

# Faith and Ferment

## *Faith and Ferment*

In 1977 the Board of Directors made a bold decision that has shaped the life of the Institute ever since. They undertook a major study, calling into play the disciplines of sociology, psychology, anthropology, and theology, of how Christian faith affects the life of church members in Minnesota, in order to gain information concerning the internal conditions of the churches and their relation to society. The interdisciplinary and ecumenical character of the research gave reasonable assurance that the results would be representative, typical, and not badly skewed or merely idiosyncratic. The database was substantial: 1017 persons returned a questionnaire, and 101 agreed to be interviewed at length and in depth.

This project, called "Faith and Ferment," engaged much of the energy of the Institute for several years. The results are truly impressive. In 1983 Augsburg Publishing House and The Liturgical Press jointly published *Faith and Ferment: An Interdisciplinary Study of Christian Beliefs and Practices*, with Joan D. Chittister, OSB, and Martin E. Marty as primary authors, and Robert S. Bilheimer as editor. The book was greeted with a two-page story in Newsweek, and is still useful as a guide to religious realities in contemporary society. Indeed, Faith and Ferment was one of the earliest studies to illuminate the "pick-and-choose" Christianity which has for so many people taken the place of denominational loyalties and identities common in earlier generations. Additionally, Faith and Ferment was an early warning signal of the way in which divisions within denominations have become generally more bitter and intractable than the historic divisions between denominations.

Sister Joan Chittister wrote the "Presentation of the Data," Martin Marty the "Historical and Theological Analysis." A third section of the book includes essays by seven friends of the Institute in response to various features of the data.

Through the Faith and Ferment project, the Board of Directors gained a new measure of confidence both in their own capacity for insight and foresight, and into the potential for serious, sustained, expert scholarly work to produce results directly useful to the churches as they seek to be faithful to their mission in this time and place.

In June 1985, to move the effect of Faith and Ferment farther forward, the Institute sponsored a conference at Collegeville called Christian Identity, Mission, and Unity Today, which brought together 217 Christians, most of them lay persons, from all regions of Minnesota and about a dozen denominational traditions, for three days. The purpose was not to mull over the book, but rather to see what additional insight and direction could be achieved by conversations that were informed by the study. Conference participants were divided into three sections according to major trends uncovered by Faith and Ferment--Christian Identity; the Influence of Society upon Christians and the Churches; and Current Divisions Between and Within the Churches.

The Report of the conference, while now nearly sixteen years old, is still timely.

## **REPORT**

**OF  
A CONFERENCE  
ON  
CHRISTIAN IDENTITY, MISSION, AND UNITY TODAY**

**held at  
Saint John\*s University  
Collegeville, Minnesota 56321  
June 20-23, 1985**

**A continuation of the  
Faith and Ferment Project  
of the  
INSTITUTE FOR ECUMENICAL  
AND CULTURAL RESEARCH**

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**ABOUT THIS REPORT**

This is the Report of a Conference held in June 1985 in Collegeville, Minnesota, at which 217 Christians, most of them lay persons, from all regions of the state and about a dozen denominational traditions, gathered for three days to discuss Christian Identity, Mission, and Unity Today. The Conference, sponsored by the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research and generously supported by the Otto Bremer Foundation, the Central Province Sharing Fund of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, and Piper, Jaffray & Hopwood, Incorporated, was a continuation of the Institute's Faith and Ferment Project.

This project was undertaken by the Institute's Board of Directors in the conviction that the historic function of ecumenical study—to think ahead five to ten years for the churches—requires a clear understanding of what the actual current state of the churches is. *Faith and Ferment: An Interdisciplinary Study of Christian Beliefs and Practices*, by Joan D. Chittister, OSB, and Martin F. Marty, edited by Robert S. Bilheimer (Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, and The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 1983), is a uniquely thorough and comprehensive portrayal and analysis of a Christian culture. It documents great vitality and great confusion among the Christians of Minnesota.

The June 1985 Conference, held at Saint John's University and graced by the warm hospitality of the Benedictine monks of Saint John's Abbey, was not conceived as an occasion to study a book, though the book certainly informed all of the planning for the Conference. Rather, our goal was to move from the findings of *Faith and Ferment*, through the process of first-person reflection and discussion by Conference participants, to a well-informed and clearly articulated sense of what will be the paramount issues for the churches to work on together during the next five to ten years.

