

Unity, Union, or Uniformity
A quest for precision

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The primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches is to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe.¹

-- Constitution and Rules of the World Council of Churches

Introduction

The epitaph of this paper is taken from the Constitution and Rules of the World Council of Churches. It makes a clear statement about the purpose of the organization: unity. Furthermore, a variety of documents, statements, working groups, etc. have been composed over the years around the goal of unity. In preparation for the 10th General Assembly in Busan, I found myself joyful to see that there existed a space for Christian communities to come together and reconcile their differences. However, after two weeks of dialogues and plenary sessions, it became evident that the reality and stated goal were in great tension. At first I thought, “Is this blatant hypocrisy? Are some proclaiming that they want unity when they really want something else? Why continue to participate in a body that has a goal contrary to one’s reality?” But it is ungodly to simply become jaded and lose hope, and I realized it was not a matter of blatant hypocrisy but a matter of linguistic inadequacy. The word “unity” clearly means different things to different people. In this paper, I will explain the three meta-ideas of unity I found manifest in Busan, propose an expansion of language, and challenge the member communities of the World Council of Churches to discernment and accountability.²

Background

¹ *Constitution and Rules of the World Council of Churches*, World Council of Churches, 30 October 2013, <<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2013-busan/adopted-documents-statements/wcc-constitution-and-rules>> (10 December 2013).

² My approach is terminological rather than theological. I do not intend to provide an answer or opinion on this matter but rather hope to ignite conversations around the goal of the World Council of Churches and recognition of the unmasked and uninhibited truthful reality versus the reality on paper.

In chapter three of *Ecumenical Visions for the 21st Century: A Reader for Theological Education*, Mélisande Lorke and Dietrich Werner have compiled the primary documents one needs to understand the World Council of Church's proclaimed idea of unity. Though all the documents in this chapter are edifying and extremely influential, one document stands out as perhaps the most significant. The statement entitled "The Church: Towards a Common Vision"³ is a detailed account of the World Council of Church's mission and is "rooted in the nature and mission of the Church and reflects the constitutional aims and self-identity of the WCC as a fellowship of Churches who call each other to the goal of visible unity."⁴ A study of the Commission on Faith and Order, this statement explains the theological, sacramental, and faith elements understood by unity: "The unity of the body of Christ consists in the gift of *koinonia* or communion that God graciously bestows upon human beings. There is a growing consensus that *koinonia*, as communion with the Holy Trinity, is manifested in three interrelated ways: unity in faith, unity in sacramental life, and unity in service (in all its forms, including ministry and mission)."⁵ Without stressing every detail, it is important to recognize that this document presents unity as being of one mind,⁶ recognizes that this is a process that has not yet been fully realized,⁷ and cooperation is a part of the journey.⁸

³ Faith and Order Commission, "The Church: Towards a Common Vision." In *Ecumenical Visions for the 21st Century: A Ready for Theological Education*, edited by Mélisande Lorke and Dietrich Werner (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publication, 2013), 121-147.

⁴ Faith and Order Commission, "Towards a Common Vision," 121.

⁵ Faith and Order Commission, "Towards a Common Vision," 142. Italics in the original.

⁶ Being of one mind is referring to the greatest obstacle noted in the introduction of "Towards a Common Vision:" "our understanding of the nature of the Church itself."

⁷ In other words there are still distinct and real differences between the Christian communities of the World Council of Churches.

⁸ Working together is a means to the end goal of unity but does not necessarily reflect the goal's achievement.

The basic principles of “The Church: Towards a Common Vision” are summarized in document PRC 01.1 entitled *Unity Statement – Revised*. Adopted in Busan by the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, the affirmation proclaims:

We affirm the place of the Church in God’s design and repent of the divisions among and within our churches, confessing with sorrow that our disunity undermines our witness to the good news of Jesus Christ and makes less credible our witness to that unity God desires for all ... In faithfulness to this our common calling, we will seek together the full visible unity of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church when we shall express our unity around the one Table of the Lord.⁹

Having been adopted by the member communities of the World Council of Churches, one would imagine that the dialogue, plenary speeches, etc. would revolve around a reconciliation process.

The reality of the proceedings, though, revealed two distinct understandings of unity.

Furthermore, private and public conversations revealed a third, closely related yet distinct, obstacle to progress.

