

Canadian Council of Churches
70th Anniversary
Panel Presentation, Thursday, November 20, 2014 – 4 p.m.

Topic: The Future of Ecumenism in Canada. Moderator: Vice-President Cyprian Hutcheon. Panelists: The Very Rev. Paul Johnson; Dr. Richard Schneider; The Very Rev. Dr. Marion Pardy; The Rev. Dr. James Christie

Interfaith – The New Ecumenism?

I am attempting to speak on interfaith possibilities in light of a number of diverse theologies of the membership of the Canadian Council of Churches. At the same time, you will understand that I am shaped and influenced by my own denominational background, The United Church of Canada. I did, however, consult with an Anglican, Roman Catholic and Muslim colleague/friend and was enlightened further by these conversations.

I begin with the **Lund Principle**, developed at the 3rd World Council on Faith and Order, Lund, Sweden, August 27, 1952; 4 years after the World Council of Churches came into being.

Should not our churches ask themselves whether they are showing sufficient eagerness to enter into conversation with other churches and whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?

Our report card is not completely successful in achieving this goal, nor is it a dismal failure. We immediately think of the Forum model of the Canadian Council of Churches and the Consensus model of the World Council of Churches. We have had Dialogues and amalgamations: for example, Lutherans and Anglicans in full Communion; in my

own denomination we have United Church/Roman Catholic Dialogue; United Church/Anglican Dialogue. You will be able to add your own.

My question for today is: Are we now in a position and place in our ecumenical history to ask the question, posed in the Lund Principle, in relation to other faiths?

Should not our churches and other faith communities ask themselves whether they are showing sufficient eagerness to enter into conversation with other faith communities and whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?

Can we think of “Interfaith” as the “new Ecumenism” as our British partners propose?

To respond to this question, I pose 3 other primary questions:

What is the “call” compelling us to engage with other faith communities?

Where are the obstacles?

Can we find common ground in light of our different theologies?

I grew up in Gander, Newfoundland, at the time when Gander was a re-fuelling stop for most transatlantic flights. On one such flight, a Sabena DC-4, flying from Brussels to New York, crashed in a densely wooded area near Gander, killing 26 of the 44 passengers. Those who died were buried in the area because of the risk involved in transporting the bodies to Gander.

The unforgettable development there was the special aerial funeral service. A Roman Catholic priest, a United Church minister and a Rabbi, flown in from New York, circled the crash site on a USAF DC-3 and , together, conducted a Catholic, Protestant and Jewish funeral service. (**Life at the “Crossroads of the World”; History of Gander, Newfoundland**, 1988, p. 94, 95).

Whatever differences, Jews, Protestants and Catholics shared at the time, they were put aside that day in order to pay respect in the midst of a horrific tragedy; at the time, the largest commercial airplane crash in history.

The “calling” was a “common cause”, to respond to human need: to pay respect to the deceased and the survivors, each religious leader performing the rites of burial according to their respective religious tradition. The need was urgent; the response was immediate. This was 1946.

Our primary calling, it appears, is to respond to human need.

It might be accurate to say that, as Christians, we also share a common theology that by naming God as Creator, bringing into being the whole of creation, we can claim that we are all God’s children. As persons created in the image of God, all of us are called to make the community, country and global village, in which we live, a better place. That is our unity. My Muslim colleague and friend further shares that our calling is to Diversity as God’s intentional plan. “We have been created for a purpose”, he continues. “One aspect of this purpose is to show that human beings who have different language, faith, color, origin, and ethnicity can work together to create a better life on earth for everyone.”

Thus, unity in purpose does not mean uniformity. In fact, God blesses diversity.

With that sense of “unity in diversity” calling, we can acknowledge the **obstacles** and, at the same time, work to remove them.

I still refer to a book published in 1988 by Canadian theologian, David Lochhead, **The Dialogical Imperative**.

Lochhead speaks of three ideological obstacles in Dialogue: the ideology of hostility; the ideology of isolation; the ideology of competition. The “ideology of hostility” occurs when one denomination, religion, person or group of people views the “other” with subtle or overt hostility. We have numerous examples of that in our world, country and in many of our own communities.

There is the “ideology of isolation” when one denomination or religion is completely isolated from another with each going its own way, ignoring the other.

There is the “ideology of competition” - the “we” versus “they”, “us” versus “them”, “me versus you”, with “my” approach, of course, superior to yours and, therefore, we compete for people and even outreach services for the needy.

To counter these obstacles, Lochhead highlights the “ideology of partnership”; a recognition and celebration that we can all learn from one another within the Christian faith and among other faiths and work together to make our religious communities and our world a better place. This is our common ground. It is what The United Church of Canada calls “Whole World Ecumenism”. The focus is on the world. Thus, looking unto Jesus the Christ, with others looking unto the Qur’an, the Torah, the Vedas and all of us looking unto our common humanity, we commit ourselves to work together compassionately for peace and justice in our world. Our common ground is as basic as the ground on which we walk, the air we breathe, the forests and seas we harvest and mine, the cosmos we explore. Our common ground is pragmatic: if we don’t learn to co-exist and learn to respect one another, we will have mass destruction.

To work on common cause with other religious communities calls for basic qualities:

- an acknowledgement that the “other” stands on “holy ground”;

- an engagement with the other in the spirit of “dialogical” reverence; that is, while maintaining and sharing our own distinct self-identity as Christians, we affirm that other faiths and traditions have their own self-understanding and we genuinely seek to understand the faith and practices that give purpose and meaning to others. We seek clarification, we comment, we query in that quest for understanding.
- “Trust” and “Respect”. As in all relationships, trust and respect develop as we grow to know one another – the result of “dialogical” reverence. When “trust” and “respect” are present, we can converse, and even debate, around differences. .

This can occur and, indeed, I have experienced this very sort of happening. I belong to a Religious Social Action Coalition (RSAC); comprised of Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus and others around the common cause of narrowing the gap between the rich and the poor in our province and country. One Thanksgiving we highlighted our common cause in Mosque, Temple, Synagogue, Parish and Congregation by submitting texts and commentary for use in worship and other forms of gathering from our various traditions. People selected their own choice of this material. The Coalition co-hosted a multi-faith prayer breakfast in order to speak to the Premier and all members of government about our Poverty cause. Each faith community representative shared a prayer from their own tradition and then presented the Premier with a copy of their sacred text. After that moving, sacred experience, we presented our common cause of Poverty elimination. Before those formalities could occur, as Coordinator, I contacted my Jewish, Muslim and Hindu colleagues concerning their food restrictions and worked with the cafeteria to ensure that these restrictions were honoured. One bonus in all of this involvement was

the luncheons that I periodically shared with my Jewish and Muslim colleague – here we listened, laughed, discussed and debated, mostly around theology. We developed trust and respect; we became friends. (The Hindu Temple in St. John's holds a multi-faith symposium each year at the Temple where presenters from 7 or 8 faith traditions share the basics of their faith; we respond with question and comment and we enjoy the unique, (for many of us) food prepared by Temple members.) We have a long way to go – we rejoice that we are on the journey.

I leave you with an adapted quote from Hindu writings: There are many paths to the top of the mountain but when you arrive at the top, the view is the same. In contrast my Muslim friend says: At the top of the mountain we are all very different and we walk our diverse paths down the mountain; when we reach the valley, we find our common ground.

Is inter-faith the new ecumenism? I leave you with that question.

Marion Pardy (Very Rev. Dr.)

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Resource:

Lochhead, David. **The Dialogical Imperative; A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter.** Maryknoll, NY. Orbis, 1988.