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The Current State of Ecumenical Fellowship from a Perichoretic Lens¹

Abstract

The author argues that the theological concept of perichoresis serves as a useful lens through which to look at the state of ecumenism today. Noting the challenges facing ecumenism, he explores whether the difference in the two basic understandings of perichoresis held by contemporary western theology and eastern theology respectively points to the reason the ecumenical movement is having difficulty in meeting those challenges. And ultimately, he believes that it is because of a misunderstanding of perichoresis as the model of community in the church that the churches are falling short of their ecumenical goal to achieve Christian unity.



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Ecumenism is, quite simply, the search for Christian unity. It is the recognition by the churches of their historic and current divisions, and their effort to find healing and reconciliation. These divisions are considered scandalous, in the truest biblical sense of the word: they cause others who might hear the message to stumble and thus not hear the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. In other words, the quest for unity – in faith and in praxis – has mission as its driving force.

This movement, born some 100 years ago not insignificantly out of the world missionary conference in Edinburgh in 1910, and promulgated over the years by churches of most major traditions, has grown into a worldwide movement. With achievements and failures as in any long-term and large-scale endeavor, it has become institutionalized at the global, regional, national, and local levels. The World Council of Churches, the All African Council of Churches, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, and the Massachusetts Council of Churches are all such examples. The context for my talk, quite naturally, is the ecumenical imperative as lived out in the United States through the National Council of Churches (NCC).

And so, what is the NCC? It is a “communion” of 37 national churches, which themselves collectively represent some 40 million Christians in some 100,000 congregations across the country. These churches come from the following traditions: Anglican (Episcopal), Orthodox (Eastern and Oriental), and Protestant (Mainline, evangelical, historic African American, and Living Peace) Churches. In our commissions, we also have the full partnership of the Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Holiness, Emergent and other churches.

And what is the NCC's work? The Council is all about scripture: the NCC holds the copyright on the RSV and NRSV versions of the Bible, translations that were produced through ecumenical cooperation under NCC auspices and that still are the versions most used in academia. It is all about unity: the Faith and Order Commission, like its global counterpart, brings the churches' theologians together to study church dividing and church uniting issues. It is all about education of the faithful: through one of its departments, the NCC's work includes the production of the uniform series for Sunday school curricula used by a host of churches now for well over 100 years. It is all about justice: through the NCC's advocacy work in Washington and elsewhere, the Council seeks to witness to the churches' common belief in God's just kingdom. It is also about dialogue with people of other faiths: the churches' representatives come together, as Christians in a pluralistic world, to dialogue and collaborate with people of other religious beliefs, something that is increasingly important these days. These initiatives, and others, define the NCC.

It would seem, from this summary, that ecumenism is an essential movement within the churches. Then why, one might ask, at this moment is the entire enterprise seemingly threatened with collapse, not only in its institutional manifestations but also in terms of its basic premise, namely the imperative to seek unity?

In thinking about an answer to this question, it might prove instructive to consider the perichoresis (or coinherence, or communion, or fellowship) of the Trinity, and what it means for conciliar ecumenism. What is it that the theological concept of perichoresis, something generally recognized as coming out of the Eastern (Orthodox) Christian tradition but resonant in contemporary Western Christian theology as well, can reveal about the ecumenical movement today? For those organizations and people involved in ecumenism, as I've intimated, this is a moment of great change. This change – occasioned by financial, organizational, missional, and

philosophical challenges – looms large and critical. Is there something inherent in ecumenical fellowship itself that relates to the current situation? Perichoresis, it would seem, is exactly the lens through which to look at this important set of questions.

Ecumenical Fellowship Today: An Icon of Unity?²

The word “icon” is understood primarily in terms of art, specifically with regard to art in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Of course, in today’s world the word “icon” also means something totally unrelated to the Orthodox worship space – think computer screens and celebrities. Still, its primary reference is to the paintings that adorn Orthodox churches.