A Personal Account of the Assembly

The Global Ecumenical Theological Institute (GETI) ran parallel to and in conjunction with the proceedings of the World Council of Churches 10th Assembly. At one of the GETI lectures, Rev. Dr. Michael Kinnamon, former General Secretary of the National Council of Churches, delivered a speech entitled *New Contours of Ecumenism in the Twenty-First Century*. In his brief talk, Dr. Kinnamon questions the commitment of the member communities to the constitutional goal of unity. In explaining why he asks the question, he observes two diverging paths the ecumenical movement has taken throughout the years.

One path “argue[s] that the fundamental divide in human community is between rich and poor, oppressor and oppressed; and the basic division in the church has to do with how

⁹ World Council of Churches, “Unity Statement – Revised,” Doc. No. PRC 01.1, Busan, Republic of Korea, 2013, < <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2013-busan/adopted-documents-statements/unity-statement>> (8 December 2013).

Christians respond to and take part in these divisions of the world. They use language like ‘unity in solidarity’ and focus, not on theological agreements, but on a shared willingness to act together in response to human need.”¹⁰ The other “contend[s] that the church would serve the human community best if it were to live more fully as the church God wills—confessing Christ together, sharing the [E]ucharistic meal, recognizing one another’s ministries, making decisions in common, when needed. Addressing these areas of division is, therefore, the highest ecumenical priority and the basis for authentic Christian witness and mission.”¹¹ The remainder of this paper will address the former group as the social action group and the latter as the reconciliatory group. Dr. Kinnamon made it clear that the social action group wants to look past differences to cooperate. The reconciliatory group wants to focus primarily on overcoming differences, leaving justice as a means to an end rather than the goal in and of itself. It is of course restrictive to reduce dynamic communities into two distinct categories, but please allow me to do so for the sake of academic argument.

The fifth plenary of the 10th General Assembly, entitled “United in Christ: The Journey of the Fellowship,”¹² was the first instance where the two tracks became evident during the proceedings. The distinguished speakers all lamented the fact that disunity is a reality. They even talked about the aforementioned document, “The Church: Towards a Common Vision,” each validating it. However, as their speeches went on, the reasons for disunity were very different. Each speaker presented an implied call for all participants to work towards unity through either social action or reconciliation. These distinct “ways” that unity could be made

¹⁰ Michael Kinnamon, “New Contours of Ecumenism in the Twenty-First Century,” (Unpublished speech to the Global Ecumenical Theological Institute in Busan, Republic of Korea, delivered October 30, 2013), 3.

¹¹ Kinnamon, “New Contours of Ecumenism in the Twenty-First Century,” 3.

¹² “Unity Plenary, WCC 10th Assembly, 4 November 2013,” *YouTube*, 7 November 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M94BeY_ZmtQ&list=PLI22eVXX9FYnfyf1MgRd7AqUUIr_Ns9Kn&index=23> (8 December 2013).

visible tell that each group defines “unity” differently. For the social action group “unity” *meant* a body cooperating for justice. And for the reconciliatory group “unity” *meant* a body reconciling their differences. The former encouraged dialogue around how communities could work together; the latter, dialogue around the essence of communal life in Christ.

The sixth plenary, entitled “God of Life, Lead us to do Justice in Today’s World,”¹³ was the second instance where the two tracks became evident during the Assembly. In this campfire style discussion, four speakers were questioned on how to bring about justice. Those on the side of social action immediately advocated a need for attention in particular issues such as nuclear power or HIV/AIDS. The message was that justice comes about through cooperation. Participants were called to *be* the Church through unifying around social action. The reconciliatory group focused on justice through life in Christ. They contended that unity in Christ places all persons from all circumstances in a just disposition. Therefore, instead of combating particular issues through social action alone, reconciliation in Christ means a natural outflowing of justice.¹⁴ The clear message was to *be* the Church through unifying in Christ.

At this point, it should be clear that the Ecumenical Movement has two different ideas of what “unity” means. On the one hand, it means cooperation in social action. On the other hand, it means reconciliation of the divided Christian communities. Dr. Kinnamon asks, “Are the church and its unity still central to the vision of ecumenism?”¹⁵ Given the complex nature of the subject, I believe the answer is yes and no.

¹³ "Justice Plenary, WCC 10th Assembly, 6 November 2013," *YouTube*, 7 November 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M94BeY_ZmtQ&list=PLI22eVXX9FYnfyf1MgRd7AqUUr_Ns9Kn&index=23> (8 December 2013).

