

Just Unity:

Toward a True Community of Women and Men in the Church

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Despite the World Council of Church's commendable and sometimes bold efforts to establish a just and true community of women and men in the church, the goal remains elusive. This is in part due to the pervasiveness of sexism in our world and the intractable nature of institutions, but it is also a consequence of some of the beliefs and traditions of the member churches. Given that the stated aim of the WCC is to "call one another to visible unity in one faith and one Eucharistic fellowship,"<sup>1</sup> it must be questioned whether unity as it is currently conceived is compatible with gender justice.

Prof. Dr. Atola Longkumer, in her lecture on Asian women, advocated a "posture of interrogation" toward structures, sources, and traditions that are oppressive or exclusive.<sup>2</sup> In this vein, it is important to question whether unity is sometimes used as an alibi to maintain the status quo and silence voices on the periphery that may complicate the journey. We call for unity, but on whose terms? As the Ecumenical Conversation on Community of Women and Men in the Church at the Busan Assembly noted: "There is a tendency to compromise gender justice for 'unity.' Often this is expressed in the work of silencing and marginalizing women and/or gender justice perspectives."<sup>3</sup> Thus, this paper is intended to survey the ecumenical legacy of work for women's full participation in church and society, engage Orthodox women's voices in particular, probe the theological significance of unity, and look for signs of hope at the Busan Assembly.

### **Historical Legacy**

One of the most iconic phrases of the early ecumenical movement was the commitment "we intend to stay together" uttered at the Amsterdam Assembly of 1948. GETI speaker Dr.

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<sup>1</sup> Melisande Lorke and Dietrich Werner, eds., *Ecumenical Visions for the 21st Century: A Reader for Theological Education*. (Geneva: World Council Of Churches, 2013), 121.

<sup>2</sup> Prof. Dr. Atola Longkumer, "Asian Women's Christianity" (lecture during the Global Ecumenical Theological Institute, Seoul, Korea, Oct. 27, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> "EC 09. Community of women and men in the church: mutual recognition and transformative justice" in *Annex to the PGC 01 First Report- Ecumenical Conversations Affirmations and Challenges*. WCC 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly Doc. No. PGC 01.1.

Fulata L Moyo reminded us that these were the words of Kathleen Bliss, the only woman speaker in the main assembly at that event.<sup>4</sup> Thus, despite its imperfect beginnings (in terms of the representation of women, Global South communities, and other marginalized groups) the presence of women in the WCC echoes since its founding.

Women leaders like Twila Calvert, Kathleen Bliss, Suzanne de Diétrich and Madeleine Barot organized a pre-assembly meeting of women before the Amsterdam Assembly; at Amsterdam, they presented the Baarn report, elucidating the findings of their two and a half year “enquiry into the status and role of women in the church.”<sup>5</sup> Shortly thereafter, at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Assembly in Evanston, Illinois, the WCC established the Department for the Cooperation of Men and Women in Church and Society. The name reflected a commitment to wholeness;<sup>6</sup> this would not be merely a women’s movement in the church but a movement by and for the whole church for the whole society.

During the 1970s, Brigalia Bam from South Africa led the women’s desk created at the Uppsala Assembly and carried on the work for gender equality; she especially prioritized the need for women to develop their own contextual theologies.<sup>7</sup> Her effort, among many others, led the Faith and Order Commission to instigate a study process on the “Community of Women and Men in the Church (CWMC),” which engaged in theological dialogue with women about personal and cultural issues as well as church teachings and structure.<sup>8</sup> From the fruits of this study emerged changes in the “composition of all decision-making bodies of the World

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Fulata L. Moyo, “Women’s Participation in the WCC” (lecture during the Global Ecumenical Theological Institute, Busan, Korea, Nov. 9, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Elisabeth Raiser and Barbara Robra, eds., *With Love and with Passion: Women’s Life and Work in the Worldwide Church* (Geneva: WCC publications, 2001), 99.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

Council,”<sup>9</sup> as well as the Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988-98). The decade aimed to be a “call to the churches to reflect on the theological and ecclesiological structures that deny women their full participation and to plan strategic steps to bring changes.”<sup>10</sup> More broadly, it endeavored to stand with women in the global community—who experience the brunt of poverty and economic injustice, abuse, racism and casteism—by affirming their agency and participation in all aspects of society.<sup>11</sup>

Despite its lofty goals, the decade dissipated and became what its program leader Aruna Gnanadason called “a decade of women in solidarity with women, or of women in solidarity with the churches.”<sup>12</sup> I fear that in part this has remained the case for many marginalized groups in the WCC, including indigenous people, the Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network, and youth—all of whom met for pre-assemblies, but had little opportunity to present their statements in major plenaries during the assembly itself aside from small appearances or cultural entertainment.