At the same time, in the Orthodox understanding, the term “icon” goes beyond art. It is, in the most expansive way, a symbol. A symbol, in the Greek, basically means one reality making another reality present. So, in the religious sense, an icon is one reality – the wood and paint and other materials used in creating the image – bringing the divine reality of the subject present for the worshipper. For this reason, an icon has been compared to a window, or to a see-through mirror. And also for this reason, icons were affirmed in church history as a confirmation of the theological doctrine of the incarnation. An icon of Jesus, for example, brings the spiritual reality of Christ present in the mind and heart of the believer. You can see how this is distinctly different from the understanding of other forms of religious art.

² Much of the material in this section, specifically on differing views of the perichoresis, was presented previously in my dissertation. See Antonios Steve Kireopoulos, *The Dialogue with Orthodox Theology in the Ecclesiology of Jurgen Moltmann: Trinitarian Theology and Pneumatology as the Twin Pillars of Ecclesiology* (Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Services, 2003).

This symbolic understanding of the icon, as one reality making another reality present, can be applied to something other than art. Can a person be an icon of divine love? Yes. Can creation be an icon of God's creativity? Yes. And so, can the ecumenical community be an icon of unity? This is in fact the question at hand, when thinking about perichoresis. What kind of unity does ecumenical life reveal?

The ecumenical movement has at its heart the prayer of Jesus in the Garden, as written in John 17:20-21: "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (NRSV). The ecumenical movement has been right to claim this prayer as its *raison d'être*. But while much has been written about this prayer and its use by the ecumenical community, and about the fact that mission is the reason for desiring this oneness ("that the world may believe"), it is not certain that much has been written about the nature of the oneness to which Jesus refers as it applies to the ecumenical imperative.

The opening to this exploration is in Jesus' words, "as you, Father, are in me and I am in you." What precisely does this mean? Without analyzing other implications, this brings us to the crux of the matter. Perichoresis: there is something about the fellowship of God the Father, God's Son Jesus Christ, and of course the Holy Spirit, that determines the nature of the oneness for which he prayed on behalf of his followers.

To define the term, perichoresis is a concept in Trinitarian theology that tries to describe the relationship among the three persons of the Father, Son and Spirit. Iconographically, this is depicted perhaps most resplendently in Rublev's icon of the Trinity. This relationship, of pure and selfless love, is such that it is perfectly reflective of the oneness they share as the One God.

How did this term come to be so important in the contemporary study of Trinitarian theology? It is largely recognized in

theological circles that the study of the Trinity begins, not from the one nature of God, but from the three divine persons. The person of Jesus, and what was revealed through his life, death, and resurrection, causes contemplation of a Triune God, and from there proceeds to the unity of God. Why is this so? Because the Christ is the subject of our contemplation; that the risen Christ is identified with the man crucified; and that God is known in the event of the crucifixion of this man. God is known in this event because only God could have wrought such a marvelous work as the raising of the dead.

This move from the three divine persons to the unity of God (rather than the other way around) is rooted in the Eastern Christian tradition, though it is now a rather common theological approach for both East and West. One illustrative example of this is Jurgen Moltmann's use of this approach, which he saw as absolutely necessary to avoid distortions in Trinitarian understanding (such as modalism and monarchianism). In Moltmann's words, Christian theology should "begin with the recognition of the three indivisible and different subjects and their one unique collaboration in their history [and thus move to] an investigation of their relationship and their unity."³

By starting with the three persons of the Trinity, Moltmann is instructive to all who would follow him that this starting point avoids the concentration on some abstract notion of nature as that which is the source of the Trinity. But where Moltmann errs is in his understanding of the perichoresis of the three divine persons as divine nature itself, rather than the mirror into their divinity as sourced in the Father. The perichoretic relationship is not what defines that oneness; it instead reflects the oneness that they share.

³ Jürgen Moltmann, *History and the Triune God: Contributions to Trinitarian Theology*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 83.

With regard to the oneness within the Godhead, Eastern theology would affirm that the Father, Son and Spirit share, or possess, one divine nature, or essence. The experience of the three divine persons in history leads not only to the conclusion that there is a Trinity; it also leads to the conclusion that they have divinity in common. To use John Meyendorff's language, the person, or the hypostasis, accordingly enhypostasizes the divine nature.⁴

In this view, it would be wrong to assume that the unity of God, the divine nature that in a sense binds them together, is in the relations of the persons. What, then, would the East say about the divine nature, the ontological unity that the three divine persons possess from all eternity? Precisely that unity in God is grounded in the Person of the Father. In short, the Father is, in absolute love and freedom, the font of divine nature and the source of the other two equally divine persons of the Trinity to whom he gives his divinity.

