

# **Ecumenism Among Us**

## **ECUMENISM AMONG US**

### **Report of a Cross-Generational Conversation about the Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the beginning it wasn't *Ecumenism Among Us*. An essential feature, *the* essential feature, was part of the original design: it was going to be intergenerational. But the working title was *Transmitting the Ecumenical Tradition*. Not a bad theme, and it would have been a good conference. What we had was better, though.

The planning committee, in a move far more significant than anybody at the time realized, decided to call the gathering *Ecumenism Among Us*. The new name, gently but inexorably, extricated the conference from the control of any particular ecumenical genealogy. Ecumenism would be found among us all and by us all, not imposed on any of us. And everybody would be equally responsible for success or failure. "We are not providing a conference with a predetermined content and agenda. Rather, we are providing an arena in which the engagement of persons with each other, which is the conference, can happen."

If conversation was what we wanted to happen, we knew it had to be modeled. The norm for conferences is a series of lectures to which the audience listens and reacts with a few questions. "They" (the lecturers) are the experts, "we" (the audience) the novices. The very structure of such a program shouts "hierarchy" and forestalls genuine conversation. So we eliminated traditional speeches. Instead we scheduled conversations between five or six people that would be eavesdropped on by everyone else, and as soon as the conversationalists were finished everybody would move to tables of seven or eight and continue talking about the subject.

Nobody would claim that the scheme worked perfectly, and some would say it didn't work very well at all. Conversing in a small group with two hundred onlookers isn't easy, and there was a tendency to address the crowd rather than to engage the group. People aren't used to talking intimately while wearing microphones. Still, the point was made: no one voice has intrinsic authority.

We knew we had to have a concluding worship service for the conference, and since we had contacts with many experienced and skilled liturgists and access to a wealth of printed sources for ecumenical worship, we initially thought it was simply a matter of deciding whom to ask to design the service.

However, the committee's discussion led to a conclusion no one anticipated. "If we really mean the conference is an occasion for discovery, then shouldn't the concluding worship be planned during the conference itself, by a committee of participants, who will try to fashion a service that

will express the spirit of the conference?" This, for a gathering of people from more than forty different Christian traditions, ranging in age from seventeen to eighty-seven. "If we include a wide range of traditions on the committee, we have to face the possibility that they may not be able to agree on anything. We might have no concluding worship." "Let's take that risk, and let's have the final eavesdropped-on conversation be the worship committee talking with each other, in the presence of the whole conference, about the problems they confronted and the opportunities they discovered in creating a way for a gathering of this diversity to worship together." We sensed the Spirit calling us to take a chance, and we took it.

On the final morning of the conference, when the worship committee, with members from the Assemblies of God, Church of the Brethren, Baptist Church, Orthodox Church in America, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Roman Catholic Church, and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, answered the question, the "problems confronted" had clearly overwhelmed the "opportunities discovered." **We are negotiating a mine field I never anticipated.** The conference planners had taken the risk, but probably had not really in their heart of hearts thought the final evening would be a blank. Now it looked as if ecumenism could be among us only until we got around to worshipping God.

The committee chair asked us all to pray for them in the next two hours. They weren't going to give up, but they didn't know what they were going to do. Said one, **I hope the Spirit talks to us pretty quick.**

The Spirit had a terrific surprise in store for us. But that would be getting ahead of the story.

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## 1. SETTING THE STAGE

### 1.1 DEFINITIONS

**I thought, "I can't go to that conference if I don't even know how to pronounce ecumenism!"** What might have been seen as a weakness in the planning--having people who said they didn't really know what we were talking about--was a strength. The ecumenical movement, hailed in the 1940s as "the new fact of our era," has become for many, and in the eyes of many others, a professional specialty with its own language, remote from the concerns of most church people. By its composition, the conference reflected something of the real situation.

Several participants suggested that forward movement requires agreement in advance on a definition of the term *ecumenical*. There was indeed confusion in the discussions because people were not meaning the same thing when they used "ecumenical," but there was also a strong and necessary resistance to premature closure on a definition. One participant, when confronted with the claim that **We can't have a meaningful conversation here because so many don't even know the basics of ecumenical history: the WCC, BEM, Toronto, and so on,** replied, **Yes, but that's your ecumenical story, it's not mine.**

The conference was designed to put all ecumenical stories--the familiar ones and the unfamiliar ones, the ones identified publicly and historically with the name "ecumenical" and those stories that reflect ecumenical substance but have traditionally choked on the term "ecumenical"--on a level playing field, without prescribing in advance an answer to the question, **Who decides what unity looks like?** Nobody's story, not even the best-known story, was to be the standard in terms of which the authenticity of others was to be measured. If part of the Institute's mission is to discover and organize those who are ecumenical but don't know it, the Institute must be open to learning from them new dimensions and truths of ecumenism.

If this report manages to convey accurately what happened at the conference, it will make clear that 1) ecumenism is alive and 2) ecumenism is at this time resistant to clear definition, *and* that 2) does not negate 1). The very fact that ecumenism is *among us* suggests it isn't going to be any one thing. Besides the sheer diversity of the participants, other historical and social factors also account for the lack of fit between ecumenical reality and clear definition.

In the view of some, the past has shown us what doesn't work. Ecumenical institutions have been created to deal with historic differences; despite advances, church unity seems as remote as ever, and when ecumenical institutions themselves consider the future, they are consumed by questions of their own survival. Nevertheless, some restructuring of ecumenical offices has been creative, reminding us that institution-bashing can become a self-indulgent parlor game.

There is no agreement on the value of efforts to merge churches, some saying such effort is not well spent, others urging that we **not shy away from the church union concept, no matter how unpopular the idea is.** In the past, much ecumenical activity has been focused on and administered by denominations (councils of *churches*), and denominations are in trouble, maybe dying. Many participants said ecumenical effort needs to be shifted from the international and national level to the local, but a few are gloomy about prospects even there. There was widespread agreement, however, that ecumenism can thrive only in healthy settings.

**Ecumenism is not even discussed in the circles I move in.**

**The Christians you know are members of a church; those you don't, of a sect.**

**Keeping the intergenerational participation in every part of the conference, with no separation at any time into age groups, showed a way to keep ecumenism from sinking further from people's consciousness. There has to be a way to involve church members, not just leaders, in ecumenical *life*.**

**There's the danger that ecumenism will lose its nobility and degenerate into a mere interdenominationalism that would absolutely and totally torpedo the idea and concept of the church in the New Testament.**

**Our differences have been man-made decisions from past circumstances and times.**

**I love the parish, but I think as I have known it it's dying.**

**We're patching the cracks in the church, so the roof won't fall in.**

**We need to establish and maintain strong, vital communities. Unless our families, congregations, schools, neighborhoods, and denominations are secure and full of life, ecumenism is but the dying ministering to the dead.**

## 1.2 DIVERSITY AND DIVISIVENESS

**As times change, so must our approach to ecumenism.** Some observers see the current changes in the times as catastrophic, others think ecumenism has reached a plateau and is stuck. Still others, insisting that lament isn't the whole story, call for celebration of evidence that ecumenical activity has responded appropriately to the changing times. We have to be wary **lest we become so preoccupied by our quest for unity that we fail to find it where and when it presents itself.**

Clearly, ecumenical vitality calls for imagining new methods, new formulations. But it also requires repentance, for despite all our deploring of Christian divisions, at a deep level we like what we are used to. **We must take a leap of faith and risk losing this church-of-division which we all know well, which we hold so dear.** The "church-of-division" is not to be confused with the "church of diversity." Participants in the conference were virtually unanimous in dismissing uniformity, or even structural streamlining, as the goal toward which ecumenism strives. Veterans of ecumenical dialogues and assemblies might wince at hearing such a question even brought up: of course no one is talking about one giant world church, its local expressions no more distinguishable from one another than one airport from the next. But widespread suspicion that uniformity is the hidden agenda of unity is still abroad in the land, and even in a community as steeped in good feeling and openness as *Ecumenism Among Us*, where ecumenism was a given, **I hear people putting limitations on how much we can love each other because of our differences.**

No one at the conference spoke against diversity. Diversity as such is not the problem to be overcome. But limits to diversity, a volatile issue throughout American society, is an issue in the churches too. Perhaps we are called not to try to negotiate truces or fashion alliances, but to trust the Spirit who gives a diversity of gifts. One of the youngest participants in the conference challenged everyone to trust the Spirit more: **I think a failed ecumenical effort is a gift from God.** The ecumenical movement has never succumbed to the conviction that human effort, unaided, can unite the church, but a number of voices at the conference urged a new balance of prayer and work. What would it mean for us really to believe that unity is a gift, not an achievement? **We [the Pentecostal movement] arose at the same time, the beginning of the twentieth century, as the ecumenical movement. We, however, were for the most part found among the disenfranchised of society. While the ecumenical movement drafted documents, we prayed down fire from heaven and experienced wondrous moments of community.** Is the future of ecumenism the coming together of those who draft documents and those who pray down fire from heaven?

Whatever the future of ecumenism, it is unlikely to be a settling down. **The divisions are not only enduring, historical ones, but are dynamic, ever changing, and new ones continually**

**arising.** As conflict between denominations diminishes, it turns up within. Many could say of their own denominations what one said of his: **We seem to be splintering within as we seek to heal without. The best way for healing with other communions is to learn to live with pluralism within.** Conflicts can be enumerated at length: race, gender, class, generation, sexuality, control. These, not the traditional doctrinal controversies, are the divisions in the church that are felt most directly by laity. **Reconciliation and grace are virtually impossible to communicate when the institution of the church is so visibly broken.**

While there are many instances of agreement or convergence, whether local or denominational, it sometimes seems that when the unity we long for is close at hand we find we aren't sure we want it after all. When theologians reach consensus, church officials often back away, subjecting the agreement to death by a thousand qualifications. And there is always the danger of burnout. A movement that seeks to accomplish something needs focused resources. But just as someone wondered "who decides what unity looks like?" so might one wonder, "who decides where the focus should be?"

**The Spirit has led us to where the fathers and mothers of ecumenism, its children (my generation), and especially its less patient grandchildren, are sensing we have been resting at a level place in the climb for some years now. We ask together: "Which paths will take us higher?"**

**Our tendency toward denial can lead us to cheerfully pretend that we're really all alike anyway, which is the last thing ecumenism needs.**

**We are uncomfortable with differences, since differences translate into conflict and conflict translates into division. I suspect we need some individual training in coming to a comfort level with differences and conflict.**

**I see no one united ecumenical movement, but several streams diverging farther from one another: interfaith dialogue and work, institutional church union work, Christian unity prayer and practice in the lives of individuals, families, and congregations, the continuing reformation of denominations, churches working together to feed the hungry and heal the sick, multidenominational rural parishes, marriages that succeed across denominational lines, multidenominational teaching faculties of seminaries. In this process there is an opportunity to let go of older formulations of the ecumenical movement.**

**I think it would be helpful now to ask whether and to what degree continuing to work for the unity of the various Christian churches serves unity in Christ. This may mean an acceptance of diversity existing permanently in a variety of institutional expressions.**

**I have sensed at the conference a deep commitment to that new creation we are in Jesus Christ, a commitment required for the work of reconciliation that has been given to us. I have not heard so clearly that it is the diversity that is in all of creation that forms the reconciled unity. There is no uniformity required in unity.**

**I hear and see and feel the tension that separates various groups of Christians because of different views of social justice, eucharist, baptism, authority of scripture, and a host of other issues. Human pride and quest for power and control effectively prevents any unity in an outward form. I'm not convinced that divisions within the church can, or should be, overcome.**

**Many today claim pluralism as their formative theological principle. The unity we seek is not expressed in pluralism, but plurality. Pluralism is the mere sanction of division and blesses, isolates, differences. Authentic diversity, plurality is difference in the midst of communion.**

**Can we reach unity, given the reality of the Fall, without understanding diversity? Can we understand diversity without sharing individually how we experience Christ? Doesn't such sharing yield a unity of the Spirit which is the *presently possible* form of realized ecumenism? Is any visible unity worthwhile which has not been preceded by a unity of the Spirit?**

**I have observed during these days a confusion and division far greater and deeper than I could have imagined. This confusion seems to me to be bordering on chaos, and lends itself to something close to self-loathing, to guilt, a loss of nerve.**

**If I can't respect and honor another tradition's interpretation and practices (even if it includes exclusion of me), I say, in effect, "I will be ecumenical as long as you agree with me."**

**The church should be a place where disagreements can occur, but not breaks in communion.**

**I think most of us are less driven by the nature of the *unity* we seek and more by the nature of the *community* we seek.**

**The urgency for the unity of the church today is not generated primarily by the disunity of the church. So many people are walking around thinking love doesn't even exist. So that is the urgency.**

### 1.3 BEING ECUMENICAL

**We are already one in Christ on a level that is far deeper than all the church dividing issues which have for so long severed the Body of Christ and make the ecumenical enterprise necessary. Nearly everyone at the conference would agree with this, on the basis of theological conviction reinforced by the experience of the days together at Colledgeville. This oneness, however, needs to be effective as well as true, and a bewildering variety of interpretations of the meaning of church is certainly a part of the problem, probably the heart of it. **Where is the passion for church unity today? Most Christians worship comfortably and in good conscience in their own setting without being pained by the state of church division.****

There may have been a time when ecumenism was shaped and energized by a common interpretation of church, but that time is past. A new formulation of the meaning of church is emerging from the kind of ferment seen at *Ecumenism Among Us*, but what it is isn't clear yet, and reiterating older images, however powerful they were, will neither light nor fuel fires of enthusiasm and commitment. This is a time of exploration. **We need to push past conversation, and practice what we talk of becoming. But then again, what are we talking about becoming?** There really isn't any way round the process of conversation, of seeking together.