Conference participants were divided into three Sections according to major trends uncovered by Faith and Ferment—Christian Identity, the Influence of Society and Culture upon Christians and the Churches, and Current Divisions Between and Within the Churches. Each Section was further subdivided into discussion groups of eight to ten persons, and each group met four times for a total of more than eight hours. Each group had a Facilitator and a Reporter. The Reporters met with their Section Leader periodically throughout the Conference, and in the closing plenary session of the Conference the Section Leaders gave preliminary Section Reports which were then commented on briefly by the Section's Reporters who formed a panel. The Section Leaders were the following: Joann Wolski Conn, Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Graduate Faculty in Pastoral Counseling Program, Neumann College, Aston, Pennsylvania; Murdale C. Leysath, Minnesota Conference Minister, United Church of Christ; Carl A. Volz, Professor of Church History, Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, Saint Paul.

In addition to the time spent in discussion groups, where the main effort of the Conference was concentrated, participants also worshiped together frequently and had several opportunities to hear speakers whose words proved highly relevant to the concerns that emerged in the discussion groups. Those speakers, who are quoted by name in this Report, were the following: Robert S. Bilheimer, retired Executive Director of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research; Joan D. Chittister, OSB, Prioress of Mount Saint Benedict, Erie, Pennsylvania; Patrick Henry, Executive Director, Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research; Thomas Hoyt, Jr., Professor of Biblical Studies, Hartford Seminary Foundation, Hartford, Connecticut; Richard J. Mouw,

Professor of Christian Philosophy and Ethics, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California; Margaret O'Gara, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology, Saint Michael's College, University of Toronto; Anton J. Ugolnik, Associate Professor of English, Franklin and Marshall College, Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

This Report is not a consensus document or "Conference Communiqué." It has not been seen by Conference participants prior to its publication, so it makes no claim to having their endorsement. What it does claim to be is one person's considered effort to discern-in the records of the group discussions, the Section Leaders' summaries, and the plenary session speeches-what more than two hundred committed Christians believe is the task God has set before the churches in this time. As such, the Report is commended to the Conference participants themselves and to anyone else who cares to listen.

Patrick Henry, Executive Director  
Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research  
June 1985

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## I. WE ARE THE CHURCH

Participants in this Conference, like the subjects of the *Faith and Ferment* study, are not a cross-section of Minnesota society. They are all persons who identify themselves as Christians and are involved to some degree (in most cases to a very large degree) in the organized life of a Christian church. *Faith and Ferment* had shown that the Christian identity of clearly identifiable Christians is often hard to specify. Conference discussion, while not trying to discern all the blurred edges of Christian identity, helped explain some of the confusion. When we who speak are those to whom we speak, we encounter head-on the problem and mystery of *accountability*.

### A. ACCOUNTABILITY

In countless ways participants could be heard saying, "We are the church-pay attention to us." Not all would have agreed with the claim that the church has not been addressing people's realities and concerns, but there was an undercurrent of frustration with the church's lack of responsiveness (or at least tardiness of response) to what is really in the hearts and minds of its members. People need to feel they make a difference, and the attention Conference participants paid to this issue suggests they do not feel they make enough of a difference.

*But:* to whom are we speaking when we ask to be heard? "Pay attention to us" begins to reverberate in an echo chamber precisely because of what precedes it: "We are the church." Most of the Conference participants are lay persons, and they speak with excitement about the new sense of lay responsibility for the church and its mission, but the old habit of referring to the church as "they" or "theirs" is hard to eradicate. Indeed, as one participant put it acutely: "We are moving from hierarchy to shared leadership without having first been liberated." We want to be involved, we are frustrated with continuing clergy domination-but we are so accustomed to deferring to the clergy as the church's experts. As Patrick Henry noted in the Conference's

opening lecture, "Saying 'I have no authority as a Christian thinker' may sound virtuously humble, but it is really a subtle recognition that thinking is hard work and a confession that we would rather not be bothered."

Participants recognized that "the church's reluctance to lead" and "the laity's reluctance to lead" are nearly identical phrases, and are both rooted in long-established habits and attitudes: fear of alienating some, and a narrowing of the church's focus so that whole realms of social and economic and political life are considered outside the reach of the church's "expertise." Indeed, on all sorts of issues we trust what the government tells us more than what the church tells us-not so much on the grounds of respect for political authority as on the assumption that the government has the experts.

