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# Unity Through Community

By Willis E. Elliott

"IT IS POSSIBLE, here and now, to have a united church at the local level." These words from the preamble of the International Council of Community Churches' constitution imply an imperative arising from the experience of several thousand North American communities. Given a glimpse of a "realized eschatology" of local unity in Christ, they bear a witness which is always urgent and is sometimes impatient of the obstacles they themselves have not surmounted and of the hurdles which defer this hope in most communities. And they have a sense of mission well expressed by W. A. Visser 't Hooft's remark that, as experimental churches, they are "like the scouts who in the old days went ahead of the wagon trains."

But it is need more than pride that prompts community churches to join the ecumenical symphony. They want a union card in the unity orchestra because they seek to take seriously the dominical prayer "that they may all be one" (John 17:21) and the apostolic reality and vision of "one Body, one Lord, one God" (Eph. 4:4 ff.). Yet there can be no blinking of the shame that while thousands of them are good at solo improvisations, only hundreds will accept the discipline of harmony even within their section.

Efforts to organize community churches—Community Church Workers, Inc. (which died in the depression), the Biennial Council of Community Churches (Negro), the National Council of Community Churches, and the 1950 merger of the latter two in the International Council of Community Churches—have all been less than smashing successes. But the several hundred that are banded together in the I.C.C.C. and in their area fellowships will be represented at the Oberlin conversations on "The Nature of the Unity We Seek"—the theme that will also dominate their own national convention to be held at Northfield, Massachusetts, July 30-August 3.

## *The Local Oikoumene*

There is always a best angle for viewing a particular phenomenon. The best angle for viewing the community-church movement is the local angle. On some sides we have hardly begun to sculpture, but on this side the shaping is in more than the beginning stage. Here and there across our land are significant demonstrations of diversity in unity, little prophetic ecumenisms. Those who are chipping away on other sides of the ecumenical structure can tell us much. We believe we have something to share with them about this local side, the most neglected side of the ecumenical endeavor.

Indeed, ecumenical thought is increasingly attending to the local. The tentative outline for the September 3-10 meeting at Oberlin asked: "Of what importance for future unity is the growth of community and federated churches? What light does their work throw upon the

problems of faith and order?" In the two subsequent preparatory papers the local incarnation of the ecumenical spirit becomes a pervasive concern.

The parish, it needs no saying, is the proving ground of all theories, the graveyard of most ideas, the maternity ward of the Church of Tomorrow. The chairman of the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order study observes that "the nearer we come to a responsible discussion of unity, the nearer we come to locality." For most community churches, however, the parish has been the prison as well as the province of ecumenical striving. Attention to the local side has been almost exclusive. Oberlin may help them view "in the round" if they go with humility, honesty and prayerful hope.

## *Humility Sees Its Debts*

Community churches have two special reasons for humility. First, only a few of them were intentional creations, planned in the sense that a denomination plans a new church. Most of them had a fortuitous origin—or, to speak in faith, were "acts of God" (more, we trust, in the biblical sense of "mighty acts" than in the legal sense of accidents). Christians of varying denominational backgrounds were thrown together by population changes and other largely "nontheological" factors. Existence came to them as gift more than as achievement. But in the fact of their existence, which they believe to be a working of God, they are beginning to sense an awesome logic which gives pause and penitence, threatens complacency and the easy custom of isolation, reveals fearful disparities between theory and practice, and forces the asking of new questions.

Less than two years ago the International Council of Community Churches set up a study commission to consider such issues as: "Who are 'we'? If each church has a God-given unity, just what kind of unity is it, and what is its meaning for our relations with each other as community churches, with the churches which surround each of us, with councils of churches, with denominations?" The logic of comprehensiveness and the logic of love combine into a fearful responsibility of life, witness and fellowship for all who name the Name.

A second reason for humility is our indebtedness to the denominations. Many of our churches are unions of two or more congregations which dropped their ecclesiastical relationships when they united (though many others maintain their old relationships within a federal structure). Some were denominational but dropped their connection in the hope of a wider appeal within their communities or from discontent (though some churches in the council continue in a single denominational alignment). Almost all our ministers were trained in denominational schools. The list of debts is so long that one wonders whether this

child has really left home. "What hast thou that thou hast not received?" strikes us with special force. There is only one family.

