

GA-1906

Council on Christian Unity

Rev. Paul S. Tch , President

- ⁸I will listen to what God the LORD says;
he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants—
but let them not turn to folly.
- ⁹Surely his salvation is near those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.
- ¹⁰Love and faithfulness meet together;
righteousness and peace kiss each other. (Psalm 85:8-10, NRSV)

Reflection on Today’s Ecumenical and Multifaith Landscape

Early in November, I was invited to be a panel member for the workshop “At the Intersection of Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations,” along with my colleagues from the United States and Canada at the 2018 Parliament of the World’s Religions in Toronto, Canada. Amidst the rapid social and cultural changes in this global religious landscape, Christian communions, churches, denominations, and councils of churches are increasingly exploring what it means to be a Christian, and, more important, what it means to seek Christian unity in this multifaith world. It seems to me that surely, considering today’s religious landscape, it is time for us to take this question seriously!

For almost ten years, I served in Kentucky at various local churches, big and small, urban and small-town. While I was serving as a solo pastor at a historic church in a small town in Kentucky, I had about ten new members who joined my congregation, and interestingly, none of them were from the faith tradition called the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Not a single person! What did my new members look for when they consider joining the church? Simply put, it was who the church members were as a collective body and what they were becoming as a group of Christians.

To live in this post-denominational era, however, does not mean that we need no longer seek Christian unity. Rather, we must sit down together as one body of Christ; then, we must ask what it means to engage, as Christians, with our neighbors of different faiths and how we will work together for the world that God so loves.

The most distinctive feature of Christianity is, in my understanding, its mandate to care for the marginalized and to value every person as we value ourselves: that is, to treat others as humans Created in the image of God. I do not believe that such a minority group as Christians in the early first century would see only those who joined this new faith movement as God’s children. No matter who they encountered, they simply treated

one another as if they had seen God in them. Everyone was equally a divine being in the eyes of these newly converted religious “zealots” in the Roman Empire.

Those who were treated as God’s children for the first time in their lives probably wanted to know why these followers of the guy named Jesus—a very common name in Judea at that time—valued and cared for them in such a way that was suspicious and strange. When disciples of Jesus explained how they had been treated by other Christians and how transformative these encounters and new relationships were, people also wanted to join this “Jesus movement.”

Christianity is all about relationship: relationship with God, relationship with neighbors, relationship with power and with oppressors, and relationship with the marginalized and the oppressed. Likewise, the ecumenical movement is all about relationship: relationship among churches, communions, denominations, institutions, parachurch organizations, and Christian movements, and now, most important, relationship with people of other faith traditions.

I believe that our multifaith engagements are all about relationship. The more we meet with our interfaith neighbors, the better we understand each other. The more we understand each other in deep relationships, the more we will speak of each other with high regard. The world will then be transformed, I am certain. Isn’t this what Jesus envisioned as he prayed for the unity of his followers in chapter 17 of the Gospel according to John?

We should not listen to what people in the world—including, of course, many Christians—say about one another. If Christians do not see God in every human being in this world, regardless of their religious or life convictions, God’s glory would not dwell in our land.

When I was given a moment for my last comments at the workshop of the Parliament of the World’s Religion, I finally had to say who I think I am as an ecumenist. I regard myself an “ecumenical Don Quixote.” My biggest challenge now is that I do not have Sancho Panza at my side while charging windmills. I do not know whether I am fighting what I am supposed to fight. No one has told me how I, once again as an ecumenist, could participate in the good fight for the right causes in this rapidly changing religious landscape.

I do not believe that I am alone in this sentiment. As a matter of fact, we, as an ecumenical movement, do not know whether we are fighting for what we are supposed to fight for. Now, God is calling us to listen to a wise Sancho, and I believe that we’d better listen to him well. Who is our “Sancho”? Our interfaith friends!

Now, let me share some highlights of the ministry of the CCU—Christian Unity and Multifaith Relations.

Multifaith Endeavors

Last summer, the CCU published a curriculum for a group study, *Disciples of Christ in a Multifaith World*. In the lesson plan for the first session, Rev. Daniel E. H. Bryant, pastor of First Christian Church, Eugene, Oregon, describes the purpose of this study guide:

This study is not a study of world religions; rather, our goal is to understand why we, in the tradition we call the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), should engage in interfaith relations, how those relations intersect with our Christian witness, and what gifts we as Disciples have to bring to such relationships (page 4).

When we engage in any multifaith activity, we do so as “disciples.” But who do we say we are as a collective body? This study guide will help our congregations reflect on our tradition and the gifts we can offer to other multifaith neighbors as one of our countless Christian traditions.

