A follow-up to my yesterday's open letter to UCBHM exec. Thomas Dipko

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THE ASCENSION OF THE MARGINALS

Dear Tom:

My letter to you yesterday commented on "Pluralism Principles," a 12-point program designed to cure what your office considers a disease, viz. **androangloeurocentrism**, which I need not unpack for you as the cathexis (here, cultural overattention) on the white Anglo-European (erstwhile, "British-Continental") male. Today there came to me "Pluralism: Basic Resource Packet," of which I understand "Pluralism Principles" to be a distillation. I write to you, on whose watch the whole program & its literature evolved, after having read all the materials. This letter is, in the main, a commentary on your program's textbook--Dan. F. Romero's "Our Futures Inextricably Linked: A Vision of Pluralism" (54pp., United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, Division of Education and Publication, 1994)--the specific work which "Pluralism Principles" boils down.

I am quick to assure the non-UCC readers of my Thinksheets that your proposal is not just an intradenominational, house-UCC, program. In effect, it addresses all mainline (old Protestant American) churches, which, for reasons sociologists have been squabbling over, have been fading away from one or more wasting disease. Diagnosing the wasting disease(s) is critical: a wrong diagnosis will prove fatal. Had I thought your diagnosis correct, I'd not be writing you this letter.

1 Your diagnosis is liberationist-**cultural**, a programmatic expression of the **theological** notion that God has "a preferential option for the poor," a slogan with more political than theological spin. As I've written in extenso elsewhere, the phrase--whatever its rhetorical usefulness--is blasphemous (stating that God is prejudiced) &, unwittingly, ironic (if I were 'poor,' wouldn't I prefer a deity that could & would do more for me than the biblical God has?).

If the theological underpinning of your program is so flawed, the whole program is skewed: "garbage in, garbage out."

2 TERMS in this Thinksheet's title: (1) "Ascension" is bodily only in the organization sense: the marginals have been moving up the institutional pyramids of the mainline churches. (2) A "marginal" is anybody who's neither white nor male. The mainline churches' regnant ideology can do nothing about Jesus' maleness but is saved by his not being white (though neither is he brown [mestiz-o/a], black, or yellow)....P.38 (the pp. references in this letter-Thinksheet being to Romero's pamphlet): "the majority culture (Anglo-European and male)."

As to (1), we all know the history since I was on your Board (leaving ¼ century ago) & no marginal had any prominent position in any mainline church. Now, neither you nor Paul (Sherry, the UCC president) is a marginal, but the exec. of your parallel board (United Church Board for World Ministries) is; & the levels just below the apex of mainline-church national structures are thick with marginals, esp. white women. This updraft is minorly due to pressure from below; majorly, it's from the nonmarginals opening trapdoors (or ceiling windows), driven by (a) liberationist conviction, (b) guilt (of the consciousness-raised powerful), (c) patronism, (d) egalitarianism (that "all should be heard from, to enrich the dialog"), & (e) pride (for "doing the right thing"). Nonmarginal eagerness to help marginals up has frequently led, at what nonmarginals have considered not an excessive cost, to Parkinson's Second Law, "elevation to the next higher level of incompetence," with the argument "If we don't give them a chance, how are they going to learn?"

Am I naysaying all this? Certainly not: on BHM, I hired as secretary a marginal (a black woman) who couldn't spell: I'd certainly not have hired a nonmarginal who couldn't spell. But now compassion has gone ideological, & a marginal has written the program textbook (p.10, Romero self-describes as "a Protestant Mexican American"; & in his Foreward, Michael Kinnamon [p.5] calls R. "a 'hyphenated person'"). Now, more than ½ century before the emergence of the "sociology of knowledge" (1954, U. of Chicago), I learned the old bromide "Consider the source."