It is in the work of John Zizioulas that a clear articulation of this belief is found. For Zizioulas, personhood is the primary ontological category. The revelation of the Trinity in the economy of creation certainly points to the existence of three divine persons in communion. And certainly, such a dynamic relationship, in which the three persons are ecstatic in their love for one another to the point of full co-inherence, is the fulfillment of their personhood. But because divine nature is not the primary category, the person of the Father stands as the initiator of the existence of the other two persons, of their communion, and of their common nature.

In this construct, the ultimate characteristic of the Father's personhood is the freedom by which he willfully generates the Son and spirates the Spirit. Freedom is important here; it signals cause as well as source. The Son and Spirit do not

⁴ John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974), 153f.

eternally come about automatically, out of some constraint of nature; they come about through personal initiative. This is not choice, as in the Father could have chosen or not chosen to beget the Son and the Spirit. Instead, this freedom is a freedom from the constraints of nature, in which the Father in ecstatic love transcends all limitations and brings forth true communion with others, because this is good, and desirable, and what it means to fully be a person. (This has implications for humanity as well, in that humans would thus be bound by human nature and not able through ecstatic freedom and love to transcend human nature, form true communion with God and one another, and eventually achieve theosis.)

As a sort of spokesperson for this position, Zizioulas defines God's being therefore, not by the relationship of communion, but in terms of the personhood of the Father. Certainly, to be a person is to be in relationship. But it is the ecstatic character of the person that brings about communion; it is not communion in and of itself that defines what the person is. The Father, as the source of all that is, eternally brings about the Son and the Spirit with whom he is in communion as Trinity. Because the primary ontological principle is the Father, Zizioulas can say that "God as person, as the hypostasis of the Father, makes the one divine substance to be that which it is: the one God."⁵

From this, a word that sometimes causes discomfort in theological circles can be used: the Father is the one *arche*, is *mon-archia*. All of this implies the monarchy of the Father. The discomfort is caused by the oppressive characteristics that are oftentimes linked to the term "monarchy." And this is why perichoresis is latched onto as the remedy for such oppressiveness. Equality of persons, born of the loving relationship that binds them, is instead seen as the ultimate principle.

⁵ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 41.

But, at least according to Eastern theology, it is wrong to confuse equality of persons for equality of nature. Yes, they are equal in nature (and made equal in persons by the act of the Father), but this equality is not the first principle; by nature and in personhood, the Son and the Spirit are sourced in the Father. This calls us to see the Father as having priority within the Trinity, even though the Son and the Spirit fully share in the Father's divine nature and are thus equal as persons. In other terms, while the relationships among these three persons is perfect love, it is only because it cannot be other than perfect love, and thus the three persons enter from all eternity into a relationship that reflects the essential unity that they possess.⁶ Given this, one can see how the relationship does not undo the monarchy of the Father. Indeed, monarchy does not necessarily preclude equality; but equality as first principle would preclude monarchy, which goes against what we know about God as revealed to us.

The reluctance to conclude that there is some kind of fundamental essence within the Trinity is related to the sociological affirmation of equality of persons in their fundamental, divinely created dignity. It ultimately leads to an understanding of divine nature as the divine fellowship, or as perichoresis. This might seem like a logical conclusion if the only basis for contemplation of the Trinity is the experience of the Father, Son and Spirit in history. But, as Zizioulas warns, while "the Economic Trinity is the Immanent Trinity, the Immanent Trinity is not exhausted in the Economic Trinity."⁷ This fear may be exaggerated; the equation of the Economic

⁶ Cf. Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Experience of God*, ed. and trans. Ioan Ionita and Robert Barringer (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1994), 68.

⁷ John Zizioulas, "The Doctrine of God the Trinity Today: Suggestions for an Ecumenical Study," in *The Forgotten Trinity: 3 A Selection of Papers Presented to the BCC Study Commission on Trinitarian Doctrine Today*, ed. Alasdair I.C. Heron (London: BCC/CCBI, 1991), 23-4.

