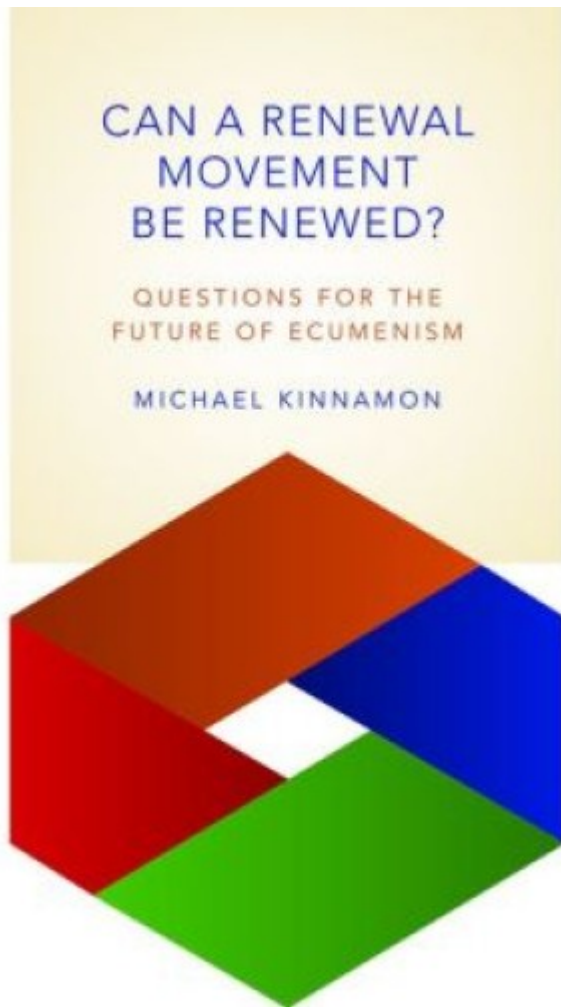


Can a Renewal Movement Be Renewed? by Michael Kinnamon

reviewed by [Steven R. Harmon](#) in the [May 13, 2015](#) issue

In Review



Can a Renewal Movement Be Renewed?

By Michael Kinnamon
Eerdmans

Lament over the current “ecumenical winter” and analysis of the factors that have contributed to it have become commonplace in recent ecumenical literature. As he considers the future of ecumenism in *Can a Renewal Movement Be Renewed?*

Michael Kinnamon gives four reasons for why the ecumenical movement stands in need of renewal: “loss of commitment among church leaders to the goal of Christian unity,” “divisions and other signs of weakness within the ecumenically supportive churches,” “an increasing split between two sets of ecumenical priorities,” and “diminishment of key instruments of the ecumenical movement, including councils of churches.”

Kinnamon is ideally positioned for proposing answers to the questions he raises about ecumenism’s future. A theological educator and veteran ecumenist, Kinnamon retired as general secretary of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA in 2011. He had previously served as executive secretary of the World Council of Churches’ Commission on Faith and Order and as general secretary of the Consultation on Church Union. As a writer he has long been reflecting critically on ecumenical praxis.

Another passionate advocate of ecumenical renewal, George Lindbeck, previously explored conflicting ecumenical visions in the pages of the *Century* (“The Unity We Seek: Setting the Agenda for Ecumenism,” August 9, 2005). As Lindbeck sees it, one faction considers ecumenism’s Life and Work emphasis on cooperation in seeking God’s justice for the world to be coequal with the Faith and Order emphasis on convergence toward visible ecclesial unity; the other faction contends that the Life and Work concern for cooperative justice—though indispensable—must be properly related to the Faith and Order emphasis, which should be seen as primary but which has been marginalized in the ecumenical movement. Both paradigms agree that the unity of the church is an end in itself and that the theological basis of such unity is God’s action in Christ for the world’s salvation.

Kinnamon, whom Lindbeck points to as a proponent of the view that Life and Work is coequal with Faith and Order, construes the split differently. As Kinnamon sees it, some ecumenists prioritize justice and see visible unity as an impediment to achieving it, and some fear that the ecumenical pursuit of justice has politicized the ecumenical movement to the point that progress on Faith and Order is much more difficult. But both parties weaken the ecumenical movement if they shun the integration of the impulses for justice and unity that Kinnamon commends. As he notes in a chapter on environmental protection as a proper locus of ecumenical cooperation, not everyone can be fully involved in all expressions of the multifaceted ecumenical movement, but all expressions of the quest for Christian unity should be viewed by everyone as inseparable.

In my judgment, Kinnamon's call for the integration of unity and justice makes them not coequal ends so much as coinherent expressions of the singular end of the church's unity. Or, to put it differently by drawing on James William McClendon Jr., the just shalom of the reign of God is one "end-picture" of the church's unity, as is the ultimate eucharistic unity of the eschatological banquet. The transformation of the world through the good news of God's action in Jesus Christ is yet another end-picture that resonates with some outsiders to conciliar ecumenism; these thinkers point to the roots of the modern ecumenical movement in the modern missions movement and contend that a recovery of concern for unity in mission is vital to the contemporary renewal of ecumenism.

Kinnamon frequently refers to his identification with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). It may be that Kinnamon's formation within the broader free church tradition supplies him with resources for conceiving of the ecumenical movement as a renewal movement that stands in need of renewing. One of the ecclesial gifts that the free churches offer to the rest of the body of Christ is an emphasis on the gathered local congregation as the essential way in which church happens.

Kinnamon commends local ecumenical covenants in which neighboring churches seek to make unity visible at the grassroots level through mutual pledges "to express together a shared Christian life to the extent current circumstances permit," including a commitment to ensuring that new ministers in covenanting churches uphold the covenant and prioritize ecumenical relationships in other ways. The widespread adoption of this practice would do much to address the ever-present problem of ecumenical reception: receiving and embodying locally what has been deemed theoretically feasible at national and international levels of ecumenical dialogue.

Another ecclesial gift of the free churches is their "pilgrim church" ecclesiological vision. They are on a pilgrimage toward a church that is fully under the rule of Christ, and they locate this church not in any past or present ecclesial instantiation but in an end-picture of a church fully under Christ's rule. Thus the free churches are deeply suspicious of realized eschatologies involving the church. This pilgrim church vision is also articulated in Catholic magisterial teaching, and it is embraced by many Christian communities beyond the free church tradition.

The ecumenical movement too has a pilgrim church vision as a renewal movement within the church, for it seeks a church that embodies Jesus' prayer for its visible

unity and thus is fully under the rule of Christ. The recovery of this pilgrim orientation is integral to the ecumenical movement's renewal. Kinnamon's lively collection of essays is a compelling contribution toward that end.