We shall take to Oberlin a frank admission of these vast discrepancies between logic and actuality. The logic of community churches is that cooperation not competition is the first law of life; yet they are often sectarian in their local appeal and sometimes isolationist toward the local council of churches. Their logic is fellowship unlimited in Christ; but nine-tenths of them have no continuing fellowship with other community churches. A larger relationship would make possible a growing and working partnership among themselves and, through councils at all levels, with other Christians. It is ironic that while the ecumenical movement still lacks the beam to descend through the fog to the local landing strip, most community churches show no intention of rising above their own terrain to enrich and be enriched by the whole church.

### *Two Kinds of Wisdom*

Our humility, while real, does not rule out self-respect. We intend to respect, to listen and to share, but not to be told. We shall bring to Oberlin the ineptnesses of our immaturity, but also the assets of fresh viewpoints uninhibited by emotional attachment to one separate, sanctified tributary of the Christian river. The rationale of a church tradition tends to become problematical and even irrelevant in other periods and under different conditions than those of its origin.

Community churches, most of them born since the word "community" was first used in the name of an American church (in 1914), are still in the period of their origin, still adaptively responsive to the forces and needs which begot them, still experimental and open to suggestion, still devoted to the idea that form must follow function. They are too young and limber to feel their elders' pain at the words of Baron von Hügel: "God has often to undo all our work for him and build it up again his own way." They find it easy to maintain diversity within unity, the right to differ without breaking fellowship. They are free to grow into the creative richness of a churchmanship of comprehensiveness. They are increasingly aware and ashamed of their isolation from each other and from the other communions, but also increasingly eager to repent of their provinciality and to assume the yokes of the larger fellowship and of ecumenical mission. And they pledge to "merge with other followers of our Lord as soon as a large proportion of the denominations, in obedience to him, unite to form one holy church."

But there is a sense in which the kind of wisdom we bring to the colloquy is quite mature. It is built up out of the experiences of all the communions that have trained our clergy and laity, as the wisdom of young America had the wisdom of old nations behind it. The enriching cultural pluralism which is the American way answers the inhumanities of the ages with the courage of youth. The Christian pluralism within a community church answers the schizophrenia of Christian dividedness with wisdom from the age-old church as well as with the wisdom of youth. It is from conviction, not merely from necessity, and not because we are tired, that we speak often in the irenic tones of old men, preferring "also" to "nothing but"

and "both-and" to "either-or." It is because we have discovered, in the parish, the wisdom of Paul Tillich's remark about "the superiority of love over knowledge." We have come to know by experience that Roy Burkhardt's dictum is true: "If people are together long enough to become one in Christ then they no longer fight over words."

### *Not a Religion of Community*

Our faith in togetherness is indeed so strong that it threatens at times to psychologize and sociologize into a religion of community instead of theologizing and catholicizing into a closer approximation of the Kingdom of God. As the natural and psychosocial sciences continue elaborating the meaning of love, the temptation to identify Christian agape with this "love" will increase, and the synthetic agape may pre-empt the apse, so that the primordial creed "Jesus is Lord" gives way to "Love is God."

But in very few of our community churches is this idolatry a live danger. We have a goodly doctrinal heritage from our denominational parents, and the lively spirit of prayer among us keeps pointing to the center. Enthusiasm for the fact of community will not veer off toward group-idolatry; nor will the one-big-happy-family routine, which glosses over differences and disdains doctrine but soon faints and grows weary, carry the day. Breadth of fellowship, we realize more and more, is creative only if each encounter of the branches runs down into the common trunk of theology and to the root of devotion, where many forms of piety sustain the whole.

So theology, often first in ecumenical conversation, has been saved till last. Yet the fact that ideas do not occupy the initial or central position should not deceive the observer into thinking they have no place among us. It is simply that people-in-fellowship comes first. Richard Porter, the present minister-at-large of the I.C.C.C., expresses this priority: "Christian unity will come at the grass roots through human relations, and not at the top through organization or compromise."

### *A Hearty Theological Diet*

It is true that when people come first, the religious association will be at least temporarily an ideological catch-all, a largest numerator rather than a least common denominator. But it is calumny to describe our motive as a desire to be all things to all men, so that, presumably, we may catch some. Far more often our motive is Christian love. While we are not a religion of love, we have a theology of love and a philosophy of unity through community. Our emphatic axis of thought is not the relation of the Lord to the church, but the relation of Christ as Event, as Person, as Community (in the senses described by John Knox), to the human natural community where sin and need call out for grace and power.

Does this condemn community churches to a thin theological diet? Rather it sets out a thick stew, an inclusive dish. The invitation to join the International Council of Community Churches which appears in the council's organ, the *Christian Community*, states our intention to "make available to all the spiritual treasures of each, over every barrier of race, creed, and color; and so to give a living demonstration of that brotherhood in Christ in

which we 'all may be one.' We find ourselves inclined to balance all sources of Christian authority derivative from Christ: Spirit-experience, Scripture, tradition, living church, reason. And almost all our churches would agree on all points with Walter Horton's "Christian consensus."