Trinity and Immanent Trinity need not be limiting of God's transcendence. This is why Papanikolaou urges more work that would bridge these two views.⁸ Still, the issue remains as to the equation of divine essence with perichoresis.

Ultimately, this issue comes down to whether one can accept the monarchy of the Father in respect of the origin of the existence of three divine persons, and not accept the monarchy of the Father as central to the innermost being of the Godhead, but rather substitute the perichoretic relationship among the three as that which forms their unity. Could this be the result of a modern sociological principle that cannot admit to a primacy of person within God, even as the essence of God guarantees their equality?

Returning to Moltmann, as a spokesperson for this alternate view, what, then, according to him is this perichoresis that defines the essence of God? In short, it is a love so deep that the one who loves and the ones loved co-inhere to the point that the fulfillment of all three is in the experience of the love of the others. It is a love that is so complete that it reaches outward to all that it touches, so profound that its own completion is accomplished only when all that it touches is essentially a part of it. It is a primordial love that reveals that, from the eternity of God, God's love was of one awaiting the response of the other, the "other" being the other divine persons, as well as the world to which God has thrown himself open.

This would present no problem to those who hold the more traditional view. But clearly, and this is where they differ, Moltmann believes that this co-inherence translates to unity of essence. Indeed, it must translate to unity if his construct is to hold together. Since he of course requires a strict threefoldness, and he is reluctant to find unity in either a divine

⁸ Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Review of *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, by Catherine Mowry LaCugna, in *The Journal of Religion* 73, 3 (July 1993), 438.

essence shared by the three Persons, or in the Person of the Father, to avoid tri-theism his conception of unity can only be found in the communion of the three. "Because of their eternal love, the divine persons exist so intimately with each other, for each other and in each other that they themselves constitute a unique, incomparable, and complete unity."⁹

It would be helpful here to recap the two perspectives on perichoresis. Both describe the kind of relationship that is reflective of full unity – in love and co-inherence to the point that one divine person cannot be fathomed without the other two. But where one identifies that perichoresis as divine unity itself, the other sees it as a reflection of the unity the three share by virtue of being divine.

These two perspectives can be helpful if when looking at the ecumenical community. It first should be said that, in any treatment of perichoresis, a corollary to it is that this relationship extends to the human community, not only in the embrace of the world by the Godhead in its all-embracing love among the three persons, but also in the sense that the human community called to communion by virtue of personhood requires those who call on the name of God to be imitative of this relationship in their dealings with one another. This is most inherent in the gathering of the church. Discipleship reflects the belief that human interaction in the name of Christ must emulate the divine interaction revealed in the Christ event if it is to participate in the glory toward which Trinitarian history is directed. This applies as well to the ecumenical community. (One might here object to the jump from the church to the ecumenical community, which itself is technically not a church, but this can be countered with the assertion that

⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, "The Unity of the Triune God: Remarks on the Comprehensibility of the Doctrine of the Trinity and Its Foundation in the History of Salvation," trans. O.C. Dean, in *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 28 (1884), 166.

as an ecclesial construct, the mission of which is to promote Christian unity so that the world may believe the Gospel message, it pertains precisely to the ecumenical community as a gathering of Christians.)

And thus, the question of the day: what kind of unity is reflected in the ecumenical community and the goal for which it exists, and specifically in the context of the communion of communions called the National Council of Churches?

The NCC's statement of faith affirms that the member communions "covenant with one another to manifest ever more fully the unity of the church." But what does that exactly mean? Does it mean, as some in the Council believe, that it is to witness together in faith and praxis so that the churches reveal a shared unity by virtue of their togetherness? Or does it mean, as others in the Council believe, that, even as the churches witness together to what they have in common, it is to work toward an integral unity so that one day the Church may indeed be one? True enough, the churches already do share a common confession in Jesus Christ, which should be celebrated. But can it also be said that the churches' different theological understandings on other doctrinal matters are not as critical to unity as their belief in Jesus? In contemplating an answer to this question, it becomes apparent that the two understandings of perichoresis as outlined above are at the heart of what the ecumenical movement is all about, and thus at the heart of the current state of ecumenism today.