Our culture's obsession with expertise is entirely different from the church's dependence on God's gifts. The church's responsibility is not to defer to "experts," but to seek out and nurture all the resources of gift and grace that the Holy Spirit has poured out on all who are named by the name of Christ. The Conference participants clearly rejoiced in the richness of treasure they had to offer each other. The challenge before the churches now is to make that kind of excited discovery of our vitality and accountability real at home, beyond an extraordinary three-day gathering in a place unburdened with the restrictions of our regular routines.

We are all accountable and we would all like to avoid accountability. We want to make a difference but we are not happy that making a difference will probably require us to live differently. As Anton Ugolnik said in his lecture to the Conference, "Anybody can make a choice free of choices-that is, choose an identity that doesn't cost us a single sacrifice."

In a church where we ask that attention be paid, and discover that we are admonishing ourselves, what is true *leadership*?

## **B. LEADERSHIP**

At no time in the Conference was there a suggestion that Christian identity is incompatible with leadership in the Christian community. The question is not "How can we divest ourselves of the burden of leaders?" but "How can leaders be helped not to feel threatened by shifts in leadership styles?" In earlier times the terms that are used today by Conference participants to characterize the kind of leadership they want in the church-inclusive, facilitating, collegial-might have been thought incompatible with leadership itself, but this "new" understanding is really very old, and is rooted in the New Testament. As Richard Mouw demonstrated in his Conference Bible study on Revelation 5, when Christ the Head of the Church is identified as the Lamb who was slain, the very meaning of rule and authority is turned inside out.

It is clear that Conference participants consider the forming and training of church leaders a concern of the highest priority. Subtle connections did not escape notice. Leadership and language are linked: those who write church documents, including ecumenical ones, should be subject to the discipline of plain speech, free of jargon and administrative huff and puff. We are being trained and shaped every time we get together: all church meetings should be designed to model collegial rather than hierarchical relationships.

Beyond the subtle points, though, are two of the most widely held convictions among the Conference participants: that clergy training and adult education demand a thorough evaluation and refashioning. To an alarming degree, participants reported that in their experience clergy had not been adequately prepared for the new style of leadership the church requires. The Conference itself did not undertake to specify what form appropriate training would take, but the Conference is clearly urging those responsible for clergy training to take much more seriously than before the opinions of lay persons when planning curriculums. When the sense of identity that clergy have of themselves intimidates or aggravates those who are not ordained, the Christian identity of everyone in the community, both clergy and laity, is damaged.

Adult education in the church, too, was a focus of deep concern, and as with clergy training, the Conference did not try to outline a program. However, a variety of styles and topics is certainly necessary, and awareness of the stages of the adult learning cycle must pervade all the planning. Conference participants spoke feelingly of their hunger for solid work in theology and history. The electrifying effect of Anton Ugolnik's first-hand report of the life of Christian Believers in the Soviet Union, and of Thomas Hoyt, Jr.'s ringing proclamation of the liberating character of the Gospel, made everyone at the Conference vividly aware of how much we can learn in church that can radically broaden our perspective-and our faithfulness to Christ.

Conference participants did specify one feature of clergy training and adult education the church needs: it must all have an explicitly ecumenical character. One bishop at the Conference noted that in pastors' job descriptions churches usually put "ecumenical activity" at the bottom of the priority list, if it is on the list at all. Taking seriously what this Conference is proposing, he said, means that he and his counterparts in other churches must so act that ecumenical activities and concerns are valued *and rewarded*. Furthermore, ecumenical questions should be high on the agenda of every meeting of every denomination's executives, not simply something for the "other business" item when, once in a while, a little time is left over. Participants in this Conference encourage theological seminaries to move toward further ecumenical cooperation, and even more important, toward giving to the teaching and training of clergy at least as much ecumenical emphasis as is now given to their preparation for service in a particular denomination.

Joan Chittister, OSB, helped to set the terms for discussion of the true character of leadership in the church in the Conference's opening sermon. She asked directly, "What is required of religious leaders in our time?" and answered in a striking exegesis of two biblical stories: "We need the *memory* of Esther, who was challenged to 'Remember who you are,\* and the *vision* of Mary Magdalene, who recognized possibility in the midst of the imperfect and called the present beyond the past."