This study guide was published thanks to the generous support of the Oregon E. Scott Foundation. You can download this study guide with other resources on our ministry website: <https://councilonchristianunity.org/>

Currently, the CCU is planning another study series in the coming years. The purpose of the next study guide will be to listen to voices from a multifaith world. Basically, we will invite people of other faiths and ask them why they believe it is important to have a relationship with other people of faith. For example, why do Muslims in an Islam-dominant country think it is important to establish and maintain a relationship with and protect their Christian friends who are a minority? In the same way, we will listen to Christians in the land of Islam, Hindu, or Buddhism. We will try to understand the religious and cultural contexts in which a religious minority is living under a dominant religious hegemony. Also, if we go to Latin America, especially, a dominantly Catholic country, we had better listen to Catholics tell us why they value relationships with Protestants and how Protestants feel and live in a Catholic culture.

I am thrilled that the CCU makes this study guide more accessible using new media, such as video clips and multimedia tools, along with a hard-copy study guide. Please note that you can make this project possible by praying or providing intellectual gifts or financial support.

The CCU has also been engaged in various interreligious conversations through the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCCUSA): Jewish–Christian Conversations, Christian–Buddhists Dialogue, Christian–Hindu Dialogue, and Muslim–Christian Dialogue.

I personally continue to work closely in various areas with Rev. Dr. Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar, Program Executive of the Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation of the World Council of Churches (WCC).

Central Committee Meeting and 70th Anniversary of the World Council of Churches

The Central Committee of the WCC met in Geneva, Switzerland, in June 2018. One highlight of the meeting was Pope Francis' visit to the WCC to celebrate this historic ecumenical institution and to urge us to go further as one body of Christ for the sake of Christ and the world. Also, the Ecumenical Patriarch, His All Holiness Bartholomew I, delivered a sermon to the Central Committee members congratulating us on this historical milepost. In 2018, the WCC, with its member communions and partners, offered various opportunities to celebrate the birth of ecumenism and to focus on "envisioning our common future: united in faith, eager for witness, and fearless in the quest for justice and peace" (WCC Brochure, *70 Years of the World Council of Churches: Walking Together, Serving Justice and Peace*). You can learn more about this celebration at www.oikoumene.org/wcc70.

One important agenda item for this Central Committee meeting was the location for the 11th General Assembly of the WCC, and Karlsruhe, Germany, was chosen for the 2021 General Assembly. In 2020, the WCC will welcome a new General Secretary as Rev. Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit exits.

For me, personally, the highlight of the Central Committee meeting was to sing a hymn and a traditional Korean folksong with the delegates of the Korean Christian Federation of the People's Democratic Republic of Korea, commonly known as North Korea. Impressively, the four-person delegation included two young female leaders of North Korean churches for the first time since they have been engaged in this ecumenical movement.

In the declination of the Disciples Mission Fund, the Disciples do not contribute to the WCC financially as much as we used to. However, the Division of the Overseas Ministries and the Week of Compassion also supports WCC programs, and I have been serving on the Central Committee on behalf of the Disciples since the retirement of Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins.

Toward a Full Communion Relationship with The United Church of Canada

In July 2018, Rev. Teresa Hord Owens and other representatives of the Disciples in the US and Canada attended and participated in the 43rd General Council of The United Church of Canada, Oshawa, Ontario, where they were introduced and welcomed along with other ecumenical partners. At one morning session, the Council passed the resolution to endorse the full communion relationship with the Disciples. The resolution was passed by 98 percent of the voters.

The Disciples are looking forward to ratifying this relationship in July 2019 in Des Moines, Iowa. Meanwhile, the Disciples and The United Church of Canada are in conversations about the reconciliation of the ordered (or ordained) ministries, local and regional cooperation, and opportunities to celebrate our full communion relationship. This is for the first time since 1989 that the Disciples has entered into full communion with the United Church of Christ.

I was deeply impressed by the efforts of our United sisters and brothers to respect and preserve indigenous groups and culture in Canada. They officially apologized to the indigenous people, especially for the boarding schools that the United Church opened to assimilate indigenous children into Western culture and languages, which has been regarded as “cultural genocide.” They have acknowledged their sin and faults toward the First Nation people, and now they are working together to promote the rights of indigenous people.

Christian Churches Together in the USA

The Christian Churches Together in the USA had its annual convocation in October 2018 in Wichita, Kansas, under the theme of “Let’s Talk About Life.” At the gathering, participants discussed the document “Unity Statement on Poverty and Racism.” You can read a full report from Rev. Carlos Malavé, director, as well as the statement, at <http://christianchurchestogether.org/cct-annual-convocation-2018/>.

National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA

The annual Christian Unity Gathering (CUG) and the Governing Board meeting of the National Council of Churches took place in the US in November 2018 in College Park, Maryland. These events were dedicated to searching for the next steps in the NCC’s main campaign, “A.C.T. to End Racism.” Our own Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins now serves as a staff member for this initiative.

With the theme “A.C.T. Now to End Racism: Hard Truths in Beloved Community,” Rev. Dr. David Anderson Booker led the plenary sessions focusing on anti-racism. He pointed out that, to end racism, its costs would include 1) institutional structure; 2) theology; 3) personal privilege, power, prestige, and identity; and 4) financial commitments. He also pointed out that the church is not yet willing to pay these costs.