*Being ecumenical*, not just doing ecumenical things: this is the challenge to all of us now. **We are in labor pains of a new birth in ecumenism. We no longer have a mechanistic view, with a desire to fix the machine.** Ecumenism is confronted with problems to be analyzed and solved, problems many and complex and daunting, needing to be fixed. But ecumenists are not just technicians--though they need all the cleverness, **consecrated cleverness**, they can muster. They are a community of the Spirit, formed in conversation and common action. **The boundaries that divide the churches can be approached, and sometimes crossed, only if there is personal contact among credible people of good will committed to the vision of the church's unity.**

**Bring the people of the place together, and begin to explore: Who is here? How did we get here? What gifts and pains did we bring with us? What is *our* understanding of our community's history and identity? Is it possible to find a shared understanding of the past among our various histories? Are there specific exclusions or practices any one community gathered has sanctioned or now supports? What kind of shared future do we want to create? What will we need to do to move into this kind of unity?**

**The vision of the future can be discovered by the very act of being ecumenical at the various levels by a broad rainbow of people.**

**There need to be multitudinous experiential opportunities for people to be converted to and then strengthened, traditioned, and resourced in the pursuit of the ecumenical vision, the ecumenical pilgrimage--opportunities for them to join this life-giving gospel movement of renewal.**

**I am impatient with elitism and signs of a We-They mentality. Ecumenism is not something that is done to the people of God. It is something we do together.**

**I believe the pressure from daily experiences will be the only effective force in catalyzing denominational change.**

**We have too often attacked the question of unity cognitively, and have not come to know each other at a human, emotional level as common seekers of God.**

The remainder of this report is about conversion to ecumenism:

- the meaning of such conversion today when the cast of characters has radically expanded;

- how conversion happens through conversation (it requires more than conversation, of course, but certainly not less);
- what can be done to prepare the way for and sustain the conversion.

## 2. THE EXPANDED CAST OF CHARACTERS

### 2.1 ENVIRONMENT

**Since the ecumenical movement started, much has changed in our country.** Revolutions--cultural, social, political, sexual--have called much into question, and the world outside our borders would be unrecognizable to those who shaped ecumenism in the first three-quarters of the century. And how can we best characterize the differences between Christians in this topsy-turvy world? Are we confused because we continue to use categories that history has left behind? **"Conservative" and "liberal" have been defined in response to a whole modern world view that is itself fading. Ironically, as the gods of modernism stumble, Christians continue to understand the world in its terms and to define each other in relation to it.**

The current scene is daunting, even dispiriting, to those who care about the ecumenical mission. When congregations and denominations are strapped for money, ecumenical budget lines, whether for local or national or world efforts, are among the first to be slashed or deleted. The movement is caught between a secular indifference and fierce opposition from Christians who suspect ecumenists of selling out the faith. **"Christendom," the social and historical condition in which culture for so long provided the basics necessary for the thriving of the church, is dead.** Its demise was registered by Christians in Europe in the aftermath of World War II, and there the ecumenical movement was a response to the radically new situation. The end of Christendom has taken longer to register in North America, and some believe ecumenical thought hasn't yet adjusted to the vacuum.

Countless analyses of current United States society portray a culture adrift, obsessed with individual rights and at the same time, paradoxically, longing for community. At the very least, **we need to digest analyses of current United States society, and to seek out observations on us by overseas Christians.** Social scientists and outsiders can help us see ourselves as we really are. And the range of our listening must broaden to pick up signals from a world in which Christendom may be dead, but God is definitely alive.

Some participants in the conference celebrate what they see as a congruence between American individual liberty and the Christian gospel, while others perceive a tension, even an incompatibility, between American institutional patterns and the church's divinely ordered hierarchical structure. Despite sharp differences over what constitutes the downside and what the upside of the American context, differences that can become a stone wall blocking ecumenical progress, there was near consensus at the conference that the current scene offers new and exciting opportunities for ecumenical imagination.

Indeed, two observations see analogies to the present in past periods of great ferment. One refers specifically to challenge. **American society no longer supports Christian assumptions. The ecumenical movement began from the urgency of the mission field. Because of profound changes in the last forty years, the United States is now a mission field, and the same urgency exists here.**

The other observer sees hope in parallels with well-known periods of renewal. **Perhaps today we have a new burst of energy from a world in transition. Maybe it is another "awakening," like the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century, or the Frontier Revival of the nineteenth century, or the Social Gospel movement of the early twentieth century. This one began in the disorientation and despair of the 1960s, and developed in the deepened religious search of the 1970s and 1980s. Now we may be seeing the change of consciousness that awakenings bring. It could be that God is shaking the churches at their very foundations in this awakening, calling us to be ready for new forms of Christian unity.**

Besides the need to divest ourselves of illusions about the place and power of the church in North American society, we need also to remind ourselves that the ecumenical movement has achieved a great deal, and its accomplishments often go unremarked, even unnoticed. It sometimes happens that the churches officially are ahead of their people. Being realistic generally means lowering expectations and claims, but the real situation of ecumenism is in significant ways better than many people think. Too often the good news gets crowded out.

**Is the church ignoring the problems of, and the problems created by, those who have been alienated by the various revolutions?**

**My hope is that just as during the civil rights struggle, there will be some convergence of what it means to be Christian and American.**

**We need to be attuned to the voices of the poets and the artists to understand more intuitively the reality of our world.**

**We define the Christ event and the Christic activity in history much too narrowly to ever universally communicate our understanding to either the scientifically driven world, the secular environment, or those of other faiths.**

**It is what we were brought up to know, live, and fight for; it is called freedom, and it is a national treasure.**

**The efforts of ecumenism must be directed toward the free association of Christians in the church (the body of Christ), and the impediments to that free association of individuals interposed by the churches must be counterbalanced or removed.**

**The coming together of the church must be the reconciliation of traditions, not individuals. I desire unity as much as anybody here, but I cannot move on my own.**

**I have witnessed at this gathering a shift in liberal Christianity toward a new form of hegemony under the deceptive name of multiculturalism and inclusivism, telling others of us that this is a tent under which we *must* live, this in the name of "hospitality" and "tolerance," pluralism, and even the blessing of the Holy Spirit (renamed Sanctifier or some such other "inclusive" rubric).**

**Many at the conference and in the churches are oblivious to the work and achievements of the movement thus far. So much scholarship, so many dialogues, have produced incredible consensus on issues that once divided us.**

**The ecumenical movement today is less optimistic, more realistic, than in the early years. Ecumenical activity was easier then, because we were riding the crest of a wave. The wave no longer exists. But the hard work goes on, belonging to a kind of ecumenical maturity.**

**Some people in my congregation still operate with stereotypes, and were astounded to learn that our denomination is in an official dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church.**

## 2.2 GENERATIONS

**The symbol of the ecumenical movement, the ship on stormy waters with the cross for its mast, is an appropriate sign of a Spirit-led movement. What remains is for us to recognize that we are all, as the saying goes, in the same boat. Who are we on this crew?**

Some at the conference could remember days when it was a real ecumenical breakthrough for a Protestant not to move to the other side of the street when a priest was seen coming, or when a Catholic's going to the Protestant Sunday School because it provided scissors and paste prompted a stern parental rebuke and prohibition. Such a world is a different galaxy from that in which other participants grew up. One of that "new generation" stated the chronology crisply: **JFK was already dead, the civil rights act was already law, when I was born.** And some, from minority communities, noted that what seems new to many is old hat to them: **It's peculiar to me to hear about multiculturalism as a *change*; as an African American, I've grown up in a multicultural situation, in which I've had to know more about you than you about me.**

There was much delighted discovery of one another at the conference. But there was initial suspicion: **I came to Collegeville reluctantly, because when I think of the ecumenical movement I think of a bunch of white people sitting around some table "talking about" the problems of the disenfranchised of the world. I also think of big structures, waste, egos, power, outdated strategies, men (white men), exclusion, dissension, hypocrisy, and crisis. But: I am an ecumenist--of a different breed, a new generation.** At the conference this same person, as did others of the younger generation, found a new appreciation for some of the pioneers: **We need to go deeper with passing on the knowledge and experiences across generations; maybe we could have a mentoring program, to continue the kind of learning I have discovered here.** One of the veterans confirmed this mutual discovery from the other side: **I speak from the vantage point of more than forty years of ecumenical work. The chance to talk with younger persons has offered hope and affirmation, grace and joy.**

**Newer ecumenists are inventing new rules.** The very presence of the newer ecumenists is itself changing the rules. **The cast of characters has changed dramatically. Ecumenism has always been open to the world, and to all people of the church. But suddenly the deep down diversity has become real, with people who do not know the "forms" and "proper ways" classical ecumenism is used to. The perspective is larger, broader, wider, but very strange when set in the context of what has gone before.** Enthusiasm of the coming generation is encouraging, but also challenging, even dismaying--**our enthusiasm must not falter when the inclusion of younger people leads to new issues and new forms of taking up these issues.**

Young people at an ecumenical conference were of course not a cross section of American youth, but they confirmed the observation of one participant with decades of church experience: **We have neglected one or two generations by not sharing with them powerfully both the intellectual learnings and the emotional content of the Christian faith, ways of talking that will allow God to break afresh into their lives.** The young are not indifferent, they are frustrated. **The only thing handed on to me as a member of the younger generation is the "second impatience" (which builds up, unlike the first which gives up)--not a bad gift, but I'm not sure where I'm going to apply the energy implied in the impatience. I know, however, that I am desperately seeking color and vitality, both for me and for my generation.** The colorless and moribund state of education in the churches appears as an ecumenical equalizer: no one has really figured out how to do it. At the very least, young people have to be recognized as contributors to the building up of the faith, not empty vessels waiting to be filled.

**The new generation takes a certain level of ecumenical life as a commonplace. My experience of the sudden involvement of the Roman Catholic Church in ecumenism in the 1960s leads to different feelings from those of people who have grown up with that involvement as a given.**

**The younger people of this world will make the fire of ecumenism their own and pass it to those who will follow them.**

**The young people here, like my own offspring, are fed up with the structures and strictures of the church that perpetuate these divisions. They pursue their spiritual lives, for the most part, without subscribing to denominationalism. I understand why they have come to these decisions. New leadership is appearing and forming, and must be given freedom to do the work.**

**What will happen when the new generation must "do" institutional maintenance? Will they think it worth doing?**

**In our high school confirmation class we used the same book used by junior high and fifth graders. The hunger is there, waiting to be satisfied. From my own experiences of Sunday School, I find it surprising I have not concluded, as so many of my friends have, that Christianity is a useless religion. If the education need isn't taken seriously, maybe the churches will be united--in extinction.**

**I have been battling over the past few days whether the church is even necessary in my life.**

**The need for ecumenism is evident to me as a person representing a skeptical generation of young people. In the conference I have found encouraging the number of questions people have concerning their faith and how it conflicts with their religious institutions. This in itself makes me feel welcome.**

**The middle-aged and older tended to choose the session, "When does dissent in the church become unfaithfulness?," the younger, "How can the ecumenical situation abroad help us in North America get perspective on our own?" Is this because young people have experienced more religious pluralism than many older persons and therefore this is more an issue for them than dissent in the church? Or does it mean that dissent is not a central issue for them because they are less familiar with significant doctrinal divisions, or, because they have grown up in an era of dissent, they view dissent as usual and to be expected?**

**I think I realize a lot of things about this world that older people are failing to see. I am among youngsters with no values, hope, love, and care. I watch their angry faces filled with hatred of the world, or those who choose to let life pass them by and don't bother to make a difference. Our churches have failed the youth with their bickering, ignorance, and self-importance. Now I'm living in a society that's saying, "Who cares?"**