### C. MEMORY AND VISION

We who are the church form our identity both by our faithfulness to what we have been given and by our willingness to imagine a future different from the present. Anton Ugolnik stated the relationship of past and future this way: "Identity anchored in tradition not only roots us to the past; it is also our assurance for the future." Many Conference participants admitted their fear of making decisions in the face of the baffling complexity of today's world, but spoke also of an irrepressible hope and confidence in the future of the church.

It was sobering to hear projections of the church's decreasing influence in the world, but Conference participants did not indulge in nostalgia for a past in which the church played a larger role in setting the world's spiritual and civil agendas. Sister Joan's question, "What kind of sign will we be?" focused attention on the quality and intensity of Christian commitment rather than on the numbers of Christians, and thus made an important point about ecumenism. The ecumenical movement is not primarily about statistics, a least-common-denominator effort to please everybody and offend no one. It is, rather, a discovery together of an identity richer, deeper, and more challenging to the world than any of us individually, and any of our denominations, has alone-in short, our identity as the Body of Christ. Robert Bilheimer put it this way in the Conference's closing sermon: We belong to "the Christ who addresses each person among us in every stage of life, and who is beyond all stages of life calling each of us to join him beyond the point where we now are."

Many Conference discussion groups spent time pondering the question about how the faith will be transmitted to the next generation, but the question was posed not in terms of whether the membership rolls will be kept up but rather in terms of the Christian identity of the next generation. While that question is in one form or another faced by the church in every age, it has a special acuteness today because the transmission of traditions (including religious traditions) within families has been so drastically weakened by the impact of social forces on family structure and interaction. One result of the disappearance of strong family traditions is a "me" culture, in which identity is linked neither to memory nor to vision because there is no sense of responsibility for what has been or to what is coming. Richard Mouw noted in the Conference Bible study that to live as a Christian is to live in a story-God's story-and my identity cannot be separated out, cut off, from the whole story of the people God has called and will call. The identity of each Christian generation is not entirely its to decide.

The Conference was alerted to a momentous, even revolutionary aid to the recovery of both memory and vision. Margaret O'Gara spoke about *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, a consensus theological statement issued by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. This document, the product of fifty years of discussion, and including full Protestant, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic participation, is "an astounding achievement in which all of the churches, for the first time in a thousand years, are able to speak together about some of the most sensitive and explosive issues which define their identity. For the first time in a thousand years, the churches have found a common voice." *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* brings us closer together by recovering the richness of biblical imagery, by highlighting the complementarity rather than the exclusiveness of our various traditions, and by setting old debates in a larger context.

Authentic tradition is much fuller than any of us had thought. As Margaret O'Gara said, "This statement is more mature and wise than most of our churches are yet. We have to grow up on to this statement." *BEM* has been sent to the churches for their reception. Conference participants, believing that *we* are the church, expressed a strong desire for widespread discussion of *BEM*; many participants were distressed that prior to this Conference they had never heard about it. If, in Margaret O'Gara's words, "*BEM* has changed the identity of the churches permanently," then at the very least *BEM* should be a central focus of adult study in every parish and congregation, and should be an occasion for the formation of ecumenical study groups in local communities.

## II. WE ARE COMMITTED-AND CONFUSED

*Faith and Ferment* makes clear two overriding features of Christian life in Minnesota: its vitality-and its confusion. Conference discussion confirmed this impression, especially when the subject was the influence of society and culture upon Christians and the churches. As one Conference participant put it: "How can we find *a solid faith for a plural world?*"

### A. A SOLID FAITH FOR A PLURAL WORLD

From the records of Conference discussion it is possible to construct a catalogue of cultural forces commonly thought to determine the way we live today: mobility, uprootedness, technology, materialism, the media, etc. Some see these conditions as dangerous to the faith, and speak of a power struggle between society and the church for the loyalty of church members. Others, acknowledging the complexity of the issues we face, nevertheless puzzle over the ways in which faith can grow and mature in response to cultural challenges.