Two Disciples seminarians from the Claremont School of Theology, Eula Nicola Pagdilao, and Taulau Tupua, were present for the seminarian program at the CUG, and other Disciples attended these events.

The four Convening Tables also met during the CUG and discussed whether this new structure of the NCC is suitable for the tasks that the Convening Tables have undertaken in replacing commissions. The Governing Board had an opportunity to hear

what was discussed during the CUG and reflected upon the mission and the stewardship of the institution.

Canadian Council of Churches

I was invited to be a presenter at the Canadian Forum on Inter-Church Dialogues of the Canadian Council of Churches. Along with Canadian colleagues Rev. Dr. André Lavergne of the Lutheran Church in Canada, Dr. Gail Allan of the United Church, and Rev. Canon Dr. Scott Sharman of the Canadian Anglican Church, I shared what it means to be in full communion with one another and its challenges and promises.

Ministries of the Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council [DECC] (i.e., Disciples of Christ World Communion)

The meaningful mile marker for the DECC was that it concluded **the fifth phase of the International Dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church** in June 2018 in Green Bay, Wisconsin. The current phase began in 2013 on the theme, “Christians Formed and Transformed by the Eucharist.” At this point, each communion is carefully reviewing the final report of the fifth phase. I anticipate that the report will be published in early 2019. You can learn more about the history of the International Dialogue between the Disciples and the Roman Catholic Church here:

<https://councilonchristianunity.org/disciples-roman-catholic-dialogue/>

As General Secretary of the DECC, I attended the Executive Committee meeting of the **World Communion of the Reformed Church (WCRC)** in May 2018 in Seoul, South Korea. The DECC urged the Executive members of the WCRC to find ways to strengthen the relationship between the WCRC and the DECC, two world communion bodies, in mission and ministries as they presented the new organizational strategy.

The journey toward becoming a world communion as a global body continues. The first step has been to change the name to the **Disciples of Christ World Communion (DCWC)** because the name DECC is no longer relevant to its own members and the ecumenical community. In relation to the World Convention of Churches of Christ (WCCC), the DECC represents only national bodies of the Disciples Churches and the United Churches into which the Disciples merged, while the WCCC represents individuals, local churches, and global partners of the Stone Campbell movement. The evangelical and missional zeal of the Puerto Rican Disciples and other member churches in the Global South have expanded the global presence of the Disciples, and these newly established national churches are firmly rooted in their identity as Disciples of Christ—not as the Stone-Campbell tradition. As historical Disciples churches struggle with membership and finance challenges, those churches are vibrant and evangelical. It is my strong conviction that the Disciples of Christ, as a world communion—that is, a distinctive global Protestant tradition—will together fulfill God’s calling for us in this world: praying for, promoting, and bringing unity to Christians.

I have contacted our current members about this change. With the exception of one member communion, most churches have welcomed this direction. I also visited and contacted new potential member communions, and so far, **the Disciples of Christ in Colombia** and **the United Church of the Philippines** have expressed their intention to join the DECC.

Becoming a Just, Peacemaking Church

The CCU—Christian Unity and Multifaith Relations of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) remains to urge our churches to be engaged in actions for peace that entail justice. With ecumenical partners, the CCU and the DECC work with the Ecumenical Forum for Peace, Reunification, and Development Cooperation on the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Ecumenical Forum for Justice and Peace.

The Ecumenical Forum for Korea had a meeting in Geneva last June 2018; and, as I shared above, the KCF of North Korea fully participated in the meeting.

I was also invited to the Roundtable for Peace on the Korean Peninsula, organized by the Korean Methodist Church, World Methodist Council, and the United Methodist Church in November 2018 in Atlanta, Georgia. Mr. Jimmy Carter, former US President, and Rev. Dr. James Laney, former US Ambassador to South Korea, welcomed participants to the Jimmy Carter Center and shared their insights on the Korean Peninsula. The NCC Korea, the NCC Japan, the WCC, the NCCCUSA, and the WCRC also participated in this event.

As a Korean American, I have fully endeavored to bring our ecumenical efforts together for peace in northeast Asia. Japan is about to pass the amendment to the so-called *Peace Constitution*, which will allow Japan to engage fully in military actions and warfare. Taiwan is caught in a struggle between two global superpowers, the US and China. North Koreans are dying of hunger mostly because of economic sanctions imposed by the UN. Many traces of colonialism remain in Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines. Indigenous peoples in Taiwan and the Philippines are struggling to be heard and recognized. And, as you can imagine, many issues require ecumenical responses in Northeast Asia. I believe this is time for the ecumenical community to act together to bring peace to this region. And my role is to point out the intersectionality of these regional issues—how they affect one another.

Let me conclude my report by reminding us of our calling: Christ urges us to live life in unity not for ourselves but for the world that God so loved that God gave Her only begotten son!

Recommended Action

The General Board receives this report from the Council on Christian Unity and forwards it to the 2019 General Assembly for consideration and discussion.