**The ecumenical challenge starts with children's Christian education.**

### 2.3 PROFESSIONALS AND AMATEURS

**The conference has struck me as an experience of a passing away of a senior generation's vision and lifework, pain and confusion in their immediate successors, and impatience (which is preferable to indifference) among the young.** The generational difference was apparent, but so, as the days progressed, was the difference between professional ecumenists, those with career commitments to and stakes in ecumenical institutions and traditions, and the amateurs, those who have been attracted by the vision but find it difficult or impossible to conceive of the movement in traditional terms. **I have found that too many people already "know" what is going on. The ecumenical movement risks becoming too confined within the minds of certain groups within the movement.**

The problem, of course, is endemic in American society: the emphasis on the professional. **The cultural message is that the individual untrained in a specific discipline can't competently make a decision in that area (law, medicine, theology, etc.) without instruction from a "professional."** Laity have not been hoodwinked by manipulative, power-hungry professionals. All--the laity by abdication, the professionals by default--have conspired to make the movement into a professional specialty, woven into institutional structures that are now themselves in crisis. Several participants in the conference noticed that there is tension not only between ecumenists and those in the church who couldn't care less about ecumenism, or are even opposed to it, but also between the professional/academic ecumenists and others who care passionately about ecumenism. **I consider myself called to be a bridge between the various worlds of**

**ecumenism**--in other words, the ecumenical movement itself needs to express better its own ideal of unity.

There is bound to be frustration on the part of experts when newcomers appear and seem to want to reinvent the wheel, but ecumenism is more the process of invention (*being ecumenical*) than it is the wheel itself. There is, of course, a learning curve. Those who have explored the territory already can instruct the novices, but there is a chance that what worked in the past won't work now, and maybe what didn't work then should be tried again. And the way needs to be opened for those who have explored the territory and didn't even know that's what they were doing. One participant suggested that the Institute **invite Pentecostal leaders to advise a group of traditional ecumenical leaders on how they achieved ecumenical aims apart from the ecumenical movement. This strategy puts the Pentecostals into a consultative, "how we did it" role, rather than in the feared and troublesome role of "ecumenical participants."**

One of the young participants in the conference expressed clearly and sharply the challenge to ecumenists to be themselves ecumenical: **To achieve unity, we must accept the frustration of dialogue as necessary to achieve discovery. Our frustration and discovery occur when we encounter the other:**

**the one who is less academic,**

**the one who is more;**

**the one in the ecumenical movement for decades,**

**the one who is new to ecumenism;**

**the one who is white,**

**the one who is black;**

**the one who ministers to the middle or upper classes,**

**the one who walks with the poor.**

The conference demonstrated that such encounters can lead to genuine discovery, but the test, of course, is whether the discovery can survive re-entry into the non-conference world of competition and turf-protection, of the old habits of "the church-of-division" that we hold so dear. If we are to be truly ecumenical, we must pass that test. As a participant from a church that has not been known for ecumenism, or known itself as ecumenical, put it: **The vision will not be reality until seen *and owned* by all.**

**Our sense of urgency grows out of our conviction that the ecumenical movement has accomplished much.**

Ecumenism from above, while necessary in beginning the movement, now threatens the vitality of the very movement it unleashed, the ecumenism from below. To put it bluntly, it seems to me that *some* of those responsible for the official dialogues want to keep control of the ecumenical movement, to insist on the critical precision of academic and literary culture, rather than to entrust the movement to "the masses," whose culture is not so intellectual and constrained. For denominational leaders and theologians to keep saying, "You can't do that yet [in other words: until we say you can]," is obstructionist.

As I listened to professionals talk about ecumenism I was struck by their fear of losing the identity they have derived from their tradition.

We have been deeply moved by the intelligence, competence, and convictions of the professional ecumenical community in this gathering. We have also been deeply moved by the simple fact that they are highly vulnerable because they are tragically caught in this inevitable radical transformation of the church in its current denominational form.

It's a long haul. For me, the first step is to keep on keeping on; to experiment, yes; to be open to new ideas, yes; but in the meantime to avoid, so far as possible, growing too weary in well doing.

I've retooled three times already as a professional ecumenist, and will now be doing so again. Change is one of the givens in ecumenism.

Many of us at this conference have discovered we've been involved directly in ecumenism through our work, lifestyles, etc. In the past I have considered ecumenists to be those theologians and dialoguers who read and write on the subject. It is important for practitioners and theoreticians (though they are often the same) to be together.

I am learning that my life experience and my Christian educational experiences have given me the understanding and vision of an ecumenist.

I've been plunged into long-standing conversations I knew little about, though I have, by personal inclination and circumstance, lived ecumenically.

In sixty years of ecumenical involvement I've learned to use the word "nevertheless."

The power of friendship is not always acknowledged as a key element in the ecumenical movement. Indeed, it is sometimes undermined in the bureaucracies of ecumenism. But I am reminded of the one who calls us friends (John 15:15) and of the capacity of that friendship to challenge and judge and subvert the heresies of self-sufficiency and self-reliance that hold us hostage to loneliness and division.

## 2.4 BETWEEN TRADITIONS

**I can't speak out of a single tradition.** The institutional crisis of denominations has already been noted as one of the major changes in the ecumenical environment since the beginning of the

movement. An even profounder change is the blurring of denominational lines in the lives of Christians. While some churches, especially the Orthodox, and to a slightly lesser extent the Roman Catholic, can still count on a majority of their membership being born into their tradition, many churches are themselves communities of persons with two or more traditions in their background. **I was brought up Presbyterian; my mother was Baptist, father Christian Alliance, sister United Church of Christ. We had four denominations in a family of six.**

The ecumenical movement is, paradoxically, challenged by this reality of "ecumenical congregations," because the movement has been structured as a conversation between traditions. **Is there room in the movement for people who live on the boundaries of several traditions?** Of course some have moved from one tradition to another out of a strong theological conviction that one is right and the other wrong, but more common is either a social/cultural shift, or a sense of "fit" that doesn't mean rejection of what went before. And for many in the "I can't speak out of a single tradition" tradition, there is a sense of incompleteness; maybe something more than was lost has been found, but there is still something precious that was lost.

Many conference participants referred to ecumenical marriages, **in miniature the coming together of diverse members in the Body of Christ.** Churches have shown concern for the spiritual welfare of both parties, and especially of the children, in such marriages, but reports of ineffectiveness are legion, and in countless cases the entire family drifts away from both churches into religious indifference. Ecumenical discussion of such marriages needs to shift from considering how the traditions can help these people to how these people, on the basis of their experience, can help the traditions find creative, even revolutionary, ways beyond the historical impasses.

**People tend to agree or disagree without any reference to the church to which they nominally belong.**

**Too much energy is lost in trying to name and resolve the differences within the specific structures. After all, the reality is that already within our congregations from a particular tradition we have an ecumenical community with persons there from many traditions.**

**Many people are relativists who feel none of the pain. They are aware of diversity, but they feel nothing. I want to be immersed in a tradition to the point where I can feel pain and joy.**

**The charismatic movement, Word churches, non-denominational churches, have reflected a movement towards Jesus Christ and away from the sanctity of denominations. The new members and Bible-taught members value the body of Christ above the religious tradition of which they are at present a part.**

**I feel cut off when with only one part of my tradition. Ecumenism is fostering the feeling of at-home-ness when we are with our brothers and sisters in our extended family. The extended family metaphor is the key.**

**It may have been true of the ecumenism of the past that people spoke and acted as official representatives of one tradition, but I don't believe it's true of the grassroots ecumenism of**

today. People who come out of what I'll term the classical ecumenical movement often dismiss us as "anything goes," "dabblers," or the more polite "eclectic."

**Youth need to understand other churches better; they may marry into them.**

## 2.5 TRADITION AND IDENTITY

**If I don't speak from my own tradition with full conviction, I'm diminishing both myself and you as a conversation partner.** Paradoxically, while conference discussion highlighted the new ecumenical reality of people and congregations living between traditions, it also underlined the ecumenical necessity of clearer traditional identity. Certainly, **denominational loyalties and deeply-held traditions can constrain or limit dialogue between Christians.** But discussion with no moorings in historically identifiable positions can drift, leaving participants in the conversation disengaged with each other. It is a question not simply of openness, but of how we *know*.

And then, another paradox: openness to others, to learning about their experience, can actually strengthen one's own sense of identity, or shape it in new and surprising ways. One Orthodox participant in the conference noted that while the ecumenical movement has often assumed certain affinities in spirit and theology, such as Orthodox and Anglican, **experience in dialogue often contradicts these assumptions. Sometimes churches perceived as "opposites" may actually find areas of commonness that were never anticipated, such as Orthodox and Pentecostals, or Orthodox and historic black churches.**

There is no simple answer to the classical ecumenical question of the relation of traditions to Tradition, especially since prophecy as well as continuity is embedded in Tradition. Internal debates within traditions about their own identity make it difficult even for those who are in the same tradition they grew up in to speak with assurance or confidence on behalf of their communities. But **you don't have to be ready to repudiate your own tradition and institutions in order to qualify as an ecumenist, and a determination to recover your own spiritual heritage doesn't make you anti-ecumenical.** Conversely, one who doesn't feel authorized or confident to speak "for the tradition" should not feel excluded from the ecumenical conversation. A commitment to Christian unity is neither guaranteed nor denied by denominational patriotism, and it is neither guaranteed nor denied by denominational indifference. There is simply no neat formula.

**The ecumenical movement needs to be a dialogue between traditions, not between individuals as such (though this does not preclude the possibility of creative, original thought on the part of individuals engaged in the discussion). The alternative to this model is what I found to be largely true at this conference, where individuals spoke most often as individuals, expressing their own views only, with little or no reference to the teachings and positions of the communities out of which they came.**

**Maybe Americans aren't capable of speaking out of traditions any longer. We may have got to the stage where ecumenism is difficult because we are so mixed up.**

No one really *likes* being excluded.

The human architects of ecumenism will need to be patient with those of us who have had first to develop trust and also revalue our own tradition. Many of us not part of the mainline traditions have grown up thinking we were second class in God's church. As ecumenists valued my tradition, I in turn could value it and began to see the strands of "sameness" and unity.

This conference has convinced me of the validity of my heritage and of the validity of the heritage of other Christians gathered here. We have talked, laughed, worshiped, and sung together because/in spite of our differences.

I had my class visit other Christian churches. The students claimed they saw Christ in every setting. I wanted to awaken them to gaps in their own practices and set up a longing for the parts of the Body of Christ to be put back together again: not "one church," but a whole body with its parts working in concert, in love, with common vision and purpose. The key to me is genealogy. We have all been adopted into this family--we have the same roots--no one claims more or less inheritance. And it is a sin to hate your relatives. It is a sin to turn your back on them, to deny them, or to disown them.

## 2.6 INCLUSIVENESS

**Who's invited to Sunday dinner? We have different ideas of who's living in different rooms in the same house, who's next door, who's around the block, who's wanting to move in. What building code do we use?** The term *inclusiveness* is itself problematical, for it suggests there is some defining group that makes the decision to increase the circumference of the circle of which it is the center. **Inclusiveness within the Body of Christ is more than hospitality.** However, the term was used often at the conference, both to affirm the diversity of participation (forty different denominational traditions, and many laity) and to call for extending the diversity, the **enlarging of our awareness of the vastness of God's household.** Indeed, the including has been done by God, not by us, not by any particular ones of us. Inclusiveness is a challenge partly to consciousness, partly to practice. **Particular churches claim to speak for their people, though often it is only the voice of a subculture of that church that gets heard.**

There was certainly no consensus at the conference on the proper limits of inclusion. Some would bring to the table only those who confess a literally true Bible, while others want to include the entire created order. Some who have first-hand experience of controversy with fundamentalists are skeptical that such Christians can be included in ecumenical discussion. Some participants see value in asking those who have not found the church to be a place of renewal and support, who have been turned off by the church, to join the conversation, maybe even to be given a privileged voice that is allowed to express itself without immediate rejoinder or argument.

Inclusiveness is not finally achieved by increasing the variety of persons around the table. There can be unprecedented diversity, but paying attention is the true test of a commitment to inclusiveness. **Ignoring is the worst form of violence.** And paying attention requires time,

patience, getting beyond "polite ecumenism." We need more of the conversations in which uncertainty, frustration, and pain are freely shared, in which those who speak are not interrupted, corrected, or argued with, and those who listen are not defensive.

I beg my Christian brothers and sisters to work for a unity of the church which does not define itself against the unity of all humankind, including all humanity's religious traditions, tested in loving dialogue. After Jesus fed the five thousand, he ordered the disciples to gather all the crumbs "that nothing be lost." To me this means that even the barest fragments of the divine are inexpressibly precious and should not be lost.