Some of the dangers are clear to everyone. Overwhelming forces in our society proclaim the value of instant gratification and teach us not to make long-term commitments. Trust in one another has given way to wholesale fear of the threat of lawsuits. American values are often uncritically identified with Christian values because we would be uncomfortable if we faced the discrepancies and contradictions, and we are always in danger of making our American way of doing things into an idol. As Patrick Henry put it, "We North American Christians simply do not begin to understand how many ways there are other than our own for appropriating and expressing the Gospel. I suspect that underlying our lack of awareness is an all-too-typically American assumption that those other ways are inferior to our ways and hence not worth our time."

One Conference participant suggested that our confusion stems from our failure to see our experience and our struggle as religious. This remark might seem out of phase with the churchly identity of the more than two hundred persons attending the Conference, but it resonates with the concern expressed in many different ways that the churches be more explicit in combating the sharp flesh/spirit distinction which still bedevils our thinking and feeling. We too easily assign our social and cultural life to a realm separate from our religious life. This problem in our spirituality was highlighted by Anton Ugolnik, who noted that in Russian literature still today the underlying concerns are always spiritual "because we are, irrepressibly, creatures of the spirit." In the Soviet Union, where it costs something to be a Believer, the spiritual significance of all of life is treasured. Here, where bearing the name of Christian, if not quite so socially advantageous as it used to be, remains easy to do, we all too readily miss the connections.

Because we miss the connections, we do not characteristically understand faith as a lifelong conversion process, as a taking of risks without safeguards and without knowing the outcome. We expect gratitude for servanthood even though we know that the Lamb was slain. Thomas Hoyt, Jr., pointed out how people today, in their fright, are retreating into comfortable and homogeneous ingroups, and he further reminded the Conference that "One cannot take sides with hurt people and not get hurt." Our unwillingness to sacrifice for the Gospel, our contentment with being unsavory salt, dead leaven, and lamps under bushels, are evidences of *sin*.

## B. SIN

One of the most widely-noted findings of *Faith and Ferment* is the "demise of sin"; only 57 percent of the respondents to the questionnaire consider themselves sinful or believe it is essential to Christian faith to believe that all people are sinful. Since it appears unusual in Christian history for 43 percent of the faithful to dispense with the category of sin, several Conference discussion groups spent time exploring the meaning of sin and its lack of meaningfulness for so many Christians today.

At one level the problem is linguistic. "Many do not even know the meaning of the word 'sin,' and certainly cannot recognize the condition," is the forthright way one participant expressed it. At another level, the problem is one of redressing a balance: "It used to be everything was a sin, now nothing is." At yet another level, awareness of social and collective sin is so overwhelming that many choose simply to ignore it. In the view of some participants, the church is still too ready to specify private sins and too reluctant to name social sins, and progress is seen as moving away from labeling "sinful acts" to confronting whatever is destructive. Two of the most blatant of social sins, which demand repentance both by individuals and by churches, were named by Conference speakers. Thomas Hoyt, Jr.: "It is not that the problem of racism lacks theological clarity and articulation. There is a lack of commitment and action in proportion to need." Joan Chittister: "We teach religion in a world where women are even left out of the language right in their own church. But what's worse, we teach religion in a world where people say God wants it that way." Several groups reported that racism and sexism seem almost chronic in our society. Is that so partly because we have masked the reality of sin, and think all we need to do is some social tinkering instead of repenting and changing the way we act?

The demise of sin comes from social and psychological causes as well as from language, historical imbalance, and complexity. Popular psychology has taught us to look inward and has at the same time led us to confuse the condition of sin with the burden of guilty feelings. Our society's worship of self-reliance and self-sufficiency nudges us, when we feel neither self-reliant nor self-sufficient, into an ever more strident self-centeredness, and greed is transformed from one of the seven deadly sins into a measure of our accomplishment: instead of "Become what you are!" the message we hear is, "You are what you have!"

Perhaps another reason we do not take sin very seriously is the way sin can confuse our characteristically American passion for getting things done. Our admiration of achievement, both our own and that of others, reinforces our suspicion of warnings that all human motives are tainted. There is, in fact, an intimate linkage between contemplation and an honest recognition of sin. If we step back from our frenzied activity, we can see the wisdom in the plea of one Conference participant: "I want the church to reassert the doctrine of original sin as a way of lifting from me the awful burden of trying to be perfect." A recovery of sin, in the interests both of realism and of hope, can be aided by a better balance between *action and reflection*.