Why Christian Unity Still Eludes Us, and Why It Still Calls Us

Before drawing conclusions on the role of perichoresis in the life of the ecumenical community, it would be helpful to lay out a bit of ecumenical history and an analysis of where the movement is today. Of course, as mentioned at the outset, the movement is in the midst of a crisis. Some would even say that, while the 20th century could be called the ecumenical century, the 21st century might become known for the demise of ecumenism. Perhaps this is too dire a prediction, and certainly

it is not one that should be taken for granted. Still, no one can ignore the financial, organizational, missional and philosophical challenges that are threatening the movement at this very moment.

Perhaps the best way to briefly cover the history of the ecumenical movement in is to go over a sampling of accomplishments from the last 100 years. One could start with its very formation and evolution: the 1910 world missionary conference, which spoke to the concerns of many of the Protestant churches for a coherent proclamation of the Gospel; the initiative of the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, whose 1920 encyclical prompted the move toward a structure that by 1948 came to be known as the World Council of Churches; the outreach from the Roman Catholic Church in the spirit of Vatican II in the 1960s, and its close collaboration with ecumenical partners ever since; the mutual recognition of Life and Works & Faith and Order as the two lungs of the emerging movement; and the incorporation of mission and education into the institutional life of the WCC. Today, this evolution continues, with the participation of Pentecostal, Holiness, and evangelical churches, not only in formal ecumenical structures like the WCC and NCC, something that might have been unthinkable just 10 or 20 years ago, but also in terms of initiatives such the 2010 mission conferences in Edinburgh and Cape Town and the writing of an ethical code of conversion when it comes to encounters with people of other faiths.

One could also review this history by pointing out the agreements that have been forged between churches. The full communion agreements between Lutherans and Methodists and Anglicans; the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between Catholics and Lutherans; the formulas of reconciliation between Lutheran and Reformed churches: all of these and other agreements speak to the goodwill and achievement nurtured by ecumenical engagement. Today, such bilateral and even multilateral agreement continues, as in the

nearly completed agreement between the Oriental and Eastern Orthodox churches that brings healing to the schism that has been festering since the fifth century.

Or, one could look at the ecumenical documents that attempt to bridge the theological divides between the churches, among them: 1965's Common Declaration by Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras, which did away with the anathemas dating from the 11th century; 1982's Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, which sought to find common ground among the WCC's member churches to deal constructively on these central themes; and 2007's Authority of the Church in the World, an American Faith and Order document establishing the ground for Christian witness in the face of modern and post-modern challenges to the Church's authority to do so. Today, this work continues, with for example the still-evolving The Nature and Mission of the Church, the global Faith and Order document seeking a common definition of the church and its purpose.

Or, one could list the issues to which the churches have spoken over the last several decades, and on which they have provided leadership for society at large. The list is seemingly endless, all of it reflective of the churches' concern for justice: peace in the face of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, the Vietnam War, and the Iraq War; human rights in situations such as South African apartheid, torture at Guantanamo, and trafficking of women and children in Asia; and sound policies when it comes to nuclear disarmament, ecological stewardship, and humanitarian assistance. Today, this witness continues, especially notable in the defense of religious freedom and civil liberties, and in the condemnation of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, especially in the US since 9/11.

Or, one could list the people who have carried the ecumenical banner all these 100+ years. A sampling would include: John R. Mott and William Temple; Willem Visser 't Hooft and Nikos Nissiotis; MM Thomas and VS Azariah; Paulos Mar Gregorios and Catholicos Aram I; Georges Florovsky and Alexander

Schmemmann; Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I and Pope John Paul II; Cardinal Johannes Willebrands and Cardinal Walter Kasper; Archbishop Rowan Williams and Archbishop Desmond Tutu; Mary Tanner and Mercy Amba Oduyoye; Reinhold Niebuhr and Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Elsa Tamez, and Wesley Ariarajah. Today, this list of luminaries continues, with some of the people just named and countless others, but perhaps more significantly with the newer generations of young theologians who are being nurtured in ecumenism through both the WCC's programming in Bossey, Switzerland, and the NCC's programming through a relatively new initiative called New Fire.