A few (pan-religious) community churches would think the ecumenical consensus too narrow for their world-faith ideal. At the other extreme are some who would judge it too broad for their rather fundamentalist and strictly pan-Protestant approach. The vast majority, pan-Protestant in fact, are in dream pan-Christian, hoping for a healing of the great schism at the local level, working toward the marriage of Catholic and Protestant values, driven by the logic of triple loyalty to Christ, the total church, and the religiously polygot American neighborhoods. Consequently, community-church theology will more and more embrace the ideal of coherent comprehensiveness in response to the fact of local unity, the rational criterion, and the demand of brother-love.

### *The Glory and the Peril*

It is the glory and the peril of a community church that it exists in direct response to the demands of its own community. The glory is that it sits where the community sits, weeping and rejoicing with the community, asking primarily such direct questions as: What are the needs of this community, in the open domain and in the light of the gospel? What are the divine-human resources for meeting these needs? How best can each particular need be met?

The peril, of course, is overconformity, servility to the wants and whims of the immediate environment. We rejoice in the autonomy of each church—and wonder whether the absolute sovereignty of the congregation can save it from the sovereignty of the community and can ever adequately relate it to the sovereign Lord and the *Oikoumene*. We believe in a parity partnership of clergy and laity, are proud of the attention we pay the layman's voice—and wonder whether we are not in danger of a tyrannous and impoverishing opposite of clericalism. In polity we speak from a seat on the left aisle—but we look hopefully at the episcopal-presbyteral-congregational experiment of the Church of South India. We tend to identify or at least idealize ourselves as the community at worship and the church as a fellowship of seekers—yet we are haunted by other dimensions of the true church, and we ponder the words of Douglas Steere, "It is what you leave out that wrecks you." Our logic is ecumenism; our disease, too often, is the localism of the one-congregation denomination.

### *Confession and Forgiveness*

With the Division of Foreign Missions of the National Council of Churches, we believe in "all efforts to make the missionary body more international, interdenominational, and interracial," and in "the power of Jesus Christ to reconcile all human differences," and add that these principles apply also at home and to the local parish—yet often we are chameleons to the prejudices outside our walls. We are experimental—but the experiments are usually pressed only to the point of local self-satisfaction. We abjure conformity to denominational patterns—and easily assimilate

to the secular structures of commerce, social-service organizations and clubs. We hold that no church can be more than a pointer toward the true church, a foretaste of the Kingdom—but the local praise sometimes lures us into smug content, as though at least for our community we were the goal and the full meal. Like Ignatius we have a passion for unity, like Irenaeus we have a philosophy of unity—but most of our churches have little use for the catholic tradition which that passion and that philosophy engendered: if the particular congregation's tastes do not include catholic values, there usually will be no sense of deprivation.

But in the same breath in which we call ourselves sinners under judgment for our partialities and prejudices, we rejoice in a forgiveness which sets us on the pilgrim way with all saints and churches in Christ and gives us something to say, our own Canterbury tale. We shall be heard to speak more of what is to be than of what was and is, more about the unity we seek than about the unity we have. We seek a functional unity issuing from the working of God in the parish, ministering to the parish, and relating the parish to all the concomitant circles of the whole koinonia. We believe that a new catholicity will thrive in the polarity between Christ-centered faith and life and community-centered order and work. We acknowledge that the "form, substance and procedure" of this Great Church are "as yet unknown."\* And we pray for the patience to await it, the plasticity not to predetermine it, the wisdom to recognize its signs, and the courage to enter in.

\*From *That They May All Be One*, a handbook on the community church, obtainable from the offices of the International Council of Community Churches, 1580 King Ave., Columbus 12, Ohio.

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YOU had to come to earth to learn it. Lord:  
There is no native word in heaven for *pain*.  
One searches the bright lexicon in vain  
For *loneliness*: there is no such dread word.  
You had to face the weakness of a crowd  
That followed noisily but would not stay.  
You watched the rich young ruler turn away,  
And felt how Pilate failed you, callous, cowed.  
You had to hear the scorn of the high priest,  
Against denial you had to cry: "I am."  
Before the world's might you were last and least,  
Before the ravening wolf the helpless lamb.  
But, since you came, my grieving way I go  
With quieted heart, because I know you know.

EDITH LOVEJOY PIERCE.

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