## C. ACTION/REFLECTION

One Conference participant stated a classic Christian dilemma this way: "Is the church meant to be a comfort to the weary or a challenge to its members?" It is easy-and correct - to answer,

"Both," but to *be* both is not easy and never has been so. Very few Christians live lives of undistracted contemplation or unreflective action, but most of the participants in the Conference consider the church today to be in great need of more reflection-for the sake of, among other things, more effective action.

From many quarters in the Conference there came pleas for careful and critical examination of the overfull church calendars that have insinuated themselves into our consciousness as the measure of our Christian commitment. Nearly everyone deplores our over-scheduled personal and family schedules (in light of which the spiritually devastating empty calendars of the unemployed can all too easily be forgotten), but we do not always recognize how deeply the church, too, is infected by the same frenzy of activity. We do not grant clergy sufficient study time. "If the pastor spends a couple of hours every day reading," suggested Patrick Henry, "the church members may view that period as 'leisure time,' time taken away from the job. We have made the clerical vocation a calling to the telephone, not a searching of the Word." Conference participants look to church leaders to act as bridges between the models of church as nurturer of its members and church as servant of the larger world; such a desire implies a new willingness to grant to clergy-and even to expect from them-regular time spent in reflection that is "nonproductive" by our usual standards of efficiency and effectiveness. Several Conference groups are concerned that the churches make an effort to restore Sunday to a special place in the time of Christians. Commercial and other encroachments on Sunday were not deplored in themselves; the issue, rather, is the ease with which Christians have made their own Sunday activities virtually indistinguishable from those of any other day of the week.

Anton Ugolnik spoke of what he as an American needs to learn and relearn from Russian Believers: "I have found in my own life that when service to the Gospel confines itself to frenetic activity, the life of the Gospel within grows pale and weak. We could use some of the quiet confidence of the Russian Believer." Ecumenism frequently begins around common action on pressing issues. Thomas Hoyt, Jr., reflecting on the history of the ecumenical movement and what it promises for the future, said, "It is in trying to live and work together in serving God and meeting the real needs of human beings that our churches may grow together into a kind of unity largely hidden from us now." Reflection is not for the sake of withdrawal from the real needs of human beings, but for discernment of the unity, hidden yet emerging, that is given to us when we live and work together. From a base in that unity, what we do will be action and not frenetic activity. One of the Conference discussion groups suggested that the churches initiate a program of lifestyle assessment for their members. Such a program, if conceived in a way to raise issues sharply, could be very unsettling, but could also help us see how much spiritual and practical-or rather, spiritual/practical-gain we could get from a better balance between action and reflection in our lives as individuals and communities.

### **III. THOUGH WE ARE MANY, WE ARE ONE**

Ecumenism is about the unity of the church. In popular opinion, the goal of unity is often confused with uniformity of belief and hugeness of structure. Participants in this Conference made very clear they would not want any ecumenism like that-and further, that they know such a caricature of unity is a travesty of real ecumenism. The unity of the church is not an institutional achievement dependent on our administrative and diplomatic cleverness. The unity of the church

is a gift we have been given by God. It is already there, and our job is to discover it-together. We begin the discovery by acknowledging that the primary fact about ourselves is our *identity as Christian*.

### A. IDENTITY AS CHRISTIAN

A kind of "ecumenical instinct" surfaced frequently in Conference discussions. Participants had come to such a meeting because they were searching for deeper meaning in their hives as Christians, and they instinctively knew, even if they had been trained otherwise, that genuine engagement with Christians of widely varying traditions-indeed, of strikingly different styles of being Christian- is the essential component of such a search.

At a bare minimum, such engagement with others can dissolve stereotypes and prejudices. Margaret O'Gara reminisced about the time in divinity school when her Lutheran professor in a course on the Reformation, a class in which she was the only Roman Catholic, politely asked her if she would like to say a word in support of indulgences. "The Roman Catholic Church in his mind was not the Roman Catholic Church that I knew, that I had grown up in. I determined to try to bridge the gap between his understanding and my own." A first test of ecumenical honesty is to ask Christians of another tradition if they recognize themselves in my description of them.