Adding to the complexity of the effort towards gender justice in the WCC, the women’s program has struggled to include the voices and questions of Orthodox women for its entire existence.<sup>13</sup> Orthodox visions of the community of women and men have at times seemed at odds with feminist interpretations of this hope. This tension particularly emerged during the Faith and Order Prague consultation on “The Community of Women and Men and issues of

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<sup>9</sup> Melanie A. May, ed., *Women and Church: The Challenge of Ecumenical Solidarity in an Age of Alienation*, Faith and Order Series (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Friendship Press for the Commission on Faith and Order, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, 1991), 82.

<sup>10</sup> Raiser and Robra, *With Love and with Passion*, 102.

<sup>11</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Who Will Roll the Stone Away?: The Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women*, Risk Book Series no. 47 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), 15.

<sup>12</sup> Raiser and Robra, *With Love and with Passion*, 104.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

unity and renewal" in 1985.<sup>14</sup> This consultation examined the “validity and proper role of experience in doing theology,”<sup>15</sup> as well as its relationship to scripture and Tradition as sources. It sought to examine the impact of the CWMC study and to discern a way forward on these issues.

At the Prague consultation it became apparent that many Orthodox women felt the subject of the Community Study had little relevance for them and “that the way the questions [were] formulated [were] foreign to their understanding of the church.”<sup>16</sup> Orthodox participants emphasized an understanding of the Church as an *already existing* unity that establishes the renewal of the human community; meanwhile, the “Protestant model” conceived of the church as a fallible human institution requiring transformation, whose purpose will be fulfilled in eschatological time.<sup>17</sup> In part, this was probably a translation issue of ecclesiological language. Nevertheless, the Prague consultation revealed especially the question of women’s ordination to the priesthood as a potentially “church-dividing” issue.<sup>18</sup>

Responses from Orthodox participants to this consultation focused primarily on the ecclesiological differences. They also expressed a strong conviction that “there are hierarchies in the world which do not imply inequality but complementarity”<sup>19</sup>—these include the distinctions between biological sexes as well as between clergy and laity. Orthodox participants Very Rev. Dr. G. Dragas, Dr. D. Koukoura, and Very Rev. Dr. G. Limouris published a statement following

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas F. Best, ed., *Beyond Unity-in-tension: Unity, Renewal, and the Community of Women and Men*, Faith and Order Paper no. 138 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1988), ix.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

the gathering that indicted what they considered a predominantly feminist lens at the consultation that “[imposed] value judgments of feminist ideology on the biblical data”:<sup>20</sup>

The strong commitment to feminist ideology of many of the participants meant that critical theological discussion in a spirit of mutual respect was often replaced by an unprecedented emotionalism which opted for particular contexts, cases and concerns at the expense of common basic experience. Thus the women’s plea for inclusiveness was made in such a way that it excluded the traditional Catholic and ecumenical Orthodox perspectives.<sup>21</sup>

These statements made clear that from an Orthodox perspective the issue of women’s rights as such was a “particular concern” whereas other topics were the “central concern.”<sup>22</sup>

Many women (and men) who gave voice to the feminist critique reacted strongly to these statements from the Orthodox: “It hurts when you need to pursue an issue of deep inner concern and it gets turned into an inter-confessional argument,”<sup>23</sup> or when it is brushed aside as merely “unprecedented emotionalism.” Even today, these standoffs on moral or doctrinal issues remain as present as they were in 1985. As the study document “Moral Discernment in the Churches” makes clear, “emotional intensity can complicate and even obstruct the process of dialogue”<sup>24</sup> and yet it must be heard for its capacity to build “empathy and compassion” as well as its prophetic role (for example, the “righteous indignation” that established the urgent need for an end to slavery).<sup>25</sup> As the member churches, we must be able to hear emotionalism and pain as an indicator of a need for deeper listening—not only on women’s issues, but in the voices of Pacific Islanders calling for greater responses to climate change, in the LGBT community advocating for

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>24</sup> *Moral Discernment in the Churches: A Study Document*, Faith and Order Paper No. 215 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), 38.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

an end to violence against them, and in the voices of the delegates from the Middle East calling for urgent action at the Closing Plenary.