In a world with such riches of the spirit, I believe that if I have to depend on 100% clarity of the entire Christian tradition before I am prepared for interfaith dialogue (or enriching my own understanding of God from other faiths), I would never get there--I would always be preparing to do so. There is something wasteful and irrelevant about such interminable preparation.

We have got to find ways to relate our deepest religious joys and discoveries and pain and misery to those deepest joys and pains and delights of people who don't call themselves Christians. If these hungers are as deep in our world as I think they are, and if our experience enables us to say, even occasionally, "By God, we partake in the divine life now," that's urgency enough.

I need to share the cultural traditions that have formed my journey with and for Christ. My people have been demonized, and this has prevented us and the Anglo people from relating on a human level, a level equal as the Mother Earth we all stand on--no one higher or lower--shoulder to shoulder.

We need to expand horizontally, but the controversy in the National Council of Churches over the application for membership by the (predominantly gay and lesbian) Metropolitan Community Church illustrates just how difficult, threatening, and painful this can be.

As an African American with a history of being declared a nonperson by the church, I'm uncomfortable with church people deciding who's in and who's out.

Jesus ate with everyone. Why can't we?

We must admit that we have not been faithful and just in really listening to the voices of others. As an African American Christian woman, I have come to know that voicelessness is sin and death.

The voices of women have been too silent in the official dialogues to date. I suspect this is going to have significant impact on the reception/non-reception of these ecumenical texts by women.

Some talk, even at this conference, has been "war" language. It is like reading the book of Joshua all over again, where people are circling your house, shouting and praying against

**you, waiting for the walls to come down, and they have never spoken to you before. They have already made up their minds who you are, what you are about, and what you are going to say. What is really going on is a replay of other dialogues both parties have had with other people. They aren't hearing the nuances and changes in the discourse.**

**Identify sources of resistance, and be constantly aware that one of the greatest obstacles to Christian unity is the principle of inclusiveness. Do not hesitate to exclude any group whose beliefs or values oppose the established goal and who are unwilling to enter genuine dialogue.**

**The inability to focus on the peculiar Christian mission, while presuming to include everyone in a so-called ecumenical vision, could be in fact inhospitable to difference. Under the guise of inclusion, it may inadvertently retain the passing vision of Christendom.**

**The pain of feeling excluded is so great that some are unable to hear the pain of those who feel inclusion is being forced upon them.**

**The problems of other Christians are our problems, their joys are our joys.**

### **3. TALKING AT, TALKING PAST, TALKING WITH**

#### **3.1 LISTENING AND SPEAKING**

**In many of the conversations, people have simply bided their time, without vulnerably listening to what others are saying. A conversation in which all agree with each other already is not much of a conversation. But simply sitting around a table waiting to speak one's piece is not terribly enlightening either.** The conference generated talk, lots of talk. The design of *Ecumenism Among Us*, and the diversity of its participants, led to reflection on conversation itself; in other words, some of the talk was about talk. Our habits of talking at one another, or past one another, are set deep. Really to talk *with* one another requires a double discipline: speaking the truth of one's own experience, and genuinely desiring, not simply being willing, to understand the other's words. When we are tempted to say "I know just how you feel," we need to bite our tongue, because the chance is good that we have projected onto the other how we imagine we would feel in similar circumstances.

A sense of urgency about ecumenism can become a barrier to progress if it fuels in veterans an impatience with the tentative searchings and testings of those who are new to the enterprise. **Newcomers need to be given a great deal of latitude in the quest for understanding.** Conversely, the newcomers, who are unfamiliar with "ecu-speak," should acknowledge that while the use of such language may be manipulative, it is not necessarily so. It may simply be what the speakers are accustomed to, and a gentle request for explanation might accomplish more than an aggrieved complaint about being ignored.

Discussion of topics, especially of disputed doctrines and practices, has historically been central to the ecumenical enterprise, and continues to be important. Working in an orderly fashion through questions, and the further questions that emerge in the discussion, is a way to make

progress. However, it too often happens that agreements reached in such conversations are scuttled by hidden disputes and misunderstandings. Attitudes, as well as beliefs, govern how Christians relate to one another. **We need to tread gently upon one another's "holy ground."** Hurt and healing deserve as much attention as disagreement and truth, though some voices at the conference questioned the value of focusing on experiences of pain, especially when pain slips over into claims of victimization. But again, who has authority to declare when the line has been crossed? The challenge of truly speaking and truly listening is never met once for all.

**When warm feelings run out, we learn that you can't build ecumenism on sloppy thinking.**

**We need serious discussion of differences in language, especially between Eastern and Western Christians. In some instances the same word has totally different meanings, in others quite different words may be expressing the same meaning.**

**A special role must be played by those unheard and unseen in past eras; the role of those who have spoken for so long must now be to listen.**

**I should be able to listen to another's views without being so sure my belief is the only correct one.**

**There is a distinction between listening to hear differences and listening for holes and cracks into which we can put *our own* message and agenda.**

**We need to relearn the canonical art of story-telling, talking of our own experience and of the experience of our community in a way that makes visible not only our hope and our joy, but also our brokenness and our failure, and the God by whose grace we continue to live.**

**With health as our goal we can model wellness in our behavior: use gentle language, lean on prayer and the Holy Spirit, employ music and play more often, take ourselves less seriously.**

**The ecumenical happy face, a mask behind which one acts as if unaffected by another's hurtful actions or words, is no help.**

**There is danger in looking for leadership to anyone whose primary agenda involves redress of grievances, however legitimate, to a group claiming victim status.**

**We must move beyond hate. It is easy to tell a story of oppression, a story of violence. The hard task is to tell a story of profound love. We all have stories of horrendous victimization. The productive step is not to use these stories of sorrow to help unite the church. Loving stories build up humanity.**

**We need to develop and use a form of discourse that acknowledges wrongs and moves forward without denying or deepening wounds.**

**I will avail myself of the healing grace of God in my own situation. My prayer is: "Lord, let it stop with me." I decide to not hand down the pain I have inherited or experienced.**

### 3.2 PERSISTENCE

**Regardless how many times one has had an ecumenical conversation, or how many times one has considered these questions, each time we have it with someone new we have it for the first time. For me, intentional willingness to go again and again into dialogue is a first, next, and last step. Conversation doesn't happen to move on to a next point. "We intend to stay together." With these brief and strong words the Christians gathered in Amsterdam in 1948 at the founding of the World Council of Churches declared their commitment for the long haul. This intention has to be renewed by each generation of ecumenists, and at no time does the challenge lessen. We must let the conversation get difficult, and stay with the differences that won't go away.**

Some conference participants registered disappointment that more tough issues weren't engaged; more participants said they were glad tough issues hadn't been avoided. One person's settled question is another's flash point. In some cases, persons discovered in the conversation that they cared passionately about something they thought didn't matter to them.

Perhaps the greatest ecumenical gift Christians can give one another is staying with the conversation to the point at which each becomes the other's advocate. Do I recognize myself in what you say about me to others? Do you recognize yourself in what I say to others about you? We may, probably will, still disagree, but at least we have gone beyond intellectually lazy stereotyping. And if we *know*, don't just guess at, what really is in dispute between us, we may be able, in full recognition of our disagreement, to act together.

**We need to develop more opportunities for Christians to consult, consult, consult each other. Cross cultural understanding and cross tradition understanding is much more demanding, subtle, and rewarding than we think for keeping the whole church *faithful* as well as united.**

**Dialogue must begin anew, from the ground up, between the not involved and those already involved. This dialogue cannot begin by jumping off of the hard-earned fruits of "mainstream ecumenism," because those categories are not necessarily relevant to all churches. Rather, it must begin from scratch. This is a new chapter in ecumenism, or maybe even a new level of evolution.**

**We must press ourselves and our churches to go to those places and listen to those people with whom we are most uncomfortable, trusting there is nowhere we can go where God is not.**

**Can we find principles, methods, ground rules, and theological bases for discourse that might help turn sharp disputes into opportunities for dialogue?**

**We need to know each other at an intimate level before we can make the transition to an intimate relationship that approaches unity and not uniformity.**

**Understanding may put more distance between us. This makes clear we must depend wholly on the Spirit.**

### 3.3 BIBLE

**The first step is to reassert the biblical base of the ecumenical movement. Bible study and the ecumenical movement go hand in hand.** One of the axioms of classical ecumenism is the biblical basis of the movement. This fundamental conviction was powerfully reinforced when the Roman Catholic Church, in the extraordinary breakthrough of the Second Vatican Council, gave unprecedented priority to biblical images in its teaching about the church. At *Ecumenism Among Us* several voices strongly reasserted the centrality of the Bible, but there was a widespread reticence about basing arguments on biblical passages.

There has of course never been a single universally recognized principle of biblical interpretation, but something that could be pointed to as "biblical theology" was culturally available in the early days of the ecumenical movement, and made it possible for a biblical basis to be a firm foundation. This is no longer true. Issues of ministry (including gender questions), of church and culture, of sexuality, of interreligious relations, to name just a few of the points of sharp contention between Christians these days (not contention over details, but over what is Christian and what isn't), are not decidable by Bible study. Each party to the disputes claims to have scriptural warrant for its convictions, even if dismissing the other's with epithets such as, e.g., "patriarchal" or "politically correct."

To exclude **unbiblical images of the church**, or to insist on **the real Jesus Christ of the New Testament**, does not resolve ecumenical disputes, since images in the Bible are many, images are by their nature hard to pin down, and the presentations of Jesus in the various theologies of the gospels are complex from the start, not to mention the knotty issue of how we interpret ancient texts (or *any* text, for that matter). To state as an ecumenical ideal that **on the essentials there must be unity and on the non-essentials liberty** is simply to restate the issue, since much of the debate is precisely over the specification of what is essential. Ecumenical discussion cannot be sealed off from the turmoil in which interpretation itself is embroiled at the present time.

Does this mean that everyone's claim to biblical authority is equally valid? Certainly not. And in the new world of ecumenism in which evangelical Christians are becoming active, traditional ecumenists will need to reassure the newcomers that ecumenism is not tied to a particular, and increasingly problematical, liberal interpretation with roots in Enlightenment philosophy. But the turmoil in interpretation does mean that one's claim to know for sure which reading is, and which reading isn't, authentically biblical, needs to be tentative, subject to correction not by another authority as such, but by the principles of sustained conversation and gradual persuasion. Several conference participants recounted ways in which "back to the Bible" became for them not a way of deciding whom to exclude, but of recognizing a much wider family.

**Scripture says it is one church, period.**

**We must look to scripture--for inspiration, for ideas, for renewal, for the challenge itself. Without accepting and using the Word of God as our truth and basis, we indeed are lost.**

**The Bible loosened the shackles of fundamentalism for me. The Word was authoritative, and called me out of fundamentalism.**

**The heart of the ecumenical issue is the identity of Jesus Christ. Is Christ in some sense the anchor, the first principle, the premise, the foundation, the gathering point; does Christ have sovereignty; or is Christ our mascot?**

**The past few days leave me doubtful that unity in the Church of Jesus Christ will result from endless discussions of how all of us read and interpret the scriptures.**

**In some of our discussion I found an unbridgeable gap between those who insist on a literal interpretation of certain exclusionary scriptural passages designating the requirements for salvation and those who no longer read those passages literally. There was also division between those who insist that true ecumenism is always and can only be exclusively *Christian* ecumenism and those who would include all humankind and, perhaps, even those who want to include all of God's creation.**

**If we acknowledge and respect the fact that the same scripture, though interpreted differently, provides the authority for our many Christian traditions, as well as our individual beliefs, we can respect one another's different interpretations and traditions.**

**Politicized language makes it possible to demonize the other. Is a biblically-rooted theological language (and the language drawn from the universal creeds of the church) so obsolete that we must continually and immediately pass over into other categories?**

**The first chapters of Acts are the forgotten text among ecumenists. We come away from meetings with the position we came "to defend," and not enough recognition of the positions we need to have burnished, polished, reformulated.**

**The Bible is the model I hold for Christian unity. I read the Bible and see different writers from different centuries, holding different theologies, discoursing on the same problems, stories, events, concepts. I see four gospels that do not agree with each other on who Jesus is, what he said, where he said it, to whom, and why. But I see them standing together, not requiring that the other change, but only that it stand along with it. This is not a war, rather a model of mutual respect and collaboration. I see stories, but not obliterating the story of the other. Embellishing, maybe. Changing the focus, maybe. But not obliterating. Poking fun at, but not dehumanizing the other. Can the church learn from this model?**

### 3.4 EUCHARIST

**The lack of eucharistic sharing constitutes the most damning witness today to our appalling disunity.** The eucharist as symbol of unity and scandal of disunity loomed large at the conference. For some, it was a surprise that it was so contentious: **It seemed like an issue whose time had passed; maybe not.** Others were simply puzzled because for them the eucharist is not central to their theology, their practice, or their piety. Some said intercommunion is the challenge most deserving of current attention and effort; some said we might as well forget it, **since there is no hope of achieving it in any foreseeable future.** And at least one veteran of ecumenical meetings reported never being **at a conference that has succeeded in finding a method for discussing eucharistic theology.**

The eucharist draws to itself our tendencies to talk at and talk past, and provides a severe test of our willingness to persist in conversation. The temperature of discussion at the conference always rose when the subject came up; tears were shed; it was occasionally implied that the position of the other side was simply incomprehensible. Some of those who favor a table open to all Christians discount the arguments of those who say intercommunion is the fruit of unity, not a means to it (or of those who say "intercommunion" is itself an improper term; there can be only "communion"), while, conversely, those who maintain a limited eucharistic fellowship may discount the others as indifferent or trendy. But many at the conference acknowledged the seriousness of both commitments. **The urgency of this matter comes from the deep anguish both sides feel while at the same time realizing that the hurt being generated is not a simple matter of one group's being arrogant and another's being insolent, but is instead a hurt that arises from each tradition's love of a different aspect of the church at large.**

The eucharist has been for decades one of the most thoroughly discussed and debated of all ecumenical subjects. Someone might argue that the contentiousness of the subject at *Ecumenism Among Us* reflects the ignorance on the part of many participants of the results of those earlier efforts at understanding; the arguments may have been "stale," though seemed fresh to those who hadn't had them before. But this would be far too simplistic an explanation. There was no generational clustering of contenders; indeed, some of those who expressed themselves with most feeling were ones intimately familiar with the record of earlier conversations and agreements. For many, though certainly not all, at the conference, the eucharist is where Christian identity is sharpest, clearest, most poignant. Even those who reject an open communion acknowledge the depth of the pain they feel when other Christians cannot join them.