The goal of this process of mutual understanding is not the blurring of distinctions, the abandonment of differences. Participants in the Conference insisted that their denominations are important to them, treasures given them by God. Denominations are not the scandal, denominationalism is. Denominations can be celebrated as the diversity of gifts, but when denominations become exclusive, when we assume that within the confines of our own denominational tradition we have adequately told the story and taught the lesson, when ecumenism is stifled or silenced in the interests of perpetuating denominational power structures, diversity of gifts is corrupted into a straitjacketing of the Spirit. The conviction that God's kingdom goes beyond denomination and nation sounded strongly in the Conference discussions, and most participants surely could identify with these further words of Margaret O'Gara, "My home was too small. It is still my home-my beloved home-but I feel restless in it."

Is diversity within the Christian community a sign of health? It all depends. One of the memorable phrases associated with *Faith and Ferment* is "pick-and-choose Christianity," and while the study itself interprets this development as on the whole unfortunate, the Conference discussion groups thought the verdict not quite so clear. Many of the participants had themselves lived through a variety of denominational identities. If the withering away of denominational loyalty on the part of many Christians is the result of a genuine effort to find a meaningful and challenging Christian community to commit themselves to and be nurtured by, then "pick-and-choose" may reveal a new and welcome seriousness about matters of faith. If, however, "pick-and-choose" is motivated by the desire to find a community in which one is entirely comfortable, in which the status quo is sanctified, then the development endangers authentic Christian witness.

There was in the Conference a kind of reveling in the richness of images and stories that participants offered to one another. The extensive time spent together in small discussion groups-

a total of more than eight hours with the same eight or nine other persons-gave occasion for probing beneath superficialities, and even for discovering that all of us are part of the chorus of tradition, the chorus Anton Ugolnik contrasted with the common misperception of tradition as a stately series of individual voices. And in one of its most specific suggestions, the Conference urges the churches to develop new attitudes, even new language, for dealing with the most intensive of all potentially ecumenical communities: marriages between adherents of different Christian traditions. The commonly used term "interfaith marriage" should be systematically and persistently challenged, for it denies the common Christian identity of the partners. "Interdenominational marriage" would be more accurate, and "ecumenical marriage" would indicate that such unions can be signs of the unity we seek, though it is important not to confuse the mere juxtaposition of two traditions with authentic ecumenism. If an interdenominational marriage is to be truly ecumenical, the partners-*and their respective churches*-need to see their coming together as an ecumenical opportunity to be explored, not an interdenominational problem to be solved. Can the churches develop a common pastoral approach to such marriages? The Conference strongly urges them to try.

*Faith and Ferment* demonstrates the power of social science methods to uncover and interpret important realities about our life as individuals and as communities. In discussions of our oneness in Christ and how to make it more real (as, for example, in considering interdenominational marriages), Conference participants showed their own conviction of a truth often reaffirmed by social science-namely, that *attitudes follow behaviors*.

## **B. ATTITUDES FOLLOW BEHAVIORS**

*Do things together ecumenically*: this is the most heartfelt of this Conference's recommendations to the churches. Ecumenism needs an experiential base if we are to overcome the resistance in the sentiments phrased by Joan Chittister, "You have to realize that things just are the way they are"; "You are fantasizing the impossible"; "What you want can't be done." No one at the Conference belittles the importance of ecumenical talk-after all, talking is what we did for three days at Collegeville. But talk must be followed by-*accompanied* by-common action. Talking together is an enormous help in overcoming fears and defensiveness, but it takes working together, worshiping together (as we did frequently during the Conference), praying with and for each other, to root out residual prejudices.

In countless ways the Conference registered the conviction that it is not enough to say "Lord, Lord" without doing the will of God. "Unity among churches," declared Thomas Hoyt, Jr., "is predicated upon how they confront issues of humankind for the life of the world." Doing things together for the sake of the life of the world is a way around and beyond the various in-house difficulties and frustrations that weigh down our denominations. But we must be careful not to let concern for particular issues be identified as the whole of the gospel. "We cannot and should not give up working on our issues," Robert Bilheimer said, and then continued: "To speak in the sight of God requires a discipline in which my issue and other issues live together, a discipline in which we do not lose sight of the whole, a discipline of being in Christ in the sight of God and not merely in sight of the issue which strikes me just now as being the most important."

