

Remarks to the Canadian Council of Churches
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NCCCUSA
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Greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Our theme is 'Acting for Tomorrow.' I appreciate that because a great temptation for US churches is to 'Yearn for Yesterday.' You know the drill, I'm sure: 'yesterday, preacher, the balcony was always full.'

'Yesterday, all the young people came to church.'

'Yesterday, we were bursting at the seams.'

For too many of these churches 'acting for tomorrow' could be subtitled: 'in order to get back to yesterday.'

Well, yesterday is not returning and it wasn't as good anyway as many remember it being. But we can't deny that the years of church membership loss have taken their toll in a variety of ways: membership loss has depleted resources, reduced staff, limited capacity, created panic, caused a loss of self-confidence.

It's amazing to me sometimes that we accomplish as much as we do while dragging around all that baggage. So, creativity is the order of the day for now and for tomorrow. Not long after I became NCC General Secretary, I spoke with your General Secretary.

While talking to her I said, 'I'm looking at your website and I see that you have 4 times as many staff as I do.' To that she replied by pointing out that she was the only full-time staff but that more work than ever gets done through creativity and part-time people. That was very encouraging to me.

At this moment, the NCC in the US has a little bit of fragile momentum. We have gone through a long and painful restructuring process (the latest of many), we had a successful Christian Unity Gathering in May; we are focused on two priorities: mass incarceration and interreligious relationships for peace; we had a big budget surplus; two churches wish to join the NCC; we have two new staff; and a nice article titled 'the rise, fall, and rise of the NCC' was recently published.

But it's a fragile momentum. The 37 denominations, 40 million members, and 100,000 local congregations that comprise the NCC US continue to shrink and therefore the NCC shrinks. And, yet, we step forward in faith, don't we? In spite of all the evidence.

I was invited to a meeting last month with President Obama's Sec. of Energy, Ernest J. Moniz. I didn't know what to expect. In fact, I couldn't remember his name when I received the invite. Well, it turns out that Ernest J. Moniz has long hair, a rather irreverent manner, and a good sense of humor. Perhaps he'll survive Washington with his dignity intact.

In a former life Ernest Moniz was on the faculty of MIT and in 2004 he signed ‘a plea from religion and science for action on global climate change.’ Among other things, that plea stated, ‘many of us share a deep conviction that global climate change presents an unprecedented threat to the integrity of life on Earth and a challenge to universal values that bind us as human beings...What is most required at this movement is moral vision and leadership. Resources of human character and spirit—love of life, far-sightedness, solidarity—are needed to awake a sufficient sense of urgency and resolve.’

We went around the table to introduce ourselves to Sec. Moniz and when it came my turn I said to him I was ashamed our churches had failed to help our people understand the depth of the crisis. Moniz pointed out that 2015 is a crucial year for action on climate change with the Paris Conference coming up, among other things, but to his great credit he did not join me in wallowing in despair. Instead, he desired to strategize with us about how to create action on climate change.

Another example of acting for tomorrow: I was recently visited by the organizers of ‘campaign nonviolence: launching a new movement for a culture of peace free from war, poverty, the climate crisis and the epidemic of violence.’ These people were very sincere and heartfelt.

They seek the endorsement of the NCC to join that of grassroots organizations all across the US. Their booklet is filled with pictures of protesters, singers, rallies, worship services, and peace signs. It was very recognizable to me. I knew many of the people mentioned and highlighted.

And I’m ashamed to say that as these good people were sitting in front of me enthusiastically describing their efforts to rally people together I was thinking how this felt like a drop in the ocean of militarism surrounding us. But then it occurred to me we have to teach each new generation about the faith of the importance of being part of the great movements for justice and peace and I told them I was sure we would help them.

In the 30 years, I have worked at the national level of the faith movement in the US, I have found that it is no longer just Protestants, Catholics, and Jews who are involved. Now, also Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and others are working alongside us.

Additionally, there is a much greater emphasis on community organizing. The influence of the great Saul Alinsky cannot be overestimated. Alinsky, a secular Jew, worked in Chicago from the 1930s to the 1960s and often made common cause with the Roman Catholic Church and Monsignor John Egan in the struggle for social justice. Alinsky’s techniques have taken root in a variety of ways across the US and influence the church today.

I’ve always regarded Jesus Christ as a master organizer and believe his strategies and tactics were absorbed and utilized by Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. After all, Jesus lived his entire life under Roman military occupation and well understood how to carry out a grass roots ministry amidst extremely difficult conditions.

Grass roots community organizing, combined with serious advocacy in the halls of power in Washington, DC can and does yield positive results. For example, we have managed to achieve federal regulation of tobacco and passage of the Affordable Care Act, flawed as it is.

However, we did not stop the terrible war against Iraq from taking place and have yet to realize just immigration reform or significant measures to reduce gun violence. The next two years will be especially difficult for advocates of peace and justice in light of the recent elections.

I draw hope not only from Jesus but from the fact that the great movements for justice over the past half century such as the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the peace movement, the environmental justice movement and the movement against apartheid—all moral and spiritual movements—have had the crucial support of people of faith, even though the churches have almost always had to be dragged kicking and screaming to the table.

We must act now. A decade ago, Chalmers Johnson wrote an important book called "The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic" in which he warned that if present trends continue four sorrows are certain to be visited upon the US.

First, there will be a state of perpetual war leading to more terrorism against Americans wherever they may be. Second, there will be a loss of democracy and constitutional rights as the presidency fully eclipses Congress. Third, an already well-shredded principle of truthfulness will be increasingly replaced by a system of propaganda, disinformation, and glorification of war, power, and the military legions. Lastly, there will be bankruptcy, as we pour our economic resources into ever more grandiose military projects.

At times, I feel we are so far down this path that the momentum is irreversible but then I remember the spirit of the Lord is upon us and that we have been appointed to let the oppressed go free and that we are to take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness but instead to expose them.

We have domesticated Jesus, portraying him as a blue-eyed, nonthreatening, meek and mild mystic, forgetting that he challenged the powers that be and that he desires for us freedom from exploitation and oppression and that it be on earth as it is in heaven.

We cannot surrender to despair just as he did not. I am dedicated to the struggle for peace and justice and I am honored to be in that struggle alongside you.