The work of ecumenical dialogue requires true openness to hearing our partners in Christ, however much we may feel the “other” is impeding our vision of the church and its future. It is in this spirit that I have endeavored to explore theological understandings of unity as well as attempted to better understand Orthodox understandings of women in the church, with a particular ear to the voices of Orthodox women themselves. I believe a deep search for understanding will be the first step in building bridges within our ecumenical family regarding the future of the community of women and men in the church.

### **Women and Orthodoxy**

Oriental and Eastern Orthodox churches have a long history of ecumenical engagement, including the catalyzing encyclical “Unto the churches of Christ everywhere” from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in 1920.<sup>26</sup> These historic churches have represented and maintained rich practices and liturgies of the early church; their participation in the ecumenical movement is of deep value and necessity. In recent decades, however, certain directions of the life, work, and vision of the WCC have caused rifts with the Orthodox churches; such rifts have resulted in reevaluation on the part of the Orthodox churches about their participation in the movement and in the WCC particularly.<sup>27</sup> This tension exposed itself fully after the Canberra Assembly in 1991, at which time several of the Orthodox churches withdrew from the Council; in response, the Orthodox Task Force gathered delegates for a Orthodox Pre-

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<sup>26</sup> John A. Radano, ed., *Celebrating a Century of Ecumenism: Exploring the Achievements of International Dialogue: In Commemoration of the Centenary of the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2011), 4.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas E. FitzGerald and Peter Bouteneff, eds., *Turn to God, Rejoice in Hope: Orthodox Reflections on the Way to Harare: The Report of the WCC Orthodox pre-Assembly Meeting and Selected Resource Materials* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, Orthodox Task Force, 1998), 4.

Assembly meeting in May of 1998 to discuss their perspective on the Harare theme “Turn to God – Rejoice in Hope” and discern a way forward for the Orthodox within the Ecumenical Movement.<sup>28</sup>

It must be noted that despite the concomitant conclusion of the Decade in Solidarity with Women, only five women delegates were present at this meeting out of a total of thirty-three representatives.<sup>29</sup> In part, given that only men are ordained as priests and bishops in the Orthodox churches, this reflects admirable respect and commitment to the process; certainly, not all of the member churches could be so celebrated for sending their most venerable leaders to ecumenical consultations. On the other hand, the lack of Orthodox women’s voices within such decision-making bodies is disconcerting. In many ways, this trend continues; the WCC Central Committee newly elected in Busan includes 28 Orthodox men and only 10 Orthodox women.

Just a few years before the previously mentioned Orthodox Pre-Assembly, there had been several international Orthodox women’s conferences, one in Damascus in 1996 and one in Istanbul in 1997;<sup>30</sup> both events intended for delegates “to consider deeply the nature of their own presence and participation in the life of the church.”<sup>31</sup> These conferences were warmly hosted by the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and All the East and the Armenian Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople, among other patriarchs and regional bishops, who “were very committed to learning more about what Orthodox women had to say,”<sup>32</sup> according to Dr. Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, theological consultant to the conferences.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> FitzGerald and Bouteneff, *Turn to God, Rejoice in Hope*, 45–46.

<sup>30</sup> Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, ed., *Orthodox Women Speak: Discerning the “Signs of the Times”* (Geneva: WCC Publications in association with Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999), 1.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 1.

