

Ecumenism's friends

by [Ann K. Riggs](#) in the [July 12, 2003](#) issue

If you care about the ecumenical movement or would like to know enough to care about it, read Michael Kinnamon's book. No one is a more engaging guide into the questions of ecumenism in our day. In clear, accessible language Kinnamon presents a careful account of the movement and a thoughtful assessment of its present moment. And the book's appendices make readily available the key ecumenical documents of the past century.

Kinnamon, the Allen and Dottie Miller Professor of Mission and Peace at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis, identifies eight central elements in the movement's vision: The ecumenical movement understands the unity of the church as a gift from God that we seek to manifest more fully and faithfully, not as something we humanly create. It links unity and renewal. Though good in itself, interchurch cooperation is not the goal of the movement, which is oriented toward a renewed life as church. It brings together unity and justice, calling the churches to greater unity in matters of faith and order and to new insight and action in matters of justice. It is not about reconciling diversities but about seeking unity in a multivocal expression of the one truth. It "moves" through the churches' recognition of sin, repentance and ever deepening conversion; it is a process not of growth but of radical change. It is truly a "movement," with a strong lay component and a notable protest character. It ascribes ecclesial significance to councils of churches. And, finally, though it may--indeed ought to--engage in dialogue with other religions, it has a goal of its own, appropriate to itself.

To Kinnamon's list I would add one additional element. For some early ecumenical leaders a sense of reconnection with the whole of the church through the ages was particularly important. Tellingly, Willem Visser 't Hooft, the first general secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC), remarks in his memoirs that those who attended the first Life and Work Conference in 1925 felt that the days of the ancient ecumenical councils had come again. Though I myself do not see this as a vision that has become impoverished, some present-day ecumenists express deep concern that this dimension may have been sacrificed or lost in recent years.

Kinnamon writes from the perspective of the WCC, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC), Churches Uniting in Christ, the closely related U.S. "mainline" Protestant bilateral ecumenical relationships, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). He notes that the vision he presents includes elements that Orthodox churches, some members of the WCC and NCC, and the Catholic Church (not a member of these organizations) have not always shared.

As a member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), I often see things from a perspective similar to that of the Orthodox and the Catholic churches. I doubt that Friends would be the only group of Protestants to see things from a different vantage point than Kinnamon's. This is the source of my questions about Kinnamon's book. Is he accurate and wise in describing Orthodox and Catholic views, and implicitly the views of Protestant groups with similar or similarly disparate perspectives, at the sideline of the main story?

Kinnamon notes that in the late 1990s an inter-Orthodox consultation "explicitly denied that the WCC, despite the language of fellowship, has an 'ecclesial character.'" Kinnamon himself argues just the opposite. Complex and important theological issues are at play in these discussions. But I raise here more limited questions of cogency and authority, questions that have serious implications for the ecumenical movement.

While many members of the NCC are independent and unique national churches, others are not. In the U.S. there are, for instance, jurisdictions of the Religious Society of Friends that belong to the NCC, others that belong to the National Association of Evangelicals and some that belong to neither of these ecumenical bodies. Each of these jurisdictions is a member of the same worldwide Quaker community. Half of the membership of Friends United Meeting (FUM), an NCC member, is in Africa and has relationships with churches there. What does it mean, then, to speak of ecclesial character in the relationship between FUM and other NCC member communities? Is this a construct that can make sense only if all the members of the NCC have the same status as independent national churches do?

Quakers understand their relationships with the Church of the Brethren, the Mennonite churches and other communities of Anabaptist heritage, only some of which belong to the NCC, to be among their most important ecumenical ties. Could the NCC simply inform FUM members that they are mistaken in their ecumenical self-perception? Could someone or some group from outside the Religious Society of

Friends insist that we have a preexisting relationship of an ecclesial character with the members of the NCC that must by its nature take precedence over other ecumenical relationships to which we understand ourselves to have a greater commitment? By what authority could this be done and what would it gain for the future of Christian unity? It does not seem likely that any community would tolerate such an intrusion nor that such an intrusion into the internal self-understanding of churches can truly serve the unity of Christians.

Is it judicious to speak of the ecumenical movement as a protest movement? Quakers are frequent protesters in the world of secular politics and, when needed, will labor long and patiently with one another. But within the community of Friends, "protest" is almost inconceivable. In May 2003, German Protestant and Catholic churches engaged in a large-scale church congress together. Against the explicit wishes of the pope and contrary to Catholic canon law, a Catholic priest turned the event into a moment to receive the Eucharist from a Protestant. This was the ecumenical movement at its most protest-like. Was the unity of the churches served by this protest activity? I doubt it.

Has Kinnamon described the impoverishment of a vision that was once whole and full and should now be recaptured? Or is the vision Kinnamon presents appropriate only for the bodies with which he aligns himself? Was that vision too narrow to begin with, too limited to the horizon of a relatively small group of Protestant churches? Is it time for a broader vision to come into being? Is a broader vision already in the making? If so, I have no doubt that Kinnamon will himself be a partner in its creation.