches multiply, and the most obvious divisions among those churches are resolved, the question arises, Is this visible unity? Or is there a further, specific texture of life together, of common confession and life that is required for true visible unity, a texture we are only now at a point to explore? This latter possibility would seem to explain why issues of authority are now pressing themselves onto the ecumenical agenda, questions of how authority might be experienced in a future, wider communion.

On the other side, the goal is blurred by expansion. Are there not other, perhaps more urgent, aims of the ecumenical movement than visible unity--justice in the human community, renewal of faith across the churches, common ground with other great religions? Some speak of many goals, or many ecumenical movements, prompting consideration of whether visible Christian unity is even an essential aim for the movement.

The second concern deals with formation and reception. These are somewhat pale words, and many observed that ecumenism is not noted for the vividness of its language. Formation and reception refer to the way persons "grow up" into a catholic Christian identity and the way Christian communities put down the roots of the oneness in Christ they have acknowledged. Reception, the "growing down" of the roots of unity, comes as the churches live out the unity they have claimed--whether in agreements for full communion, theological convergences, conciliar membership or in recognition of each other's baptism and faith. Cynicism about ecumenism is based on the "agreements" and declarations that rest on shelves but have never put down any roots in changed relationships.

Growing up into unity is the other side of the coin. Members of the symposium shared a deep concern that many "farm teams" of the movement for Christian unity have withered. Student and lay organizations in which people from diverse Christian confessions were drawn together with a passion for mission or service were settings where experiences of shared faith brought conversion to the vocation of unity. The institutions of ecumenism must reconnect with streams of such experience if they

are to stay green.

The third concern has to do with what some spoke of as the "erosion of the basis" of ecumenism. Within many of the churches deeply engaged in the ecumenical movement, rank and file struggle with very fundamental questions about the validity of scripture or about basic christological affirmations. The sources from which the imperative for the ecumenical movement flows are themselves in question.

One participant noted that a traditional biblical mandate for the church to be one is "so that the world might believe," and asked, "Believe what?" Individual churches are often not clear even internally about the answer. This uncertainty can shift the focus in ecumenical thought and theology strongly toward the notion that unity is something we accomplish rather than a gift already manifest in the Christ who embraces us all even as we recoil from each other. On the other hand, this "erosion" can foster a readiness to simply declare unity in our current diversity. The most minimal terms of oneness are then taken as all that could be necessary. As individual communions debate internally over such basic matters, they tend not to postulate higher standards for unity with other Christians than they find feasible to maintain within their own church.

These three concerns cover a host of specific issues. The following four challenges could have been discussed at length under any of the three headings.

The first challenge is so obvious that only studied practice can ignore it: the need for a wider ecumenical community. This has two sides. One is the fact that a large and apparently increasing proportion of the Christian world is outside traditional "ecumenism." The separations of evangelical, indigenous and Pentecostal Christians from others, as well as the divisions among themselves, deserve urgent attention in any serious search for unity. The second fact is that a great deal of the ecumenical action is outside as well. Each of the three concerns would be transformed if addressed with representatives of the wider Christian family.

The second challenge is one that conciliar ecumenism, to its credit, has been more frank to face: the struggle for economic, political and social justice. For many Christians, as well as their neighbors of other faiths or no faiths, the primary issues are ones of survival and human dignity. A speaker suggested that the true imperative for the ecumenical movement is to reconnect with the Jesus movement, the struggle toward the reign of God with the dispossessed and the marginal. This

has particular force in consideration of the goal or goals of unity.

Despite common agreement that Christian unity necessarily has a positive contribution to make toward the unity of the whole human family, the relation of the two goals is a point of tension. Christian divisions are one of the factors that allow injustice to take root. And even where injustice is overcome (as in the overthrow of apartheid) the divisions of the church remain as a continuing source of estrangement. The brokenness of the churches contributes to the brokenness of the world. Plainly, Christians must come together for justice and service that one need not be a Christian to support. And they must come together to make whatever contribution to the peace of the world that cannot be done in any other way than through Christian faith.

This brings us to the third challenge: relation with the world religions. Mission, which was both a primary motive of the modern ecumenical movement and the primary locus for ecumenical formation, is itself a point of division among the churches, which differ over the nature and practice of relations with other faiths. One speaker noted that while there is a kind of "postdenominationalism" among many Christians, there is also a "postecumenism," where particularity itself becomes problematic. The challenge and even romance that attached to dialogue with the Christian "other" has for many people been far surpassed by the greater adventure in reconciliation that appears to be offered in interfaith relations.

This development is concretely reflected in the transition of councils of churches to interfaith councils, but it reaches much further. A participant who supervises interfaith relations for a large Christian communion noted that the assumption that such a "wider ecumenism" frees one from more "parochial" concerns is quite misguided. Serious engagement with other traditions will necessarily lead to consideration of the deepest roots and unity of the Christian faith itself. A key example is the dialogue with Judaism, which Christians must not bypass but which raises in full measure the issues of intrinsic Christian identity.

The final challenge is that posed by culture and cultures. "Culture" in the singular stands for the predominant public culture of North America and also for the emerging features of a global culture. As a global reality, the Christian church faces the question of conceiving its unity by its participation and identification with this culture or by being an alternative, countercultural system.

"Cultures" stand for the coordinate affirmation of specific identities within or against this wider framework. What can the unity of the church mean in relation to the imperative for thorough contextualization of the faith in every community? Domination and fragmentation are the negative versions of culture and cultures, respectively. A united church could more effectively resist the first danger on the global stage, but would also be more liable to that danger itself. A united church could overcome the isolation of fragmentation, but only if it can articulate the unity reconciling authentic diversity.

Most participants seemed to share the view that the next few decades will bring changes on a dramatic scale both in the context in which the ecumenical movement works and in the face of that movement itself. Perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, for people who have invested so much of their time and energy in patient and incremental work within the existing forms of ecumenism, this is a prospect that excites rather than discourages them. One person likened ecumenical formation to a process of gradually assembling the elements necessary for a sudden explosion, another to the "punctuated equilibrium" of biological evolution in which periods of relative stability give way to intense development.

Paul Crow shared both the expectation of change and the readiness for it. Surveying the many points of the discussion, he told the group that there was a vocation implicit in this agenda of issues. Crow recalled years before having mentioned to one of the founders of modern ecumenism, W. A. Visser 't Hooft, that he sometimes thought he ought to have been born into that pioneer generation. Visser 't Hooft responded that if you were truly committed to the unity of the church, you could work in any generation. For someone to retire while looking forward to the changes that are coming is a sign of spiritual youth, and a testimony that the story of Christian unity is only in its early chapters.