The content and reports of these gatherings reveal that Protestant feminist assumptions about the desires of Orthodox women may often be erroneous. It is important to listen to one another in order to be in true solidarity. Orthodox women spoke of the pride of place of the Myrhh-Bearing Women (who proclaimed Jesus' resurrection) and the *Theotokos* (Mary, the Mother of Jesus) in liturgical celebration as indicative of the high respect for women in their tradition.<sup>33</sup> Orthodox women “see themselves as full members of the church,”<sup>34</sup> as evidenced by their deep commitment as well as their calls for accountability—that the church might express in its reality what is already its true essence:

“A subtle yet pervasive sense of ‘the one faith’ and ‘the one church’ seemed to saturate their being, as well as undergird interpersonal exchanges. [...] It may have been this deep, almost palpable sense which grounded the delegates’ ease when discussing inconsistencies, shortcomings, sins and abuses which have occurred within the contemporary life of the church.”<sup>35</sup>

In many ways, this type of realistic appraisal of the life of the church with an “undergirding” faith and hope is a necessary aspect of the entire ecumenical endeavor for unity; the more we take note of these voices, the more clear it becomes that Orthodox women are an indispensable member of the Body of Christ living into its common calling.

The delegates at these conferences articulated their concerns. They called for increased support from church leaders for women who “feel called to serve the Lord and his church,”<sup>36</sup> particularly access to theological education, the lack of which “hinders [their] role and work within the church.”<sup>37</sup> They shed light on liturgical practices that “appear to run contrary to our theological affirmations regarding the dignity of women;”<sup>38</sup> these included the churching of

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 36–37.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

female babies differently than male babies, the “prayer for miscarriages, abortions, and post-partum mothers,”<sup>39</sup> and prohibitions around receiving Eucharist while menstruating in some contexts.<sup>40</sup> They advocated for the revival of the patristic tradition of the ordination of women to the diaconate, already being restored in some of the member churches.<sup>41</sup> In many ways, Orthodox women expressed not a desire to gain power or even to fight for their “rightful place” within church structures and institutions, but rather a deep “quest of women to *offer their gifts* to the church and to the society”<sup>42</sup>(emphasis my own). They mourned that “women may be seen by some as more readily dispensable”<sup>43</sup>—their contributions invisible.

Delegates highlighted some of their apprehensions concerning the respective contributions of clergy and laity within the church, which consequently impact the role of women given the doctrinal position on women and the priesthood. French Orthodox theologian, Elisabeth Behr-Sigel asks: Has “Christianity, which began as a lay movement – a movement suspect in the eyes of the clergy of the time [...] turned into an institution ruled by the clergy?”<sup>44</sup> Sophie Deicha similarly wondered whether, given the prominent place of saints and martyrs in the Orthodox theological and spiritual imagination, the “lack of knowledge of saints other than priests”<sup>45</sup> has resulted in clericalism and discounting of the laity, especially women. Both called for a concerted recovering of the “royal priesthood” which calls all baptized women and men to holy lives of discipleship.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 39, 96.

Because original sin is understood as distorted relationship, the “sin of sexism” is a relevant term in Orthodox theological circles.<sup>47</sup> “When this sin (of sexism) is active, yet its presence is denied outright or minimized, it gains power and momentum.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, from an Orthodox perspective, all Christians are responsible to name sexism (“an expression of inauthentic relating based on gender”<sup>49</sup>) even when it is identified among Christians or within religious leadership. They are also responsible to advocate for other factors interwoven with sexism—including poverty, racism, illiteracy, abuse, and other issues disproportionately affecting women. After all, as St. Paul so eloquently puts it: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”<sup>50</sup>

### **Unity-in-tension**

The questions surrounding the appropriate and just community of women and men in the church are not the only divisive issues preventing unity in common witness and fellowship in the global Christian community, nor are these challenges of unity in diversity new to the ecumenical movement. I should also add that Orthodox positions are not the only obstacle for feminist Christians participating in the WCC; our Korean context, for instance, also posed challenges. In a visit with my GETI group to a large Presbyterian church in Gwangju, I was struck by the lack of women in leadership. Though the church is growing, thriving, and sending out hundreds of missionaries, it was difficult for me to celebrate its witness or to experience it as truly God’s church because of my concern for gender justice. I remembered the echoing laments of Korean Prof. Namsoon Kang, unable to find a faculty position in theological schools within Korea because of her feminist voice. As she notes, the “spirit of ‘100 percent-all-male’ in leadership

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>50</sup> 1 Cor. 12:26, New Revised Standard Version.

roles in theological institutions and denominational offices has constituted Christianity in Korea with its proud growth in number.”<sup>51</sup> Though women were among the passionate first converts to Korean Christianity due to its liberative potential in their lives, Dr. Kang laments the present reality that women are in principle welcome as leaders, but in praxis largely excluded from teaching and preaching, primarily serving roles that are an extension of those in their households.<sup>52</sup> This was validated by my experience in the churches and theological institutions we visited.