**Until we can partake of the eucharist together, there will be no unity.**

**Eucharist/Holy Communion is the essential next step. All Christians acknowledge the high place of Eucharist/Holy Communion in life in faith in Christ.**

**The *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* goals of a decade ago had no room for those of us who are non-sacramentalists in theology and liturgy and non-episcopal in polity. This made us feel like second-class citizens, and actual stumbling-blocks to Christian unity.**

**Is it really true that if the eucharist question were settled, most denominations could come together in one body of Christ?**

**Receiving the eucharist together is not the ultimate goal; it is a further step along the journey to full communion in the human family.**

**The eucharist does not have to be an ingredient of an ecumenical conference.**

**We need to settle the business about the eucharist and who can receive it. If the worry is about people not taking it seriously, let God decide that. If we are brothers and sisters in Christ like we claim to be, then why can't we share in communion with each other?**

**Our discussions need to be more serious when it comes to the nature of the church and what it means to be in communion and what are the criteria for union and communion. Without concrete criteria the discussion can end up being merely subjective and sentimental.**

**I favor limited, infrequent, officially sanctioned eucharistic hospitality, to show that we have neither full communion nor no communion.**

**I do not believe that a shared communion table is the issue that divides, but rather what the principalities and powers that control the table feel threatened about possibly losing should they share this mandate widely among the fellowship of believers.**

**The eucharist is the food of God's people in community, it's not magic. The eucharist belongs to God. God did not lead the people out of Egypt and feed them on manna to let them starve to death. We have made a deliberate theological choice to form a house church, because the bottom line is this: the eucharist is so important that we cannot starve to death. We cannot let ourselves go hungry while the churches hold the eucharist hostage.**

**I'll just keep on "dining" on Sundays with Southern Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, the United Church of Christ, the Disciples, and all the others, when I am not in my Catholic parish church, as a demonstration of one person's understanding that the Presence is, and can be found, wherever hungry souls gather to be fed.**

### 3.5 FAITH, LIFE, ORDER, WORK

**Being the church and fighting injustice are inseparable.** The four terms that classically define the concerns of the ecumenical movement are presented here in alphabetical order, as a way of illustrating another point of controversy at the conference. Traditionally, the concerns of "Faith and Order" are seen as different from those of "Life and Work." Ecumenists have, for the most part, been attentive to the balance between them. **It is one theological project for me.** Some observers of the ecumenical scene in recent decades have criticized what they see as a retreat from Faith and Order concerns in the interest of Life and Work issues, with a consequent overemphasis on social action. According to this point of view, the church has taken its cue not from its own nature, but from currently critical, or fashionable, or politically correct, secular thinking, thereby running the double risk of doing badly what other agencies can do better and of failing to offer the theological and spiritual nurture and sustenance that the church is uniquely equipped to provide.

The controversy is not about an either/or option (though there were moments in conference discussion when it sounded that way), but it easily becomes sharp, because it is about where the center of gravity lies, where energy and resources need to be applied. In other words, it is about choices, and finally it is about how to characterize the Christian mission. What is the church? and What is the church for?: these questions can perhaps be distinguished for the sake of academic argument, but ecumenically minded people differ on which question needs to be answered first.

One particularly nettlesome form of the dispute involves not only how Christians who differ from one another on Faith and Order issues can cooperate in Life and Work matters (or, conversely, whether those who agree on Faith and Order issues but disagree, sometimes drastically, on Life and Work principles, can get along), but also whether the experience of Life and Work cooperation with adherents of other religions should modify Christian exclusivist Faith and Order claims. The conference gave many signals that interreligious dialogue--how to engage in it, what its boundaries are, its implications for Christian theology--is quickly becoming a church-dividing issue. On this question, while the pressure for broadening ecumenism to embrace interreligious dialogue (and, indeed, to include ecological concern for the entire creation) came mainly from the younger participants in the conference, there was by no means a sharp generational divide.

**Focusing our priorities on who has a policy of open or closed eucharist is a diversion of our mission. Jesus would be outraged at people who are directing their energy to this issue instead of the mission of our work.**

**Some see ecumenism and evangelism as mutually exclusive, though the same people have no difficulty "evangelizing" about ecology, politics, or other assorted politically correct approved topics.**

**The body of Christ includes the whole creation. How can we debate whether it's a peace and justice issue or an ecumenical body of Christ issue?**

**Our conversations appear too often to want to establish a new form of Christendom, now not on the basis of doctrinal unity, but rather on the basis of a shared interpretation of the political, social, and economic challenges facing American culture.**

**Our social obligation as church is not separated from our scriptural and sacramental obligation. The world is hungering for our light. We will need to be much more united and intentional about letting this light shine into the dark corners of suffering and death in this world of ours.**

**Most here seem to think the church's main task is to be involved in issues; there is no interest in anthropology, Christology, soteriology, sin, or redemption. When churches define themselves solely in terms of doing good, it is no wonder they are ignored by society. I have no interest in an ecumenism that ignores or trivializes or marginalizes the transcendent, prayer, or faith.**

**It strikes me as ironic that concerns for economic, racial, social liberation, fundamental to the lives of millions of Christians (and non-Christians), many (if not most) of whom are people of color, can be labeled "issues," regarded as separate from the gospel, or treated as if auxiliary to the Christian faith. Yes, I make space in my own life for contemplation, study, silence, etc., but I also come from an African people who do not/did not dichotomize the world into secular/sacred, public/private, and I also am in the heritage of Black American Christians who heard God through the word call them into action, on their own behalf and in behalf of God's world. In faithfulness to those heritages and all that God has enabled me to know, experience, and become, the integrity of my Christian faith is caught up with my faithfulness to serving the downtrodden and freeing the captives (not just in a spiritualized sense).**

**The general discussion I hear even among many professional ecumenists is not nearly nuanced and reflective enough. Positions are regularly caricatured and oversimplified, as though, e.g., to be interested in theology, trying to be faithful to historic Christian tradition in some recognizable form, is perforce to be uninterested in the issues of poverty and racial and other kinds of social injustice.**

**What are the Christian spiritual, theological, biblical warrants for cooperative action in my state in jails, opposing prejudice, hatred, and bigotry, advocating for children and families, participating in public policy discussion of gambling and education and tax equity?**

**If we work together only on social action (which is also carried out efficiently by non-Christians), we will soon find we have lost our footing, our anchor, and will be swept along in the tides of secularism and consumerism.**

**Sociological, political, and economic analysis is essential, but in the churches this needs to be reflected on theologically; otherwise the church cannot speak in its own voice, but only in the language of the culture.**

**We find little division when we are focused outside of ourselves, united in responding to basic human needs, working for peace and justice. When we feel these needs urgently, we can respond with diversity but not division.**

**Don't confuse or lump together ecumenism and interreligious issues; that would alienate a lot of us.**

**Ecumenism will always be hindered any time both Christ and Christianity are placed on a par with any other faiths or religions of the world. Any one or group of people who have a problem believing or accepting this premise for ecumenism does not really believe in Christ or is not submissive to his claims. An exclusivistic understanding of the Christian faith should foster rather than hinder the unity of the church.**

**The world is only in its infancy. We have many millennia to go before the "second advent"! All religions are facing a similar situation of relative inability to adjust to a world so different from the world where they were born. The Christians on the way to each other in**

**Christ will have to meet with other believers (Hindus, Buddhists, . . . ) in God, or in "The Unknown Principle of the Universe." Christian ecumenism is distinct from the Encounter of Religions, but it should promote this encounter for the sake of God's glory.**

### 3.6 REPENTANCE

**No redemption with no repentance.** Twenty years ago Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in an essay on "Repentance and Self-Limitation in the Life of Nations," implicitly challenged the conventional claim that it is our rationality that distinguishes us from the rest of the animals. "The gift of repentance," he wrote, "which perhaps more than anything else distinguishes humans from the animal world, is particularly difficult for modern people to recover. We have, every last one of us, grown ashamed of this feeling; and its effect on *social* life anywhere on earth is less and less easy to discern. The habit of repentance is lost to our whole callous and chaotic age."

The "gift of repentance," our "distinguishing characteristic": there was not a great deal of repentance talk at *Ecumenism Among Us* (though, as will become clear at the end of this report, an invitation to repentance was the highlight of the surprise the Spirit had in store for us). Perhaps our reticence about the subject simply reflects the truth of Solzhenitsyn's observation: we're ashamed of it, or at least unfamiliar with how to talk about it. **Americans don't like to talk about sin; we will talk about dislocations and other things that are treatable.** Or it may have had to do with the relative congeniality of the conference participants. There were some sharp controversies, to be sure, but there was a degree of civility during the time in Collegeville not often experienced in the contentiousness many of us know much of the time in our daily lives. Celebration seemed more in keeping with the event than did repentance.

But: the only way finally around and beyond our talking at and talking past one another to talking with one another is the way of repentance--not a wallowing in guilt, but a confession of sin. And there were some eloquent testimonials to the need for such honesty, both as a way to clear the air and a protection against the trap of victimization. Repentance breaks cycles of replay and replay of the same old patterns. Repentance is a sign of strength, not of weakness.

**I keep thinking honesty would call a person to say, "I want ecumenism to work, but only on my terms." What about God's terms and plans for this movement?**

**Let's acknowledge our theological pride--our sense that we have it right, and unity would happen if others would just come closer to us.**

**I need to leap the chasm and see the face of one who shares my deepest commitment; I am tempted, however, to assume God's prerogative of judgment on the other.**

**Some of us have traditions about which we need to apologize.**

**A church leader once said to me "I have much to give to, but nothing to receive from, your tradition."**

**I tried to help my brother, who was dying of AIDS, see that God hadn't given up on him even if the church had; he believed what the church told him.**

**We need to confess that being members of Christ's body and having the mind of Christ is our norm for *self*-correction, but not a norm with which Christ empowers us to judge or seek to control others.**

**I have resisted the free-style of this conference. But the chaos teaches too. There are still many old conventions floating around us all, too much jargon, insider language. Breaking down of assumptions breaks down the power of a few to control. In the chaos I begin to let go my prejudices, even the "noble" ones.**

**We need to stop whining. The ecumenical movement has come to be seen as a dialogue between cry babies, not as a source of renewal leading to unity.**

**Some of us do not have the requisite skills to play the game of who can outdo the other in angry, self-righteous stories of injustice, so we become spectators and cheer the teams on, and to the victors go the spoils of our Christian guilt and charity.**

**The basis of institutional authority is the assumption that each institution claims to know the will of God. That they present differing opinions on that subject is proof enough that God's will is a bit veiled on critical matters. I will be pardoned for believing that no one knows the mind of God.**

**All healing from brokenness comes from repentance and forgiveness. We have got to apologize to our brothers and sisters for the ways we've excluded them through activities of institutional sin such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, classism, and denominationalism. After asking for forgiveness, then we are to turn from our wicked ways (1 Chronicles 7:14).**

**Churches must confront the scandal of our Christian separation, in an atmosphere of confession of guilt and repentance. My own tradition's often smug liberalism will make such confession and repentance especially difficult, since we believe we have advanced to the place where others are tending and eventually will come.**

**I propose we covenant as individuals and congregations for a quadrennium of repentance of our sins against other Christians, against humanity, against God, and a confession of our needs.**

**We must apologize to our Lord for breaking up his body.**

## **4. FORMATION IN ECUMENICAL SPIRITUALITY**

### **4.1 THE PERSONAL**

**I was an ecumenist and didn't know it.** The conference was for some a time of discovery, for others of rediscovery: **I had become jaded, but here I have tapped again into the energy and vision that got me started.** To be an ecumenist is, of course, to hold certain convictions and do certain things, but it is much more, and deeper. It is a "tilt" of the person who is naturally curious, who feels at home but knows home is too small, who takes **a cue from Will Rogers: "I don't like those people; I must get to know them."** Being ecumenical is intention, but it is also instinct. Ecumenists are innately suspicious of anyone's claims, including their own, to have fully comprehended another tradition's beliefs and practices. Ecumenism is, truly, lifelong learning.