At the same time, we must be careful not to deflect direct challenges to our habitual ways of being Christian by dismissing the challenges as "just someone else's issue." Two challenges received special attention in several of the discussion groups.

Full intercommunion between the churches has been, and remains, the most elusive of ecumenical goals. *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* has brought the goal nearer, but the fact remains that week in, week out, the Feast of the Lamb demonstrates our divisions more than our unity, our memory of old and bitter divisions rather than our vision of the faithfulness together to which God calls us. Not everyone at the Conference agreed, but there was a strong conviction, widely held, that intercommunion can and should be implemented immediately. In the venerable debate between those who say intercommunion is an essential means to unity and those who say intercommunion is the outward and visible sign of unity already achieved, the center of gravity of this Conference was clearly all the side of intercommunion as means. But it is not as if the reality of unity is not already present. The participants in the Conference sensed, felt, knew in their time together the oneness we have in Christ, and in light of that experience the traditional barriers to intercommunion seem less than compelling.

The Conference's other challenge to the churches to change their behavior as a means to changing attitudes is the urgency of feminism. Conference participants had on the whole moved beyond treating feminism simply as "an issue." Not everyone would have agreed with one group's conclusion that feminism speaks to all issues and looks for a new vision, but the Conference clearly registered feminism as one of the paramount concerns for the churches today. Patrick Henry put it this way: "The voice of women and the voice of the Gospel are not identical, but the harmonies are very rich and very deep, and we must all-both men and women-listen to those harmonies." Inclusive language is simply an imperative. Language behavior may well be the most powerful of all the forces shaping our attitudes. Our habits are hard to change, and for just that reason we must work hard to change them. Feminist images of God are jarring to many- and for just that reason they can free us from bondage to prejudices that lie deep beyond our consciousness. And a behavior that is especially characteristic of women is increasingly important in carrying the ecumenical movement forward-networking.

### **C. NETWORKING**

Conference participants made numerous suggestions of ways to perpetuate and enhance the kind of breakthrough to unity they experienced in the days together in Collegeville. The suggestions have in common a skepticism about largeness of scale and of numbers, and a regard for the personal more than the institutional, though the institutional was not disregarded. For example, the question was raised: Why does each congregation and each denomination insist on thinking of itself as a "full service church"? Can we start thinking of ourselves as interdependent churches, sharing gifts and pooling resources (for example, educational materials and methods and equipment), instead of each trying to do and have everything?

The Conference sees much hope in the development of small faith-sharing groups within congregations, and even better, between congregations, groups that can sustain themselves over a period of time beyond one or two introductory sessions. Ways need to be found to encourage those Christians now silent to participate in the dialogue that constitutes the engagement of all of

us with the developing history of Christian thought. Prayer with Christians of other traditions must become part of our regular practice, not an activity reserved for one special day a year. Prayer for Christian unity is undergirded by the united prayer of Christians. We must support one another when acting in a prophetic role means the going gets tough. We can share with each other our own discoveries; for instance, churches which have moved ahead faster than others toward the use of inclusive language have much insight and experience to offer those churches which are only now beginning to deal with the question. And everyone at the Conference would welcome the appearance of an ecumenical directory of services, a sort of "Whole Ecumenical Catalogue," to alert persons who are ecumenical, even those who do not know they are, to the range of networks available to them.

The Conference itself may have established the nerve-lines of an ecumenical network for Minnesota. Conference participants urged each other to find ways to make real in their own local situations the sharing and mutual support that were so powerfully real during the Conference. During the concluding worship service all took part in a simple, deeply moving ritual of reappropriating and renewing their baptism. Quietly, but with unmistakable power, we were reminded of who we are—the many members of the Body of Christ, united in one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. Robert Bilheimer, in the sermon during that worship service, stated the challenge and the hope of Christian identity, mission, and unity today: "As by a miracle, we have a priceless fellowship with one another in Christ. Let us, however, make no mistake: that fellowship has been given to us for a purpose. The people of God has been set within the peoples of the world for witness to God-in-Christ. We still have the opportunity of making a far more telling witness than we are now making, granted the imagination to make it together. Can we not come out of our in-house woodwork? Can we not be far more articulate in common concerns? Have we exhausted all of the possibilities of imagination concerning a common witness?"