Some 350+ churches on the world stage see in this body of work a legacy that speaks to the heart of the imperative toward unity. Among them, through official membership 37 churches, and through common work dozens of others, in North America value this same legacy. So what has happened that this legacy is now threatened, and what can the churches do to be reinvigorated by this imperative?

As mentioned, there are financial, organizational, missional and philosophical challenges to ecumenism today. All of these overlap, and all of them need remedy.

The financial challenges have been well documented in a myriad of settings. The economic downturn, the shrinking endowments of foundations, the drop in philanthropic giving generally, and the fiscal challenges in each of the churches that in turn trickle down to related organizations: all of these have negatively affected the NCC and other ecumenical organizations.

In response to these challenges, churches and other ecclesial organizations, such as the NCC, have cut costs. The stories of lay-offs and other such measures are many. But in a time such as this, at least in terms of their ecumenical covenant with one another, the churches are called to discern whether or not they can reclaim the vision that originally moved them to accomplish in faith the great deeds listed above, and if such commitment

still exists, to translate this commitment into living out what is known as the Lund Principle: acting together in all matters except for those in which they have deep differences. So for example, especially in difficult economic times, are duplicative ministries in each church really necessary when the same ministries can be carried out together for a fractional cost to each church?

As with all things in church life, is there something to be learned from scripture when it comes to financial challenges? In the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-28), the master rewards the two good stewards and takes away from the one fearful and thus ineffective steward. Instead of looking at three different stewards, what if this parable is transposed into three different time periods? It is not certain that the churches would come off as well as the characters in the parable. Were the churches faithful stewards when times were flush, or did they squander resources thinking that hard times would never come? Were the churches faithful stewards when times were flattening out, or were they negligent by maintaining bloated programs when belts were instead in need of tightening? Are the churches being faithful stewards now that times are tough, or, after taking prudent cost-cutting measures and only now starting to learn what is truly needed in terms of leadership in development, are they giving in to fear and, by shaving rather haphazardly more and more from program ministries, in effect burying their talents in the ground, so that, as in the parable, they will produce nothing for their efforts?

How about the organizational challenges? On one level, basic management skills are needed so as to effectively run an office, rather than what is perhaps familiar to many from observing various organizations according to the personality of the leader, subjective criteria based on personal predilections, or appeals to a spiritualized higher purpose?

On another level, processes built for another time and another sensibility may no longer fit. It is a common assertion that, in ecumenism, as in all coalitions and initiatives, relationships are

key. When people get to know and trust one another, they are freer to enter the give and take that such work requires. But sometimes, it must be wondered, if structures and processes that have been built – the committees, regulations, and other such things seemingly *ad infinitum* – not because they reflect relationships of trust, but to protect against the mistrust participants have for one another; not to allow for full appreciation of another’s tradition, but to ensure the assertion of their respective traditions’ perspectives; not so much to discover what is essential for unity, but to make sure the result of their effort finds broad consensus despite continued disunity. In other words, though any organization must be administered responsibly and legally, and especially in the churches’ case ethically and morally, do the processes that the churches have in place, while maybe well intentioned, get in the way of their efforts to reach their ecumenical goal?

This leads to the missional challenges. In short: in an age when all premises of church life are questioned by those inside and outside the church, does what the churches do ecumenically really matter anymore? More fundamentally: does Christian unity have anything to do with Christian proclamation? It would seem that most participants would all answer that it does matter. For example, as the 100-year anniversary of modern mission was celebrated in 2010, this connection was affirmed repeatedly. After all, Christian division does not lend itself to a coherent proclamation of the crucified and risen Christ.

Still, in the case of the NCC, at a time when the ecumenical landscape is being re-surveyed and each organization needs to re-invent itself to adapt to the changes in this landscape, the churches in ecumenical solidarity with one another – in the NCC and in other organizations – still need to ask what they collectively most contribute to the proclamation. Quite simply, it is the confession that church divisions are indeed a scandal, and that repentance takes the form of trying to bring about

reconciliation. In other words, these churches are all about nurturing the unity of Christians.