There were frequent calls at the conference for formal presentations of the accumulated wisdom of the ecumenical movement. Something would have been gained by creating a broader knowledge base, but something more crucial would have been lost. Such presentations would have reinforced the suspicion on the part of newcomers that the ecumenical movement is simply another organization to sign on to, another line on the résumé, and on the part of veterans that they have already done it. The ecumenical movement as a renewal movement is first, and repeatedly, a personal renewal, even a conversion. One who has already begun to be formed ecumenically can read the record of the movement as something familiar and inspiring, not as foreign and intimidating.

The current widespread interest in spirituality throughout our culture has attracted extensive media attention. Analysts of religion are not entirely sure what to make of it. Christian theologians can be found who herald it as a movement of God's spirit; Christian theologians can be found who warn it is a trick of the devil. There is, as in so much of American culture, the danger that a positive trend will be absorbed into an all-embracing individualism, a privatizing of everything human, but that danger must not make ecumenists wary of the personal, as though the personal is by its nature simply self-regarding. An ecumenical spirituality is more than personal, but it is not less. It begins with the personal. And keeps coming back to the personal.

**To me, ecumenism means being made more aware of our differences and divisions; I'm not sure steps can be taken to "fix" them. I know there is a world of difference between what is *merely* personal, which tends to short-circuit into individualism, and the *truly* personal, which is the most universal.**

**The form of our spirituality, how we meet God, is as much a revelation of who we are as our more narrowly defined theologies. The spiritual dimensions of ecumenism are more at the forefront than in the early days.**

**There can be no unity apart from sanctification. The church cannot bypass the wonderful cleansing unto holiness. At the conference I have heard many voices calling for unity and only a few for sanctification.**

**The more ecumenists can teach and practice hospitality, the more the church's divisions will either be pulled down or will fall because no one cares to put the energy into holding them up.**

**We all need creativity, repentance, courage, perseverance, and listening ears.**

**Bureaucracy destroys Christianity no less than any militant atheism.**

**Ecumenical formation experiences ought to be a required part of every pastor's preparation for ministry.**

#### 4.2 THE COMMUNAL

**I believe people do ecumenism by nature and are not aware they are doing it. Oftentimes they are reluctant to name it ecumenism because of the negative press ecumenism has received over the years. People basically understand the value of working together. We need only to interpret, give meaning, show them the biblical foundation for doing so.** A hundred years ago William James located religion's center of gravity in a person's solitude. The Christian tradition has always insisted that religion is also what one does with one's social relationships. Ecumenical formation requires inwardness and contemplation, but it also requires commitment to, with, and in a community. Even what one discovers in solitude is a resource for the upbuilding of the community. The challenge to ecumenists is to become a community that can be recognized but not type-cast or confined, a community that forms newcomers without making them into "ecumenical sectarians."

"Community," like "spirituality," is a rich term, much spoken these days, and in jeopardy of overuse. Official ecumenism has adopted the Greek term *koinonia*, which appears frequently in the New Testament, to make the point that community and communion are finally inseparable, and unity requires both. The puzzle for ecumenists is to figure out how the communities that are the various churches relate to the larger Christian *koinonia*; more specifically, how do my commitments and energies, and those of my congregation, and of my tradition and its institutions and agencies, become engines of ecumenical breakthrough while remaining true to what we have received from our ancestors in the faith? The search for community is complicated when communities that are valuable, that can legitimately claim to be outposts for God in the world, are competing for our loyalty. **I get a lot of support personally from the ecumenical community, which is almost my church now.**

Several participants in the conference reflected on the insight that all can draw from the centuries-long experience of religious communities within the church, especially within the Roman Catholic Church (of course the orders are an inheritance of the whole church from the time before the East-West schism and the later Protestant Reformation). The Benedictine tradition, in the midst of which *Ecumenism Among Us* happened, has shown how a distinctive form of spiritual and social life can grow, flourish, and remain itself while manifesting loyalty to the larger community. No one, including their own members who know the difficulties and the tensions, would suggest that religious orders as a model provide a solution to the problem of Christian disunity. But much can be learned from their accumulated experience, and, as Saint Thomas Aquinas long ago observed, if something has been done it must be possible.

**God is a consuming fire, yet God can be known, through Christ, *directly and personally*. This knowledge of God is relational. We are united with believers in glory. There can be no true ecumenism without this shared first-hand knowledge of God.**

**The search for healing is a multibillion dollar business. Ecumenists have much to contribute regarding what whole people in whole societies might look like.**

**Why do we continue to believe we must engage in mission work as denominations? It is at the level of community mission that I see the church most effectively overcoming its divisions.**

**If the church could be viewed as it was in early Christianity as a community of disciples in which *everyone* is a learner and the needs of each are the concerns of all, the unity of the church might be possible to achieve in the foreseeable future.**

**We are losing "church" as we have known it. Will we hide from each other, or learn to value each other more as those who will help us get through this time?**

**People need to be together as people--talk, eat, spend days, dance, make art and music, consider issues, listen to each other, be silent together, see each other in different moods.**

**Affection develops over time, it does not occur out of a shared ideology or sameness. It is the love of people standing side by side.**

**Ecumenists show by precept and example how to move away from an ethic of individualism, autonomy, and privatism toward a community of responsibility.**

**Monastic communities can continue extending a welcome to others to enter a place where prayer, solitude, worship, and hospitality beyond denominations is possible.**

#### 4.3 PILGRIMAGE

**Ecumenical vocation is a pilgrimage that can only be sustained among companions willing to match their pace to those who walk alongside.** An ecumenical formation that does justice both to the personal and to the communal creates a life of faith that is experienced as pilgrimage, a journey inward and a journey outward that is never finished. The ecumenist is restless but not nervous, on the way yet not at loose ends or at sea. Ecumenism is **a turtle ministry, its urgency a matter of priority, not of speed.** The image of pilgrimage, whether to Canterbury with Chaucer, on progress with John Bunyan, or along the way with an anonymous Russian peasant, is a treasure of the whole church. There is no single authentic form; perhaps an ecumenical study of pilgrimage images (and not just famous literary ones, but how people actually think about their lives in these terms) would provide new resources for ecumenical formation.

Pilgrimage is a lifetime endeavor, but **in a remarkable number of stories told at the conference, the journey began with a one-on-one encounter**, in some cases forty or fifty years ago. In at least one instance, the encounter was with a book, or rather, with the person whose vision was communicated in the book's pages. Several participants reported their own sense that such a life-changing meeting with a true mentor had occurred for them during the days in Collegeville.

The special appropriateness of pilgrimage as a portrayal of the ecumenical life is its combination of a sense of direction with an expectation of surprise. Pilgrims have a general idea where they're going, but they cannot predict what they will find along the way, and even if they know where they are going, they will themselves be different people when they get there because of their adventures and encounters in transit. Some lines of T. S. Eliot ("Little Gidding," V) express this mystery of pilgrimage, of discovery and rediscovery (after all, the unity of the church is a given, the starting point), and provide both a statement of the ecumenical calling and a description of the ecumenical experience: "We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time."

**The goal may be farther away than it was originally envisioned, yet in striving toward that goal many individuals and churches are learning about each other and evolving new attitudes. Progress may not be dramatic and still be steady.**

**Ecumenism is not passive or tolerance, or peaceful coexistence; it must be actions taken: activity planned and executed and supported and sustained.**

**I easily lapse into the smug reassurance that I am already "there." These days have helped me understand better that the sector of my own life crying out for confession and repentance is my assumed pragmatic wisdom born of many years of church and academic leadership. Too easily I "understand" the resistance and barriers. Too readily I forgive others and myself for not daring to hope for more, to work for more. Too quickly I settle for one tiny step when a longer stride, however shaky, might have been attempted. Being older, experienced, wise in the ways of the church and the world, has given me a peace in my heart that may not be the peace that God gives us in Jesus Christ through the Spirit. My own confession and repentance need to lead me to that deeper level of spiritual critique and reflection.**

**We recall how the children of Israel would have to be rescued again and again because they could not obey the word of the Lord. The prophets were provided to encourage their return to the Lord. Their entire journey has become our own.**

**By the grace of God I will see, hear, and learn from the wisdom of other faith traditions even as my pilgrim's journey is defined by my belief in the Triune God.**

**I am committed to my church as the true church, though I am not perfectly or fully in it. All my life I am entering the church. The problem is when people identify themselves with their church or their church with themselves. It is necessary for God's work not to leave in peace anyone who identifies himself or herself as the true church, whether liberal or conservative or fundamentalist. The way is to enter the church and grow within it.**

#### 4.4 IMAGINATION AND RISK

**Think about the Spirit blowing where it wills, and the temptation of those in authority to think God is the same as the rules we make. Robert S. Bilheimer, at the conclusion of the Institute's 1985 conference on *Christian Identity, Mission, and Unity Today*, presented this**

challenge to those who had gathered in Collegeville: "We still have the opportunity of making a far more telling witness than we are now making, granted the imagination to make it together. Have we exhausted all of the possibilities of imagination concerning a common witness?" The challenge is just as sharp and just as timely today, a decade later. The theme of imagination, and of the risk that acting on imagination entails, surfaced often at *Ecumenism Among Us*. It is clear that imagination, like conscience, requires not only teaching, but also formation.

Imagination is not just a useful attitude, an effective strategy or tactic for the achievement of particular ends. It is, or ought to be, a theological category, especially in a time when the sciences are telling us of a universe more complex, more various, even more bizarre, than any of our ancestors dreamt up. To be made in the image of God **who makes galaxies and mosquitoes** is to be made in the image of the supreme imaginer. An ecumenism stuck in the mode of "this is the way we've always done it" is unfaithful to the God who makes *all* things new, all the time.

Imagination requires not only a loosening of shackles we impose on our thinking, but also a discipline of attentiveness to the unfamiliar, the uncomfortable, the shocking, and a willingness to give many benefits of many doubts. To imagine a common witness is to be open to the possibility that none of us will end up witnessing in a way we are used to. At the very least, it means we will be ready to experiment, to try things out, with agreement from everybody that no one will be held forever answerable for an experiment that doesn't work. We have been taught that perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18); imagination can do the same, if not quite so thoroughly. And among the most demanding of ecumenical disciplines is a sense of common purpose between those who, out of solidarity with the excluded, will not associate with those who do the excluding, and those who, for the sake of inclusiveness, will continue associating with both the excluded and the excluder.

**We need to be affected by the dreams and thoughts of others--to be in constant realignment of our own views. This does not mean we must all agree, just that we all must be willing to learn. And to learn, we must be willing to accept that we know nothing.**

**Some of our churches have vigorous internal dialogue going on. We need leaders who will give public witness to the differences within particular traditions, for the sake of truth, and for the sake of dialogue with other churches.**

**It is not a breach of personal identity for me to pray more fervently with Pentecostal Christian sisters and brothers than I might while partaking of the eucharist at another church.**

**We must work at eliminating the fear that the word will be lost when we place it in God's creation as we know it today.**

**We are not the ones who should decide who belongs in the church. In order to help further radical inclusion, I will not associate with people or churches that do not believe in such radical inclusion.**

**May I humbly suggest that Christians pledge to non-violence. Yesterday in my Reflection group someone threatened to walk out. Over another issue, it could just as easily have been me. I wanted to say, "I will go with you"--not to leave the rest of the group, and not to tackle the guy and bring him back, but as a promise to stay non-violently, prayerfully engaged no matter where we feel we need to run away to. This is so the dialogue--our confessions of faith to each other--an continue.**

**When I feel irritation, fear, or hostility as my response to another, I can ask those emotions to be my teachers, to show me what part of my spirit is frightened, in pain, and feels the need for security and protection, to ask what steps will open me to healing, to be more fully re-membered with Christ's body.**

**We need to believe that deep union with God and with one another is possible because God desires it for us even more than we desire it.**

**We need to laugh more.**

#### 4.5 HOLY OBEDIENCE AND HOLY DISOBEDIENCE

**Staying connected with the church while questioning everything is important to me.** Any renewal movement has a strong element of dissent. Ecumenism is saying that the way things are is not the way things are supposed to be, so it is bound to come into conflict with institutions and structures. Yet, as has been noted earlier, it is a mistake to equate ecumenical seriousness with disaffection from one's own tradition. Obedience and disobedience do not offer a clearly marked either/or choice, they are not fixed points on a target. In some traditions, of course, it is much easier than in others to tell when a boundary has been crossed, an authority contradicted, but all traditions, by their history if not by their theory, acknowledge the possibility of faithful dissent. Jeremiah, after all, stood alone.

