Can these bones live?

by Michael Kinnamon in the September 6, 2003 issue

It is difficult to assess the health of the current ecumenical movement. On the one hand, recent years have witnessed astonishing theological convergences--for example, the agreement on justification between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation. On the other hand, there has been an undeniable loss of energy and passion in the movement as a whole, perhaps in part because such theological work has not yet made a significant enough difference in the way Christians live with one another.

This is the concern of what is known as the Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity, now published in book form. The proposal is the product of three years of discussion by 16 scholars, invited and sponsored by the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology. This "unofficial" ecumenical group included such well-known ecumenists as Geoffrey Wainwright (Methodist), George Lindbeck (Lutheran) and Robert Wright (Anglican).

An introductory comment identifies two problems that have left the movement "stalled in place": 1) Many churches that have historically been involved in ecumenism are now preoccupied with internal divisions and are thus less able and willing "to receive" the results of ecumenical dialogue. 2) The World and National councils of churches, once primary instruments of the movement, are now captive to a social/political agenda that subordinates the focus on visible church unity and is, itself, often divisive.

The resulting proposal is straightforward. The churches must rededicate themselves to the vision of tangible, substantive unity set forth at the WCC's New Delhi Assembly in 1961: a "fully committed fellowship"--marked by a common confession of the apostolic faith, eucharistic sharing, common prayer and mission, a reconciled ministry, and an ability to make decisions together--of "all in each place" who are baptized into Christ and confess him as Lord and Savior.

The proposal offers specific steps for strengthening commitment to visible unity, steps that deserve serious study; but the proposal is not so much a blueprint for

action as a call to gospel obedience. According to the Princeton group, "retreat from this vision is sin, which is visited upon the churches in their own internal weakness and unfaithfulness."

The authors lift up several once-familiar themes that, in my judgment and theirs, have been forgotten or rejected in much recent ecumenical conversation:

Christians are already bound to one another thanks to what God has done in Jesus Christ. The ecumenical indicative (we are one) is the necessary presupposition of the ecumenical imperative (such unity must be made visible to the world).

The unity of the church, therefore, is not simply a matter of human togetherness or institutional self-preservation. Rather, disunity is "a counter-testimony to the gospel," a visible denial of God's gift of reconciliation.

While the church's unity is inseparable from its mission, it is also an end in itself. One body in Christ is what Christians are.

Tolerant cooperation is not an adequate expression of unity since "friendly division is still division."

Ecumenical dialogue is not compromise but a common attempt to confess the faith handed down from the apostles. Apart from the whole body, Christians inevitably emphasize their own partial perspectives.

If taken seriously, the proposal could go a long way toward healing a split within the ecumenical movement between those who favor the model of "organic" or structured unity--a model that led, for example, to the formation of the United Church of Christ--and those who favor the model of "reconciled diversity" in which denominational identities and structures are relativized but preserved. Many of the Princeton group are Lutherans, a tradition that has championed reconciled diversity; but their proposal stresses that authentic unity demands repentance and "the courage to forego genuine riches of a tradition for the sake of a more comprehensive unity in the truth of the gospel."

The report from a recent international conference of (organically) united churches suggests that any model of unity, if it is to deserve such a label, "must be tangible enough to make a witness to the world, intense enough that those in it recognize their responsibility for one another, costly enough that churches are changed as a

result of being in it, and intentional enough that the body of Christ is renewed through the sharing of gifts." The authors of the Princeton Proposal, if I read them correctly, would strongly agree. Separated churches, they argue, distinguish themselves from others by claiming their own special strengths and insights. In this way, they emphasize something other than Christ and empty the cross of its power (Eph. 1:17). In some parts of the world, these divisions reinforce insidious forms of nationalism. In the U.S., they enter into collusion with divisions of race and class and show the churches' accommodation to the ethos of consumerism.