Sometimes, however, it seems questionable as to whether or not the churches truly believe this. They at times seem too quick to keep the search for unity at the bottom of their lists of priorities, or perhaps it's just that they are resigned to division and find it easier to substitute mere collaboration among like partners for the quest for integral unity. Bracketing this philosophical problem for a moment, whatever one's view on this, it should at least be agreed that in an ecumenical institution, if churches are to effectively make their collective contribution to the proclamation of the Gospel, in terms of program they should retain what is most unique among their various ministries.

First and foremost is Faith and Order. Faith and Order is the one place where the churches can send their theologians to explore the issues that divide and unite the churches. Historically, this has taken the form of traditional issues in such areas as Christology and ecclesiology. But starting this quadrennium (2012-2105), Faith and Order in the United States will be taking up the very issues that are tearing the churches apart and causing the hemorrhaging of their members, issues that are very familiar. These timely theological explorations will include critical issues in sexuality, for example, and how our various churches deal with these issues. They will include issues of violence, from war to terrorism to pedophilia, and our churches' complicity in such violence, and how this violence causes crises of faith among church members. These discussions also will include the theological concerns brought to the ecumenical table by diverse communities long marginalized from ecumenical dialogue, and how the witness of these communities might be instructive to churches of a more mainstream provenance. Faith and Order believes that, if these issues cannot be explored at the Faith and Order table, where else will the churches be able to explore these theological issues together, and perhaps stem the tide

against which each of the churches are swimming? Moving forward, then, Faith and Order would seem to be crucial to ongoing ecumenical witness.

What about issues that are not only timely for the churches, but also essential for society in this time and place, and specifically in the area of Interfaith Relations? Especially post-9/11, the involvement of religious communities across the board has never been considered so important in bringing about societal reconciliation. People read daily about Islamophobic bigotry targeted against Muslim neighbors and anti-Semitic rhetoric aimed at Jewish brothers and sisters. At the same time, within the churches there are segments of their respective membership that misconstrue the churches' attempts to learn about Islam or actions meant to prompt peace in the Middle East. What can the churches say together in this arena, both to society at large for what is happening to others, and to their own people so that they will be equipped to engage constructively with people of other faiths?

While interfaith prayer services increase in popularity, and interfaith collaboration continues to emerge as an effective tool to deal with issues of mutual concern in local communities, where the ecumenical community contributes most to this area is in interfaith theological dialogue. For interfaith partners, it is commonly accepted that it is better to do dialogue together with "Christians" and not with Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Orthodox, Catholics, Christian Reformed, etc., etc., etc. Not only is this a drain on resources; it is a drain on theological patience. At the same time, it allows the churches to get together to share effective practices, as well as to encourage churches locally to be, and how to be, good neighbors to people of other faiths.

It is safe to say that the state of interfaith relations in the United States today is good, and getting better all the time. And, to a large extent, the Christian community has contributed to this success. In particular, the ecumenical Christian community has been an integral partner in interfaith relations locally,

nationally, and internationally. But what the ecumenical community also recognizes, or at least ought to recognize, is that interfaith relations cannot replace ecumenism. Why not? Because the goals are different. Interfaith relations is ultimately to lead to better understanding of one another, and to live peacefully together and in appreciation of one another. Ecumenism is ultimately a search for unity, something to which interfaith relations can never, nor wishes, to aspire. For Christians, however, the Gospel message of salvation in Jesus Christ is central to Christian identity, and therefore ecumenical unity around that message continues to be the churches' goal. Also unique in the ecumenical contribution to the spreading of the Gospel is collaborative work in biblical translation, as well as in religious education and Christian formation. Indeed, it is in this area that, despite a need for streamlining, the churches already have a successful model for living out the Lund Principle.

As for the many justice issues to which the churches can attend, again it would be good to pare down the list to those on which their voice is unique and already most effective. And on those issues where their voice is not heard above the rest, leave it to the rest to accomplish. After all, there are enough organizations, and religious ones at that, taking up any number of issues that seem to occupy the agendas of multiple organizations all vying for attention in the same space. Why waste the time and effort? As Jesus said when informed that others were also doing miracles but not in his name, "whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40). The lesson here in terms of advocacy is not to drain resources to take on a task just because it is a popular issue today or because colleagues have a historical investment in it; if other groups are already doing it, celebrate their accomplishments and focus on where the churches' voice is most needed.