"The source" of all four tributaries upstream from the UCC is northern

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European (including Britain), as Romero is not: your textbook was written by, culturally, an outsider. Do I object? Of course not. But I would object to the fact's not being taken notice of. Before my consciousness got multiculturally raised, I would have objected to the fact's being take notice of. An insider as insider could "access" our church folk, in the study groups you propose, more easily: the xenophobic button isn't pushed. On the other hand, "we" the UCC majority can & should profit from listening to "them" our minorities (including women, whom Romero--again p.38--does not include in "the majority culture [Anglo-European and male]").

3 Nothing in your packet applies critical consciousness to the current **tribalizing** of American society. Quite the reverse: you invite me to think about my tribe: you want me to self-identify in group ("The Study and Discussion Guide" for Romero's pamphlet/booklet) as heterosexual aging white male American. I don't mind really, except that it makes me uncomfortable to be reminded of all my superiorities. If I'm not superior to homos, why would almost all homos have preferred to be heteros? If I were not superior to the young, why would they be complaining about all the advantages, especially financial, to being "older" in America? If I were not superior as white, why would "we" have so much power & privilege over "them"? If I were not superior as male, how come (according to feminism) "we" could have controlled "them" for these couple million years? And if I were not superior as American, why would half the world like to move here (or, in the case of the Cuban "rafters," drift here)? But as a Christian I don't gloat over these superiorities (which in gospel light are "rubbish" [Phil.3.8 NRSV]), but all this "multicultural" & "pluralistic" clamoring ineluctably draws my fleeting attention to them. Nor can I be faulted for thanking God for them (as underdogs would were they top dogs) & asking God why he graced me with them, if at the same time I repent of the evil component in them. ("Component" is important: I do not repent of whatever good may be in them severally. But the moralizing marginals want me to repent of the whole bundle, & even to deny the concept "superiority"! Fat chance. With such excessive demands, what "they" get from "us" is backlash. Fair is fair, & it's only reasonable & right to give credit for all the good that has come from yesterday's "injustices" & "oppressions.") ....Not mentioning language, the Guide doesn't encourage me to mention an additional superiority of mine, viz that I am English-speaking, my native tongue being the globe's only lingua franca ever. Hispanic California citizens voted overwhelmingly against adding Spanish as an official language: English is superior as the only language in which you can "make it" in the U.S.A.

In this §, my use of "superior" is narrow. Superiority *facts* are one thing, superiority *claims* are quite another. The former are observable, the latter are reprehensible: (1) we are all soon equal-opportunity dust, & (2) "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble" (Jas.4.6 KJV; & 1P.5.5). If we fear, as we should, that God may "resist" us, we should do even more than disclaiming superiority: we should place ourselves in the inferior position, where grace can drip down upon us from God through the one we "regard as better" than ourselves (Phil.2.3, on which Michael Kinnamon [p.3, "The Gospel of Empathetic Love," in your packet] quotes p.56 of Karl Barth's THE EPISTLE TO THE PHILIPPIANS [Jn.Knox/62]: "To believe in grace means concretely: to set the other above oneself"). ('Tis a hard saying in a survival-of-the-fittest culture that teaches its offspring "self-esteem.")... Of course this below-positioning is not just sapiential, ie to receive the drippings of grace; it is primarily love-moved, & love's eyes are made to move upward, so the lover must be below the beloved, & the beloved is EVERYBODY, even the enemy! Ah, 'tis a yet-harder saying, & one that Sunday after Sunday provides material for the General Confession if you can't think of anything else.

4 I'm fascinated by what you the Board/Division/PluralismWorkingGroup use as **biblical warrants** for this program. If I were to run a catena of biblical quotations collected from all your program's materials, what canon would I come up with, & where would I find spins to adapt passages to the program's purpose? When I clean a fish, I discover what it's been eating; so also when I read a book or article's footnotes & bibliography; so also if I did this biblical-roots study of your program --but must not take the time for it, but here are a few notes:

(1) In the packet's pamphlet "A Biblical Under-

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standing of Pluralism," Burton H. Throckmorton, Jr., uses NT diversity as a model & justification of "pluralism" as unity-intending interlistening, a quite modern & even somewhat postmodern sophisticated idea. I've two objections here: (1) This use of the NT is modernizing; for the NT itself, while celebrating aunity *given* in Christ & (Jn.17.21) *prayed for*, shows nothing of a unity *worked toward by interlistening*. On the contrary, the NT's missions/churches fly outward from the Jesus-explosion, each doing its thing with little or no awareness of the others except for a few instances of very early controversy (Gal.2.1-10/Ac.15) & one instance of somebody seeking info from somebody else (Paul from Peter, Gal.I.18); & (2) While the earliest stage of the Christian movement, as is true of every movement, exhibits variety, it's stretching it to call it diversity (which implies some considerable degree of variety-consciousness & disagreement), & to call it pluralism would be proleptic (a present idea read back into the past as though pre-existing)--my point here being that Throckmorton, like "Bible-believing" fundamentalists, here peals off the whole of post-NT Christian history, as though the Spirit were not at work in the ecumenical creeds, through which we canonical-classical Christians believe the Spirit consolidated the NT's variety (Jn.16.12-15)....Throckmorton knows that in the history of NT interpretation/theology, the polarity has been unity/variety. Note (p.9) how he makes from that two sneaky lexical moves (underlinings mine): "The church's canon attests to the great diversity of voices, to the pluralism that is a given in the church." One expects such tricks of a politician, not of what he is, a recognized biblical scholar. One suspects that if he stoops to that, he would stoop to rewriting the NT to give it a particular political spin--which indeed he has done, in violation of documentary integrity, in the interest of feminism. What makes all this even more worrisome is that his wife (exec. of your Board's division responsible for producing the program) is, I think, in agreement with the way he uses the NT to ground-support-sanction the program.

(2) Throckmorton is correct (p.8) that the NT's unity is in its centering in "the person of **Jesus**, or...the crucifixion and exaltation of Jesus," with a variety of "ways of understanding the significance" thereof. But wrongly, he uses that fact of "variety" to give license for its continuance *in church*. More than implies (p.9): To "the church's canon....many other [legitimate] voices have since been added"--a statement contradicting the very idea of canon! The effect of his libertinism is to cancel both forces of "canon": (1) The negative, limiting the extent of revelation (though not of inspiration); & (2) The positive, the Spirit providing the energy of light & power to impress on the Christian reader of the Bible the whole Word of the living God. If some group such as the Jesus Seminar wants to present a Jesus who is a peripatetic first-century Jewish wise-saying peasant whose grieving followers pumped up his corpse into a god, no problem unless they want *the church* to add this image to the NT's images, thus giving this novelty canonical status. Throckmorton doesn't tell us whether in his mind there're any criteria for knowing when any one of these "many other voices" is out of Christian bounds, off the biblical-theological playing field. Prostituting his expertise, he seems to be opening the door & shouting "Y'all come!" Come, worship Sophia (as at the "Reimagining Conference," Minneapolis, Nov/93) if that's your fancy. As biblical scholar, he has no censoring function; as Christian, he does, but here is not exercising it.

(3) The dominical & pauline sanctions--the authority of Jesus & Paul--support, in your program's literature, "pluralism": Jesus & Paul are converted into pluralists....Let's take **Paul** first. Your Guide says (Session Three) "Paul's celebration of the gift of pluralism." But the text (p.28) says "It was in the context of Paul's understanding of Christ's mission that [in his fight with Peter] he sought unity." True, but to generalize that, everybody's a pluralist who insists on unity "in the context of [his/her] understanding"! Some pluralist! Again (p.42), "the one group that exemplifies the diversity of God's creation is gay and lesbian people." Can you really imagine even with the help of tortured exegesis, that Paul would be "inclusive" of them in his "pluralism"? Or that he would tolerate, to say nothing of "affirm," the existence of two denominations, the General Christian Church & the Jewish Christian Church? Of course he welcomed converts to his point of view (Gal.3.28), but that's a narrower meaning of "pluralism"

than your program intends, so it's ignorant or dishonest to use Paul as an authoritative prop for your program.