In his GETI lecture at the Busan Assembly, Rev. Dr. Michael Kinnamon posed a number of questions to the gathered young ecumenical leaders. He asked: “Are the church and its unity still central to the vision of this movement?”<sup>53</sup> Investigating the often-divided motions, one for theological and liturgical unity (Faith and Order) and the other for “unity in solidarity”<sup>54</sup> with a focus on human need (Life and Work), Kinnamon fears that the two shall never meet and that “our divisions are now taken for granted.”<sup>55</sup> However, these are not new concerns; “we cannot afford to commit the dreaded ‘loss of ecumenical memory.’”<sup>56</sup> In a 1974 Faith and Order meeting at Accra, similar questions arose:

“At Accra the question was the possible tension between the commitment to church unity and the commitment to justice and reconciliation: as Christians struggled towards these goals in the world, they might find themselves on opposing sides of certain issues, thus leading to further differences within the church. In this context a warning was issued against an ‘easy’ church unity, bought at the price of one’s Christian commitments to justice and reconciliation.”

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<sup>51</sup> Lorke and Werner, Dietrich, *Ecumenical Visions for the 21st Century*, 63.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Rev. Dr. Michael Kinnamon, “New Contours of Ecumenism in the Twenty-First Century” (lecture during the Global Ecumenical Theological Institute, Busan, Korea, Oct. 30, 2013).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Best, *Beyond Unity-in-tension*, 27.

This ‘easy’ unity could be likened to Bonhoeffer’s cheap grace; “cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”<sup>57</sup> Cheap unity is unity without justice, unity without repentance, unity that displaces the majority of the human and Christian family from its visioning. We cannot pretend that healing theological divisions within the church can be separated from the need to heal divisions within the human family.

For many women who have struggled within the ecumenical movement for the “affirmation of the full ministry of women, this tension between ecumenism and our obedience to our spiritual vocation can cause almost unbearable pain.”<sup>58</sup> Such women are not alone in carrying the burden of a commitment to costly unity. The Orthodox, too, speak of their agony and frustration with the movement and how often they feel overlooked as a minority group within a Protestant sphere.<sup>59</sup> The Orthodox delegates made a strong demonstration at the Harare Assembly calling for “radical restructuring of the WCC,”<sup>60</sup> a restructuring which feminists had also advocated. These concerns have been addressed in part by the move to a consensus model of decision-making at Busan. Thus, feminists and Orthodox participants can find solidarity in their common feeling of frustration and marginality. As Rev. Dr. K.M George of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church framed it during the fiftieth anniversary of the WCC: “We are *exhorted* by our Lord to stand together as one body in the unity of the Triune mystery. But we are *exhausted* by standing together.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 4.

<sup>58</sup> Pauline Webb, *She Flies Beyond: Memories and Hopes of Women in the Ecumenical Movement*, Risk Book Series no. 56 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993), xi.

<sup>59</sup> FitzGerald and Bouteneff, *Turn to God, Rejoice in Hope*, 57–9, 122.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

Given the challenge of liberation, post-colonial, feminist and queer theologies, among others, as well as corresponding social movements in society, Orthodox participants in the ecumenical movement have expressed concern about “the limits of diversity.”<sup>62</sup> Admittedly, the boundaries of what constitutes Christianity in an ecumenical context are notoriously nebulous—hence the difficulty of discerning who should be admitted to membership. At the same time, justice concerns require an equally important question: who decides the nature of “legitimate” diversity<sup>63</sup> and sets the terms of unity within the Christian community? It is clear that many ecumenical participants presume that it is another group within the WCC making these decisions—for all, this is an intolerable situation. In this regard, the newly minted consensus model is an admirable step.

The problem with consensus is that it requires agreement—this can cause watered-down and vague proclamations that could be bolder and more concerted if we simply went with a majority. But majority decisions are not and cannot be defended on the basis of a scriptural tradition that admonishes the eye who says to the hand ‘I have no need of you’ and which reminds us that “the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.”<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, the patience required of all in the ecumenical movement has often led to the aforementioned exhaustion and to “cynicism about the possibility of unity.”<sup>65</sup> It is difficult to retain hope on a long journey with a seemingly impossible end, yet this is precisely the biblical witness: “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>63</sup> Lorke and Werner, Dietrich, *Ecumenical Visions for the 21st Century*, 130.