The way to concretely implement such changes methodologically must wait for another discussion. But it is worth noting one promising place to explore: in structural

partnership with seminaries and other institutions of higher learning. This not only would root ecumenical work in academia as well as in the church; it would give academic institutions a better reach into the churches. This is not so strange a comment as it seems. A common phenomenon today is the disconnect in the formation of students in terms of vocations, in that many students enter seminary in order to discover a vocation that responds to their vaguely formed spirituality rather than out of reflection on their spiritual experience in a church tradition. It would seem that a structural partnership might thus help to connect the goals of academic and church leaders. In the end, this would truly make the NCC a council of the churches. And not incidentally, it might help in terms of funding for both the Council and the seminaries, since funders are keen on partnerships these days. Today we are at a crossroads. Participants are highly aware that, if ecumenical organizations fade away, it is an open question as to who will facilitate these endeavors? Where will the churches do all these things together for the betterment of all?

Conclusion

This points to the final challenge – the philosophical challenge. And this, in turn, leads back to the discussion of perichoresis. As indicated, there are basically two ways of looking at ecumenism and its stated goal of “manifesting the visible unity of the church.” One view would say that it is an opportunity to witness together to an inherent unity the churches already possess by virtue of a common confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The other view would say that it is an occasion to lament the fact that the churches are not united at all, as sadly demonstrated by the ultimate ecclesiological reality that they are not united in Eucharistic fellowship. Certainly, these views overlap, and adherents of either can learn from one another. Still, does this tension reflect a deeper divide?

It is clear that these two positions reflect the two interpretations of the divine perichoresis articulated above, and its extrapolation into the human community. If the divine nature, the unity, of the Trinity is defined by the relationship, as is argued in much contemporary theology, then the Christian unity after which churches seek in ecumenical life is defined by the relationship of the churches around the table, with all of its attendant subjectivity and vulnerability to outside circumstances. Manifesting visible unity means celebrating the fact that Christians can get together; or better yet, it means collaboration of equals around a common task.

The problem with this interpretation, based on the relationship of the persons involved, is that the unity lifted up becomes merely moral and intentional among like-minded persons centered around collaboration, more akin to the goal of interfaith relations, and not an integral unity of churches. Furthermore, the relationships themselves become a substitute for the content of unity, just like it is in the understanding of perichoresis that serves as the model for this type of ecumenical interaction.

Certainly Christ's prayer for unity was for more than mere collaboration. Indeed, it is because of this deficient understanding of unity that Christian unity still eludes the churches.

But why is it seemingly still a calling? Precisely because the desire for unity – with each other and with God – is at the heart of what it means to be human, and thus what is sought after is a profound and integral ecclesial unity modeled after the other understanding of perichoresis.

For the human community, then, there is something yet more compelling than being together in a perichoretic relationship. Such a relationship, like within the Trinity, is called to be an icon of an integral ecclesial unity. So as not to be misunderstood, this is not a calling to return the fold of one community or another, as some churches might triumphalistically believe. It is not a calling to confuse

uniformity for unity. It is, however, a calling to recognize that, even though Christians of different traditions come to the table as a fellowship of equals, this fellowship is rooted in something greater than the sum of all standing together. This “something greater” is what the churches need to discover jointly with one another.

Tough times like the ones in which the churches find themselves today expose the weaknesses of the current state of ecumenism. Relationships alone can't stand up to such challenges: commitments to one another don't seem as important; retrenchment into respective communities and concerns tend to overcome the embrace of one another; resignation to division becomes the default position.

And yet, Christians know that there is something more to do. They intuit that they are called to something greater. They sense what has been lost, and what needs to be reclaimed. Yes, times change and demand different approaches. But what doesn't change is the prayer that Jesus prayed, that his followers be one, even as he and his Father and the Spirit are one. And to this prayer his followers are called to add their own “Amen.”