Ditto in the case of **Jesus**, who was harshly noninclusive except of those who opened themselves to his sectarian shout amid the first-century Jewish religious hubbub. But p.26 says "Jesus' ministry was one of acceptance and inclusion": yes of course, on his terms. Not being a Christian, he couldn't have been a latitudinarian ("pluralist") about Christian groups; but being a Jew, he could have been so about Jewish groups--and wasn't (though he was not an aggressive sectarian: "Anybody not against us is for us" [M.9.40]...or was he [Mt.12.30: "Anybody not with me is against me"]?)....A number of Jesus passages in the text blur the church/world (disciples/crowds) distinction, as do in different ways both Roman Catholicism & liberal Protestantism (both wanting to be chaplains to "the world," the human communities beyond the church). Take one (p.28): Jesus "believed that all people were children of God. God's unconditional love was available to all." Creatures of God, yes, but children of the Father without acknowledging the Father? As for unconditional, the conditionality was so severe, the path so hard, the gate so narrow, that "few find it" (Mt.7.14).

The text ends (p.50) with another unwarranted extension, universalization, of a church text (Eph.4.2-3) into a world text. This abuse of Scripture is common among the liberationisms & the churches which, eg our UCC, have gone liberationist. This reduces the mission of God to partnership, to virtual merger, with the mission of humanistic secularism. As though a yes to Rodney King's question "Can't we all get along?" were salvation! In that atmosphere, what becomes of evangelism even when a liberal denomination has an evangelism department? The liberationisms want "the oppressors" to repent. If they do, what's everybody else to repent of in order to enter the Kingdom of God?

5 The program's Enlightenment ideal of everybody patiently listening up to everybody is **utopian**, & as such depressive of both honesty & witness. Throckmorton, p.3*: "every voice is to be listened to,...received into one's inner being." Kinnamon, p.3, believed that "All voices need to be heard. We need the witness of those who see things differently from ourselves"--but then he repented of that doctrine when in a feedback he heard something he really didn't like, dutifully accepted as "different" what he'd heard, then later felt guilty that he'd not denounced the speaker's P.O.V. He failed, he says, because of "a certain kind of [latitudinarian, pluralistic] relativism" ([], mine)....*Of his "Cleveland...."....Really, though, these utopians often fail to practice what they preach. I frequently feel myself unheard, & excluded, by "inclusivists," fundamentalists on the left.

6 Here, Tom, is a momentary relief from this diatribe: The study process is excellent, & we ought to boost the UCC Calendar of Prayer for daily use, as the Guide does. Two cheers, too, for the UCC Book of Worship, also Guide-boosted.

7 The text badmouths the **melting pot** but offers no alternative metaphor (mosaic? Japanese soup?). Whites of various ethnicities melt, but it's possible also for nonwhites (as M.L.King Jr.'s "content of character rather than color of skin"). To make a virtue of nonmelting, as the text does, can find only the flimsiest support in the Christian religion, which is for melting everybody in Christ ("the Jew first, and also the Greek," Ro.1.16): the gospel is for integration, not pluralism. There is indeed (text, p.25) a "new consciousnes that has accompanied the rediscovery of cultural identity," but the NT is an awkward place to look for yes-saying to this retribalization. Too, there's a tragic irony in baptizing this world-wide movement: most of the current two dozen wars on this planet have retribalization as a major motive. Your program is not in good company. You are blessing a disease instead of preaching the Christian cure.

8 Kinnamon (p.5, "The Gospel...") well preaches **balance**: "'acceptable diversity' beyond which the church does not go if it is to witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ." I've long been for this balance (eg, in "Unity through Community," the lead article in the 8 May 57 CHRISTIAN CENTURY; in 1970 WCC lectures with Avery Dulles; & in NYTheol.Seminary courses). But grievance-nursing "victim" minorities of race, gender, class, sexual preference, & nation are to me almost as odious as the "oppressors" who've "marginalized" & "dehumanized" them.