<sup>64</sup> 1 Cor. 12:21-22, NRSV.

<sup>65</sup> Kinnamon lecture.

<sup>66</sup> Hebrews 11:13, KJV.

The admonition to patience cannot be advocated without caution. “While [...] patience may keep a dialogue in process, it may alienate others who feel that patience delays justice,”<sup>67</sup> including feminists who have abandoned the church because of its persistent patriarchy. There are times when dialogue must cede to the need for prophetic words denouncing oppression.<sup>68</sup> How can an understanding of the goal of visible unity be expanded to allow for such critiques to be put forward without considering them a threat? One answer lies in a Faith and Order Statement from Accra in 1975: “We may believe in and give witness to our unity in Christ, even with those from whom we may, for his sake, have to part. This means to be prepared to be *a ‘fellowship in darkness’ [...] and a ‘unity in tension’*” (emphasis my own).<sup>69</sup> This idea of bearing witness to our unity in Christ while being given the freedom to openly disagree and even to part liberates the space for all, and could give rise to an ecumenical movement with the sort of soul Dr. Kinnamon fears it is lacking.

### **Toward Hope and Fresh Vision**

The way forward for the ecumenical movement will require continuing discernment and theological depth with regard to what unity actually is. “It becomes clear that the same intent—to obey God’s will for the ordering of the Church—may, in some, inspire commitments to continuity and, in others, commitment to change.”<sup>70</sup> Such change could at times include renewal of church traditions, language, and institutions so that they rely on new understandings of power and authority.<sup>71</sup> This may equally necessitate restructuring of the WCC to broaden its reach to those who are currently outside its circle.

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<sup>67</sup> Best, *Beyond Unity-in-tension*, 154.

<sup>68</sup> Webb, *She Flies Beyond*, 5.

<sup>69</sup> Best, *Beyond Unity-in-tension*, 23.

<sup>70</sup> Lorke and Werner, Dietrich, *Ecumenical Visions for the 21st Century*, 128.

<sup>71</sup> Raiser and Robra, *With Love and With Passion*, 141.

We need to be realistic about the disappointing truth that much of what currently constitutes unity in the churches is actually a situation “in which in which one sector conforms to the forms of participation imposed upon them.”<sup>72</sup> This is why the move to consensus decision-making is an inspiring first step to the kind of utter transformation needed within the structural dimensions of the ecumenical movement.

Fresh models of interacting could emerge with an eye to feminist and womanist theologies (as well as Indigenous theologies) that call for wholeness in our communities—wholeness that gives each and all dignified voice. We need to return to an understanding of unity not as something we must strain to create, but “a reality given already by God”<sup>73</sup> to which we must respond. There are perhaps people within the fellowship with whom we would rather not be in community—yet these are our God-given kin. There are those we would rather ignore; these are the very ones in whom we will discover the face of Christ.

When we are willing to discover Christ in one another, we “take seriously [the] incarnational nature”<sup>74</sup> of the Gospel. We bring the whole community, however painfully, into the process of discerning and naming “the Faith of the church through the ages.”<sup>75</sup> Perhaps instead of using the idea of unity as a way to silence those naming deep and existing tensions, we could commit ourselves once again to a *covenantal* theology of fellowship. From the message of the Amsterdam Assembly in 1948, the birth of the WCC, we hear this call:

“He has brought us here together at Amsterdam. We are one in acknowledging Him as our God and Saviour. We are divided from one another not only in matters of faith, order and tradition, but also by pride of nation, class, and race. But Christ has made us His

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<sup>72</sup> Oduyoye, *Who Will Roll the Stone Away?*, 55.

<sup>73</sup> Best, *Beyond Unity-in-tension*, 23.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

own, and He is not divided. In seeking Him we find one another. Here at Amsterdam we have committed ourselves afresh to Him, and have covenanted with one another...”<sup>76</sup>

Not only does this early statement acknowledge the urgency of the healing of our non-theological divisions (including, I would now add, that between women and men), but it calls us to do so in covenant with one another.