¹⁴ Such a natural outflowing would not need social action; all would be at peace.

¹⁵ Kinnamon, “New Contours of Ecumenism in the Twenty-First Century,” 4.

Expanding Vocabulary¹⁶

Before analyzing my experience of reality presented in the previous section, it is important to explore more a precise vocabulary in regards to the “oneness” words. Currently there is a strong focus on the word unity. All groups are using the word unity but are not necessarily meaning the same thing. Using and distinguishing between the terms unity, union, and uniform is a good starting place for identifying who means what.

Ambiguity around unity, union, and uniform is not unique to conversation of the World Council of Churches. When looking up these three words in various dictionaries, the English language resources gave inadequate definitions for distinguishing the three. Their definitions were not exactly synonymous, but they did include a lot of blurred lines. Therefore, I pulled out the most distinctive characteristics of each in order that we might forge anew an expansive language for expressing reality.

Unity is defined by Merriam-Webster’s dictionary as “the state of being in full agreement ... the quality or state of not being multiple : oneness.”¹⁷ Collins’ dictionary defines unity as “the state or quality of being one; oneness ... something whole or complete that is composed of separate parts.”¹⁸ Unity, then, is a state of oneness or full agreement with a simultaneous sense of diversity.

Union is defined by Merriam-Webster’s dictionary as “an act or instance of uniting or joining two or more things into one ... something that is made one : something formed by a

¹⁶ Since the working language – when typing out documents – of the WCC is English, I am proceeding with the expansion of vocabulary in the English language. The appropriate expansion should be made in their equivalent expressions within translations.

¹⁷ “Definition of Unity,” Merriam-Webster Dictionaries, <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/unity?show=0&t=1386572934>> (8 December 2013).

¹⁸ “Definition of Unity,” Collins Dictionaries, <<http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/unity>> (8 December 2013).

combing or coalition of parts of members.”¹⁹ Oxford Dictionaries defines union as “the action or fact of joining or being joined, especially in a political context.”²⁰ In union differences exist, but members come together for a common goal. Union is when people agree to disagree so that they can work together as one coalition or syndicate. A parallel can be made between the phrases “unity in diversity” and “union in differences”.

Uniform is defined by Merriam-Webster’s dictionary as “having always the same form, manner or degree : not varying or variable ... of the same form with others : conforming to one rule or mode.”²¹ Oxford Dictionaries defines uniform as “not changing in form or character; remaining the same in all cases and at all times.”²² Advocating for uniformity, then, is when one focus on the necessity of principles being expressed in the same way.

As previously stated, our English language dictionaries do not provide adequate definitions for the subject matter at hand. Therefore, the following are proposed definitions for unity, union, and uniform: Unity is being of one mind with diverse expression; it is about operation rather than cooperation since diverse parts are acting *as* one rather than different parts acting together *for* one. Union is not being of one mind but intentionally looking past differences to work side-by-side towards a particular goal; it implies clear boundaries and divisions overcome only in alliance rather than dissipation of separation. Uniform is acting, appearing, and articulating exactly alike; although people in union and unity can be healthily uniform, people seeking uniformity are not necessarily in unity or union. It is easy to suggest we

¹⁹ “Definition of Union,” Merriam-Webster Dictionaries, <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/union>> (8 December 2013).

²⁰ “Definition of Union,” Oxford Dictionaries, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/union> (8 December 2013).

²¹ “Definition of Uniform,” Merriam-Webster Dictionaries, <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/uniform>> (8 December 2013).

²² “Definition of Uniform,” Oxford Dictionaries, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/uniform> (8 December 2013).

expand the “oneness” vocabulary, but it is more trying to establish the application of the new terms. Looking back at the experience of reality established in the previous section of this paper, I will now offer a suggestion for discerning identification.

The reconciliatory group is best identified as striving for unity. Their goal is to dialogue about differences, strive for forgiveness, and move towards reconciliation. Their focus is inward and on the oneness of the body. They see the value of union in differences as a way to unity but seemingly reject cooperation for social justice *as* unity. Therefore, their understanding of the mission of the World Council of Churches is to look inward on reconciling the body of Christ, leaving cooperation outside of the organization as the manifest realization of the fruits of unification.