The abiding temptation of the prophet is self-assurance. A compulsive second-guesser would hardly have the stamina for the short haul, much less the long haul, but a degree of humility is a necessary grace. Neither obedience nor disobedience is in and of itself holy; each can be the outward and visible sign of a paralyzed or disoriented spirit. And if one is often unsure of one's own motives, how presumptuous it is of others to claim sure knowledge of what motivates either the supporter of or dissenter from the way things are.

Discernment, a term leveraged into common language by the spirituality revolution, is a valuable gift that Christians in an ecumenical setting can offer one another. Many times at the conference participants reacted with astonishment on hearing their own stories played back to them in accounts of experiences of others in different traditions. Talking with others may not decide the issue for any particular person, "Is my dissent a holy disobedience or just willful self-indulgence?" However, talking with others, especially if they are several others from a variety of traditions, provides a larger context in which to interpret one's own actions and motives.

**In American political and religious life we have this polarizing method, which you don't find much in Europe. We need to help people find deeper ground, so they won't be so scared when they hear others speaking in different ways.**

**Neither the right nor the left has a corner on meanness.**

**I will practice what I preach: give priority to mission in the world with those who share my passion regardless of their institutional affiliation, and confront the institutional arrogance of the powers that be who tell me they know more about my needs of and in Christ, and how those needs can be met, than I do.**

**We have to be prepared to make people angry, to be seen as not nice, not good.**

**What is the high road? How do you handle dissent when you're battered, bruised, and beaten?**

**Any kind of prophetic protest needs to be spoken with the recognition that we can be wrong. The longer I was in a stance of defending myself, the more I was becoming the mirror image of the people who were attacking me. You have to avoid becoming what you hate.**

**We have to be careful not to reduce theological issues to something else, and assume our opponents are motivated by that "something else." People are asking to be dealt with theologically. The ecumenical movement has tended to assume unity means agreement; this is about the stupidest thing I can imagine. Paul tells us our capacity to continue dealing with each other in conflict is a witness to the God who holds us together.**

**It is my duty to advocate dialogue, and to subvert official teaching with godly praxis by initiating the call to holy communion by the whole company of the baptized wherever I may be, such that whosoever will may come.**

**Some issues are resolved by the people long before the institutions resolve them.**

**I suggest "ecclesial disobedience"--that is, eucharistic sharing by responsible and informed Christians so often that the "rules" are perceived to be out of date.**

**In the true spirit of ecumenism we intend to remain respectful of our authorities, but we pray earnestly that we may be spared the contradiction that in being respectful to them we may be disloyal to the Holy Spirit who is calling us to a life together in Christ without impediments--especially impediments legitimized in his name.**

#### 4.6 PRAYER

**Our promise to make prayer central to the ecumenical journey is rarely fulfilled. In these or similar words, many participants in *Ecumenism Among Us* signaled their conviction that dialogue and common action, important as they are, have shoved prayer to the ecumenical**

periphery. The conference was not without opportunities, even encouragements, to pray. The Benedictine monks of Saint John's Abbey pray together three times every day (morning, noon, and evening), and always welcome anyone who cares to join them. The planning committee, recognizing that we would be meeting in the monks' home, decided to schedule conference events so as to allow participation in several of the monastic prayer services. For some, both those familiar with the daily office and those who had never known such a thing, praying with the monks was a moving, deepening experience. **I am pleased and proud that our days have been framed by the ancient prayers of the church with the monks.** Many did not participate, however, and for others who did, even if they found it an ecumenically broadening and instructive experience, praying as guests of the monks did not catch the spirit of the conference.

But even the plea to pray together more is not a request for some one thing. Had we stipulated more formal prayer in the program (e.g., beginning or ending each session with prayer), some would have been satisfied, but others not. Structured, scheduled prayer would have given notice that everything we were doing was offered to God and done in the presence of God, but it would have fallen far short of "praying constantly," which for many participants meant praying when the time seemed right. An especially strong case was made that we need to pray when discussions get heated or knotted.

The call for more prayer is part of a more general desire, expressed in many ecumenical forums, for a shift in the center of gravity of ecumenical dialogue from discussion of doctrines to the experience of liturgy. Many voices at *Ecumenism Among Us* suggested that the hope for new and unexpected Christian convergences through liturgical reform is still high, a hope that has been sustained by the experiences many have had of feeling "at home" in the services of other churches. And as the conclusion of this report will make clear, worship together, that we feared for a while would be impossible or at best jarring and awkward, proved to be where we really found ecumenism among us.

**Place all ecumenical encounters, gatherings, and debates within the context of prayer. We continually need to be reminded, especially when we are fearful, defensive, hurt, confused, or angry, that Christ is present with us in both the pain and possibility.**

**There is something cleansing about worshiping the Lord together. Something miraculous happens when I bow my head in prayer or raise my voice in song together with a person I've been arguing with or about whom I've been having ungenerous thoughts. Worshiping with that person does more for the state of my heart towards him or her than any amount of wonderful dialogue.**

**We must learn the devices the devil is using to divide the body of Christ so we can band together in prayer to come against the tricks of Satan.**

**The liturgical approach to theological understanding is a very helpful project, an approach to ecumenical theology that deserves greater attention and application.**

**Theological faculties need to make public worship a major discipline in their course of studies. Can you name a seminary where public worship is the central theological discipline?**

**The 1954 Assembly of the World Council of Churches said, "The measure of our concern for unity is the degree to which we pray for it." How many of our churches use the ecumenical prayer cycle in their intercessory prayers on Sunday? How many of us pray for the work of ecumenical organizations?**

**I don't believe we have been spending enough time *together* in prayer. What are we doing beyond the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity?**

**First, all Christians would benefit by searching the scriptures and our traditions for what has been said about the Holy Spirit. Second, we should seek the experience with the Holy Spirit that united Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10). Third, we need to pray for unity in the Spirit.**

**Is there not a way to pray together for the sort of unity we're called to, and in that prayer to begin already to be one?**

**Ecumenism is based on trust. You have a deeper level of trust if you have prayed together.**

**We need to pray more as a collective faith community for unity than discuss it. Unity starts with a change of heart that moves one from a disposition of protecting "turf" and "the tradition" to understanding the church is God's to safeguard, not ours. Such a transformation may then breed an appreciation for the rich diversity of Christianity and undercut charges that any "branch" of the church is being unfaithful to the gospel. The reign of God will not be ushered in by careful planning and strategic engagement alone--opportunities and space must be made in the Christian family for us to *experience* each other's spirituality, lives, and living environments. Prayerfully when such opportunities are taken advantage of I will learn more about who my brothers and sisters are and how to regard them as full members of the same Christian family I have covenanted to be faithful to.**

## **5. LOOKING AHEAD**

### **5.1 WHAT CAN I DO?**

**I will try, at least once each year, to put in writing my first-person views on specific elements or practices that are likely to improve the quality of the ecumenical dialogue.**

Ecumenism is, certainly and primarily, a common effort, but the common effort requires individual commitment. The basic answer to the question, "What can I do?" is this (to adapt the words of an ancient prayer): "I will be an ecumenist--in my head and my understanding, in my eyes and my looking, in my mouth and my speaking, in my heart and my thinking, at my end and at my departing. An ecumenist is who I am, and as a result ecumenism is what I do." Robert S. Bilheimer's challenge, cited earlier, to exercise ecumenical imagination, is directed relentlessly to

each and every one of us. Ecumenism is a vocation. It is a high calling, but not always a popular one. **I am tremendously saddened and dismayed that the raised eyebrows and rolling of the eyes when I have spoken of my desire to be involved in ecumenism have come from clerics, most under the age of thirty-five.**

Many conference participants said, in one way or another, that their main obligation is to work harder at ecumenism, give it higher priority, stay in for the long haul, study, and study some more, pray, and pray some more. The congregation, the local community, the circle of acquaintances, the workplace: these are the arenas in which people see opportunity to get beyond being stuck. **I need a bridge between my spiritual world and the secular world.** The conference encouraged the hope that "I can make a difference, we're not fated to business as usual"; and making a difference doesn't require that we call in heavy equipment. **My suggestions sound so simple and basic--foster our family-feeling, put ourselves into our relatives' "homes," heighten our appreciation of our common ancestry and our common bond as adopted members of the family, teach appreciation for the parts of the heritage that the various denominations have preserved.**

The ecumenical movement is not well served by inflation of rhetoric, by an expression of its ideals so lofty that most people think it is beyond their grasp, out of their hands. Stating the goal too grandiosely is like the "for instance, Mother Teresa" or "for instance, Saint Francis" syndrome. Most people can honestly say, "I'm so far from being Mother Teresa or Saint Francis that if you cite them as examples, you get me off the hook; what they exemplify doesn't apply to me." The unity of the church is a goal worthy of a lifetime's commitment, but it is a goal that is built patiently, slowly, one ecumenist at a time. To organize an eight-person ecumenical Bible study group, and to keep it going year after year, is at least as important an act of ecumenical upbuilding as is membership in an official theological dialogue commission. Each individual is responsible for modeling what the body of Christ should be like. **Nobody can get others to do what they won't do themselves. You don't bring unity by orchestrating diverse warring groups to have a facade of unity at the top.**

**Accompany friends to worship services in other traditions--*several times*. Get to know clergy in the other traditions.**

**I can work for better understanding of the differences, and so become better able to describe them for others.**

**I can make every effort to understand another's point of view, and to distinguish sincere conviction from malicious manipulation.**

**Being true to what I believe is essential Christianity, the restoration of broken relationships, I will refuse to retaliate against those who see ecumenical work as a departure from the truth and who attack those of us involved in promoting Christian unity.**

**Acknowledge our obligation to provide the knowledge of God to our children.**

**I would help design ecumenical Bible studies or participate in an ecumenical teaching team.**

**Make pilgrimages to each other's holy places.**

**I will see in each person our kinship, in creation my stewardship, in each event of hostility and destruction my call to bear witness to God's peace, justice, and righteousness.**

**We should not worry so much about discussing the importance of ecumenism; rather, we should worry about how the common Christian will experience ecumenism. To see the ecumenical movement progress at a faster pace, we all need to create experiences in our own communities that will set Christians on fire with a longing for unity.**

**I can form an ecumenical coalition in my area; none currently exists.**

**Working shoulder to shoulder for a common goal ties me irrevocably to my fellow workers.**

**I will form a comparative religions study group in my church.**

**I will get my congregation to sponsor an ecumenical camp.**

**Financial support for conferences is a modest step.**

**I can enhance my own personal awareness through a *regular* program of reading in ecumenical materials.**

**As a farmer, I feel a huge responsibility for care and stewardship of the land.**

**I can commit myself to times of definite prayer.**

## 5.2 WHAT CAN WE DO?

**We need symbolic actions that manifest the extent of agreement already achieved in ecumenical work. Lack of such symbolic actions is discouraging.** The first thing we can do together is celebrate what has already been accomplished. Several symbolic actions are in the planning stage; most dramatic is **the lifting of the sixteenth-century condemnations of one another by the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches, scheduled for 1997.** This event will call to mind another testimony to ecumenical breakthrough, the "removal from the memory and from the midst of the church of the East-West excommunication of 1054," accomplished by Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras in 1965. And the way has been made for many other convergences, such as the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), and the prospective agreements between Lutherans and Episcopalians and Lutherans and the Reformed.