Covenant language reflects God’s commitment to be our God and for us to be God’s people. It expects dedication to staying engaged with one another, but it does not preclude disagreement. In an eloquent call to the Orthodox churches before the Harare Assembly, His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius IV Hazim of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East exposed our lack of true covenant: “I have the impression that we fear facing intelligently, deeply, and seriously those who have different opinions from our own. [...] we would not like to have concerns and burdens given to us by the presence of the other.”<sup>77</sup> Isn’t the willingness to bear the inconvenience and even burden of another the very essence of covenant? God has not lacked faithfulness to human beings, despite our burdensome nature. As the new convergence document “The Church: Towards a Common Vision” states, “the unity of the body of Christ consists in the gift of *koinonia* or communion that God graciously bestows upon human beings.”<sup>78</sup> We live in covenant and communion with God as well as with one another—this is gift and it must be received and preserved with care and respect.

Covenant is also a means of accountability. As early as Amsterdam, delegates confessed and lamented that “our separation has prevented us from receiving correction from one another in Christ.”<sup>79</sup> In the Orthodox theological imagination, this is part and parcel of the process of

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<sup>76</sup> Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope, eds., *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 21.

<sup>77</sup> FitzGerald and Bouteneff, *Turn to God, Rejoice in Hope*, 16.

<sup>78</sup> Lorke and Werner, Dietrich, *Ecumenical Visions for the 21st Century*, 142.

<sup>79</sup> Kinnamon and Cope, *The Ecumenical Movement*, 22.

*theosis*, that growth in the likeness of God, which is “not an instantaneous event but a life-long endeavour.”<sup>80</sup> We grow in Christ-likeness by being refined by the rough edge of encounter with those from whom we most differ, whose presence draws us closer to the living God standing between us.

I concur with Dr. Kinnamon’s call for a “fresh articulation of the ecumenical vision.”<sup>81</sup> I think this must include a reorientation of the aim of ecumenism away from the emphasis on “visible unity [...] that the world might believe” and toward a covenantal expression of unity. I do not mean to discredit the clear biblical call that all may be one, nor to diminish the importance of evangelism. However, I fear that we have become too concerned with cleaning out our house so that others might find it worthy to move in; we have assumed with some arrogance that our work for unity is crucial in order that the world may come to know Christ. And yet, have we not come to Christ only by the leading of the Holy Spirit and the grace of God?! We must renew our Christian family for the sake of *our* salvation, not for the sake of being better instruments.

Orthodox theologians teach that salvation is “not only of the individual but of all involved,”<sup>82</sup> including the whole of Creation. Our scriptural witness also attests to this. Hebrews 11 offers the great litany of the faithful, but ends: “Only together with us would they be made perfect.”<sup>83</sup> Perhaps the soul of the ecumenical movement could be restored if we stopped focusing on what “the world” thinks of us or how credible our witness is and instead tuned to the urgency of saving our own souls. This is a very Orthodox understanding. We draw closer to Christ and in so doing we bear fruit that transforms the world. We draw closer to Christ and we find one another there with Him. It is in finding God in the working out of our own salvation as

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<sup>80</sup> FitzGerald, *Orthodox Women Speak*, 45.

<sup>81</sup> Kinnamon, “New Contours.”

<sup>82</sup> FitzGerald, *Orthodox Women Speak*, 46.

<sup>83</sup> Hebrews 11:40, New International Version.

an ecumenical family that the world will hear the Good News. Our liberation, redemption, and salvation are inextricably tied to one another; *only together* can we truly be Christian.

Truly, we are exhausted by standing together. The ecumenical movement has often been a “unity-in-tension” and a “fellowship-in-darkness”<sup>84</sup>—it bears the stamp of diverse and imperfect human beings who have strived to be faithful to God. This tension itself is not a weakness but a reflection of the movement’s integrity. It asks of feminists and Orthodox, men and women, East and West, to struggle together and hear one another with grace and in full. We may disagree and even part ways for God’s sake, yet we remain in fellowship, lured to true conversion and costly covenant. The legacy of the ecumenical movement and of the biblical call entreats us to work out our own salvation in fear and trembling, even as it blesses us with the promise of God’s redemption together in Christ.

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<sup>84</sup> Best, *Beyond Unity-in-tension*, 23.

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