The social action group is best identified as striving for union. They seem to want to look past the inherent issues and deal with earthly injustices. Therefore, they are focused outward and on social action. The goal of the World Council of Churches, from their perspective, should be oriented around how all members can cooperate in helping those “outside” the organization. They do not appear to reject true unity as an ontological principle but have despairingly given up on working towards it in any other way than as cooperation.

Finally, the term uniform is worth mentioning as an obstacle.²³ Many conversations at the Assembly had subtle, implicit accusations that uniformity is the goal of some or all. It is important to be able to identify when one is seeking uniformity in order to avoid the distraction. An example could be equality as the principle and woman’s ordination as the expression. Unity in diversity would say that we are one mind in that all people are created equal and said equality

²³ Although nothing is completely negative. Therefore, just as there is a place for union in the process of becoming one in unity, there too, when used with great discernment and sensitivity, is a vital place for uniformity. However, such a disposition is far away from the reality of the World Council of Churches today, so it is not worth expanding upon at the current juncture.

can manifest in different ways. Gender equality can be expressed through different roles (*i.e.* men and women filling diverse but equal positions) or similar roles (*i.e.* men and women filling all the same positions as each other).²⁴ In the former a community might not have ordained women but still practice equality. The role of men and women can vary while equality is still a reality. In the latter a community might give the same social roles, in this case ordination, to both men and women as an expression of equality. When dialogue gets ensnared around uniform expression of a principle, progress cannot continue and be fruitful.

Discernment and Call

If they are to appropriate an expanded vocabulary, member communities of the World Council of Churches will be better equipped to discern what they are striving for, what the World Council of Churches is actually doing, and if the two intersect.

As it stands, the main purpose of the World Council of Churches is unity.²⁵ As it stands, the dialogue revolves primarily around social action issues and theoretical reconciliation. In other words, the stated goal is unity but the dialogue pushes union. It does not really matter what goal the World Council of Churches decides upon. What does matter is that the member communities figure out who they are, what the agreed upon goal *actually* is, and either stay or leave in accordance with their commitment to *that* goal. If the decided goal (of either unity or union) is contrary to one's identity (as striving for unity or union), to remain is to live a lie.²⁶ Furthermore, if one agrees to a goal on paper just to keep some at the table but works towards a different goal in reality, they are going beyond just living a lie to deceiving and manipulating the other. Such deception and manipulation does nothing more than hold the organization back from

²⁴ And probably many other ways, as well.

²⁵ As is documented and adopted by member communities; see epitaph of this paper.

²⁶ Softened from the more proper phrasing, "it is hypocritical to remain."

true progress. Therefore, discernment and self-accountability is essential for the survival and continuation of the WCC.

It is important to overstate that this paper is not meant to be an answer to the problem. Its aim is to blatantly recognize the need for precision and push member communities to work towards discernment of a particular goal of specifically the World Council of Churches. When communities decide to be part of an organization, that organization must have a clear identity and goal for which it exists. That identity must exist in both word and deed. It is not to say that there is no place for social action or no place for reconciliation of Christian communities in the broader context. It is about overcoming the identity crisis of the World Council of Churches.

I realize that conversation around the topic at hand is not a new idea. However, the reality of the current situation is that member communities have departed from the conversation of old, and the lines distinguishing the differences in the “oneness” terms have been blurred. When something is blurred, it cannot be seen clearly. The murky space can then be used to fantasize a false reality of the object at hand. I do also realize reigniting the conversation around “oneness” vocabulary means introducing another point for the fragmented situation to argue over. However, my intention is not so diabolical. My intention is to provide a *clear* framework where the World Council of Churches can work through its current identity crisis. My intention is to call member communities to focus deeply on discerning the reality of their own intentions and actions. Finally, my hope is that member churches will hold themselves accountable to their discerned convictions.²⁷ Only once member communities remove the mask of who they say they

²⁷ In other words, if a group realizes that they have been striving for union but had always intended for unity, then that community will change its ways moving forward. If a community proclaims unity but only truly desires union, they, given their real desire, should not participate in the World Council of Churches in lieu of its current goal.

are from who they actually are will the organization truly flourish. Only then will the World Council of Churches progress in its mission and have an impact on the world.²⁸

²⁸ I make the claim that the World Council of Churches has little to no impact in the world due to the fact that no major international news sources covered the 10th General Assembly. If the WCC was influential in even a small percentage of peoples' lives, news agencies would have been breaking down the doors to have a story to sell.

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