**Bilateral and multilateral agreements must be pushed as to their practical application, and the number of such agreements, to the extent they remove historical or theological barriers to church unity, must be rapidly increased in order to provide theological credibility to the search for unity and the cooperative lives already manifest in our communities.** All sorts of coordinated actions could be taken to signal that we will do apart only what we cannot do together, instead of doing together only what we cannot do apart: cooperative judicatories, joint

ministries, shared evangelization, cross-denominational congregational covenants, creative use of emerging technologies to make an ecumenical network, ecumenical clergy retreats. The challenge of living the gospel in the world, for the sake of the world, can be daunting: **I'm scared as an individual; but what if all of you come with me?**

Symbolic actions can encourage, but ecumenism will be sustained only by education. Many conference participants noted the need for new ecumenical education, and for the education that is already being done to be newly ecumenical, whether in seminaries, in church school curricula, in adult study, in social action settings. **We need discussion and dialogue with our brothers and sisters of other denominations on a regular basis.** Congregations need to know the documents: *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, the decrees of the Second Vatican Council, the publications of councils of churches, whether world, national, regional, or local. The documents need to be known not for their own sake, but as stimulants to the thinking and vision of people where they live their lives.

If education provides sustenance for ecumenism, and symbolic actions provide encouragement, gatherings, such as *Ecumenism Among Us*, provide discernment. The planners of the conference are pleased that so many participants said they hope similar events happen often, in a variety of venues. **We need a lived experience in a worship community, like this conference, to see the great diversity and the unity within the diversity.**

**Make in-depth ecumenical dialogue part of the agenda at every church gathering.**

**Today's emphasis on the local, while an appropriate expression of church fellowship "in each place," frequently becomes a narrow and self-satisfied localism.**

**Continue the conversation; listen, share, reflect, discern, decide, act, rest, begin again. As fundamentals become clearer, conversion moments present themselves, yielding clues regarding needs. As our horizon lines shift because of conversions, and needs are named, design issues arise.**

**Now I am more convinced than ever that American ecumenism is a dead end without the full participation of brothers and sisters from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Russia. Let it become a true Babel, and out of this through prayer perhaps the Holy Spirit will work wonders.**

**There is a Native American saying: "If we work cooperatively we can accomplish anything."**

**Proper information is one way of dispelling ignorance, fear, and misinformation. The reeducation of Christians to Christian ecumenism would do away with the misconception of one world church, the fear of denominational destruction and the loss of religious freedom.**

**Let's develop interracial parish partnerships, to go beyond superficialities.**

**Build small familial ecumenical communities in every neighborhood to counteract the prevailing, media driven secularizing power.**

**What seems hopeful to me are efforts to minister to persons in their work and living environments: at airports, shopping malls, hospitals, on the street, at vocational training institutions, in support groups.**

**Ecumenical agencies and denominational structures need to equip congregations for the daily living of shared life across congregational borders, to the fullest degree possible.**

**We need ecumenical worship events several times a year, preferably scheduled at the usual worship times and substituting for the usual congregational worship.**

**Create nation-wide, state by state, small Christian groups patterned after the "base communities" of Latin America, with life and action centered in Bible study and the eucharist.**

**Can we have a curriculum that teaches ecumenism?**

**Sadly, much of what goes on in the broader ecumenical world never reaches the person in the pew. Denominational agencies of Christian unity need to be actively involved in meeting the ecumenical needs of congregations as well as participating in ecumenical meetings and dialogue groups.**

**The churches have already invested heavily in secondary schools and colleges; what about vocational training schools?**

**Get church leaders involved in a conference just like this.**

**The many denominations in my city need to bring together the laity, the theologians, the ministers, the old, the young, the in-between, to share their stories of faith and their experience of division, as has happened in this conference.**

**What does each tradition believe it can't live without? This would give us a list of the difficult issues, each to be discussed with care, time, and thoughtful deliberation.**

**We lack a tight, focused view of the top priority items to be accomplished in the near term. Without such an understanding, this process will languish. If we could agree on these (eucharist? baptism? ministry? other?), even if they turn out to be the wrong ones, at least some publicly recognizable action may result. Let's narrow our view to increase the odds of success.**

**We need conversion in two areas of understanding: Christian education materials, and theological training. This may bring us into direct tension with our American cultural context, with our religious tradition, and with our own feelings of security.**

**If what is happening at this conference becomes a *movement*, then this meeting may be the important next step itself for the future of the ecumenical movement in North America.**

### 5.3 THE SPIRIT'S SURPRISE

**We need more joint worship services as a way of requiring groups of Christians to plan together, reflect on the unity they have, and see what can be done to foster other steps.** So wrote a conference participant, an hour before the entire group heard the tale of woe from the worship committee recounted in the Introduction to this report. Joint worship services: they gather into sharp focus the pain and the joy of Christian identity. A history of ecumenical worship would demonstrate over and over again the predicament described by the chair of the conference's worship planning committee: **We began our work by considering the tension between a service that will reflect the communion that already exists and a service where worship pushes at the edge of life together.**

The committee knew its task would be difficult. Its oldest member, a veteran of many decades of struggle with the question, said it unflinchingly: **Anything we decide, there's going to be discomfort.** A eucharistic celebration open to everyone and accessible by everyone was never a real possibility, though the committee had to discuss why. What might have been thought a relatively uncontroversial alternative, a foot washing service, proved equally infeasible, for, surprisingly, a rather similar reason: just as the eucharist for some Christians presupposes a unity that does not yet exist, so a foot washing ceremony is part of a larger community process, presupposing an intimacy built up over a stretch of time. **In deciding not to have a foot washing, just as in deciding not to have a eucharist, we were honoring a tradition,** taking seriously a ritual's embodiment in a community.

The ecumenical tension between patience and impatience, a tension that goes with the territory and is not finally resolvable, was palpable in the committee's discussion in the presence of the entire conference on Tuesday morning, and in the spirited question period that followed. Everyone needed to be reminded that **even ten years ago a gathering such as this would have been unlikely. We already realize we share a lot, we have more in common than what separates us. We have to be careful not to jump the gun by engaging in action that would simply cover over the deep divisions that are here.** But equally needed was a reminder that the night before, in the entertainment following the conference banquet, a unity of worship had been unexpectedly found. Conference participants had been invited the first night to volunteer to sing, act, play, or whatever, so that even the banquet entertainment would be in the improvisatory mode of *Ecumenism Among Us*. Some of the performances were funny, some serious, and hymn singing had generated a unity as real as it was hard to specify. **Last night it happened. We thought we were going to have only an entertainment.**

But this was Tuesday, not Monday, and in about eight hours we would either worship together or we wouldn't. It was unthinkable that we wouldn't, but nobody had figured out how we would. One committee member signaled what was required: nothing less than conversion. **We must confront and repent of our inability to come fully open to the way the Spirit is going to move in any worship experience. The manifestation will be only as powerful as we are open**

**when we come to it.** Another member of the committee closed the morning session with a prayer that God be **honored and pleased.**

As people were leaving for lunch, one Pentecostal participant, with a glorious and powerful voice, and with long training in being "fully open to the way the Spirit is going to move," began to sing "Kum Ba Yah." First gradually, then rapidly, scores of people joined in, holding hands and making a huge circle. For many minutes the music carried the hopes and fears that were met in that room that morning. When the singing finally died away, we knew something remarkable had happened. A corner had been turned, a way opened. The Spirit's surprise was afoot.

When we gathered that evening, we found ourselves in the presence of a simple table on which was a candle, surrounded by stacks of the papers that had been written by everyone earlier in the day. The chair of the committee introduced the service not by an expression of resignation or relief, but with a quiet and firm declaration: **Our theme is thanksgiving to God that we have been called to be a people together, not only of this place, but also *people on a journey.***

What followed was song, scripture reading, preaching (two very brief sermons, one by an Assemblies of God pastor who noted that he was accustomed to 45 minute sermons, so it was a severe discipline to be asked to preach 4-to-5 minutes), poetry. **We pray that we may not leave this place the same way we entered,** said the African American Baptist, who then taught us a new version of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," and challenged us to sing in parts without dividing into sections. Later in the service she would focus everyone's attention directly on the God we worship when she sang "How Great Thou Art." A Church of the Brethren pastor prayed: **We're drawn to you, O God, and to one another as we hear one another's song of the soul. Send us the music to be able to sing good songs together: give us the notes, show us the beat, you write the text, show us the importance of melodies and dissonance.** The service concluded with a poem just written, which says in part: **Is it possible that Pentecost came late this year? There's been some change in the calendar of the church, so what was recorded in Acts happened in June, not May of this year, beside a small lake in Minnesota. These few days flames, even tempers, have flared, and then gathered in sacred illumination. We have gathered to honor the diversity of liturgy, worship, song, and to celebrate the Christ who brought us here for Pentecost this year.**

So much in this concluding service brought us together. One participant had written a hymn during the conference. We sang it as a celebration of our common life. The two sermons, one based on 2 Corinthians 5 ("We are ambassadors for Christ"), the other on Matthew 12 ("Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?"), highlighted the melodies and the dissonances. A ministry of reconciliation requires that we be reconciled to one another. **Your doctrines, your view of scripture, might be offensive to me; I may think you narrow-minded, driven by a political agenda. But: how do I choose to respond? Do I choose the offense? Do I respond in unity or division? If your doctrine offends me, there's much about you that doesn't, and I can't be certain it offends God.** And what is the meaning in our context of the family motif in the Gospel? **We are to speak in Christ's behalf to whatever person we meet. Is there a new definition of ecumenism that would fit here? Ecumenism is the willingness to become family.**

The Spirit was surprising us at every turn, not because we were unprepared for the talents and gifts of those who were leading us, but because we had feared there was no center we could all acknowledge, yet here we were being twirled into a circle of light, being knit into a body. And one surprise was nothing short of stunning.

In the morning a good deal of resentment had been directed toward the Orthodox, who were thought by many to be the guardians of tradition at the expense of spontaneity and breakthrough. The Orthodox are accustomed to being perceived this way, though being used to it doesn't make them like it.

After one of the sermons, the Orthodox member of the worship committee began to speak. There were probably several who expected a defense of dogma. Here is what we heard. **For seven weeks before Easter we Orthodox prepare by going to church more often, praying more often, going to confession, fasting. It's a spiritual journey that's like the ecumenical journey, beginning with recognition of our alienation from God and from one another. How far we have fallen short of the goal that we all be one in Christ!--and it's not an option, it's a commandment. We begin the journey with a service, Forgiveness Vespers, on Forgiveness Sunday. After singing hymns and hearing biblical texts about forgiveness, each of us does a full prostration on the ground before every other member of the community. Because everyone bears the image of Christ, we're bowing before the Christ in each person. We get up and ask one another to forgive: "Forgive me, N, for all the sins I have committed against you"; and the response: "God forgives; forgive me too." Then we exchange the kiss of peace. This is what I would like to call us all to today as we proceed on our long, hard journey. This journey is undertaken in mutual love, despite the fact that we have to yell at each other from time to time. Each person with whom we come in contact bears the image of Christ, and we must be reconciled. The worship committee has decided to ask you all to forgive one another. Approach the person next to you, exchange a sign of peace; seek out those from whom you particularly need forgiveness. I want to ask all of you for forgiveness. I know I tend to speak harshly at times. What I try to say is as difficult for me to say as it is for you to hear. Forgive me, and ask one another for God's forgiveness.**

During the next ten minutes *Ecumenism Among Us* became, unmistakably and irrevocably, ecumenism among us. People who had wondered how they could undo harsh and unkind things they had said, people who had been alerted to offenses they had given and been totally unaware of, found themselves unexpectedly in a new world where repentance and forgiveness were natural. What Solzhenitsyn called "the gift of repentance that is particularly difficult for modern people to recover" was suddenly available, precisely as *gift*. A gift, to be recovered, has to be offered, and there it was, among us. And, to the astonishment of many, it was the Orthodox tradition that unlocked the floodgates of feeling for the conference.

For one participant, there had been on the conference's opening night a premonition of the Spirit's surprise. That night saw a summer lightning storm, spectacular even by Minnesota standards. **I was assigned a small dormitory room, starkly efficient, simple, in its plainness quite monastic. Imagine my surprise when I turned out the lights amidst the dazzling, thunderous light show outdoors--to discover that the ceiling is covered with glow-in-the-dark stars! I was reminded that we are *all* one with the universe, together in the galaxy,**

**part of an environment that extends beyond Christians and human members of other faith communities; we are an interdependent part of God's splendid world. We need to acknowledge that interdependency if we are to move beyond the small tensions and conflicts that separate us from one another. Words of a poem I learned decades ago in**

**college came back to me: "The moment we cease to love one another, the moment we cease to hold one another, the sea engulfs us and the lights go out."**

But: when the lights went out the stars started to glow. There is much to deplore, much to regret, much to repent of, much to rejoice in, much to celebrate, much to give God thanks for. There is no excuse for complacency; the ecumenical journey is long and hard. But it is grounded in a promise. **In the end I believe God's church is on course. It is not ours; it is the church of God in Christ, and it will do just fine.**