I applaud all of this; indeed, it is part of what I try to teach in courses on ecumenism. But when I shared the Princeton Proposal with two of my best, most ecumenically committed former students, they both dismissed it as "old-style ecumenism," out of touch with important developments in the movement. I heard a similar response from two ecumenical officers of mainline denominations.

I think there are at least three reasons for such a reaction, and naming them may help identify energy-sapping tensions within the ecumenical movement. First, the proposal emphasizes the danger of limitless diversity but does not sufficiently underscore the celebration of diversity that should be part of our unity in Christ. Of course, diversity can be conscripted for sinful purposes and, of course, there are limits to theological diversity (especially when a theological claim denies the given diversity of God's creation!). But it is also true that "unity," if not properly understood, can mean a suppression of diversity based on the preferences of the powerful--and this is not said strongly enough by the Princeton group. The ecumenical movement has been around this block time and again, but further clarity is needed about the relationship between the one and the many if Christians involved in ecumenical work are to hear one another.

Second, the proposal emphasizes faithfulness to the apostolic tradition of the church without raising questions as to the credibility of that tradition. Yes, it is necessary to seek together the common faith that transcends our particular traditions and "differentiates the churches from truly spurious 'Christian' communities." But aspects of the tradition, as historically confessed, have been oppressive, which is why experience, slippery as it is, must be taken into account when making theological claims. Further clarity about ecumenical hermeneutics is very much needed in the coming years.

Third, and perhaps most significant, the proposal doesn't adequately link the concern for Christian unity to the church's ministry of justice. In their brief recounting of ecumenical history, the authors highlight Faith and Order while paying little attention to Life and Work, that part of the movement which has sought to overcome divisions in the human family caused by such things as war and economic injustice. They make the crucial point that the way we live as church frequently undermines our witness, but without relating this to the challenges of contemporary history. Of course, the more concrete you get, the more controversy is generated; but this is unavoidable if unity is to be tough-minded and relevant.

I agree with the Princeton group: ecumenical organizations, like denominations, often seem more driven by political ideology than theological discernment. The concern for justice, however, is central to the gospel and is inseparable from the character of our fellowship. Clarity about this will contribute to ecumenical coherence and vitality.

The fundamental issue, as I see it, was concisely stated (and in a way that sounds most contemporary) by the WCC's first general secretary, W. A. Visser 't Hooft, at the WCC's 1968 assembly in Uppsala: "The ecumenical movement has entered into a period of reaping an astonishingly rich harvest, but . . . precisely at this moment the movement is more seriously called into question than ever before. And once again the basic issue is that of the relation between the church and the world." The Princeton Proposal operates out of a God-church-world paradigm: the church must get its act together in order to carry the message of wholeness and reconciliation to the world. Many contemporary Christians who care about things ecumenical, including my students, think more in terms of God-world-church: the church participates in God's reconciling mission in the world and thereby discovers something of its own unity. The movement has got to insist that these are not either-or.

This is, admittedly, a long review of a small book, but it is warranted 1) because this call to ecumenical faithfulness is timely and eloquent, and 2) because the proposal comes from people--many of them, at least--who are deeply involved in preparations for a continentwide conference on Faith and Order. Preparations for the conference have already caused tensions by appearing to circumvent the National Council of Churches.

In an essay on ecumenical theology, published in 1989, George Lindbeck argued that "the most noteworthy feature of the past 20 years is the growing dissociation of two different ways of being ecumenical." One way is defined by the goal of visible church unity, rooted in the church's catholic heritage, and proceeds through painstaking theological dialogue; the other thinks of unity primarily as interdenominationalism and is interested in it only to the extent that it contributes to peace and justice. My unscientific survey of responses to the Princeton Proposal points to such a split. But it need not, and should not, be so.

Perhaps the planned Faith and Order conference can seek to demonstrate that there is one ecumenical movement, committed because of the gospel to both unity and justice. Perhaps it can underscore, to borrow a theme from a WCC assembly, that "Jesus Christ frees and unites." This would be a most important witness in a world, and at a time, of such oppression and fragmentation.