

## You Have Gifts to Bring

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! In a minute, I want to greet you on behalf of the nearly 50 million sisters and brothers in Christ whose churches make up the National Council of Churches in the USA, but first, a more-personal word.

I was born in very southern Iowa. And since I had relatives in the Kansas City area, I remember stopping in Independence when I was a kid. So the Reorganized Church was not unfamiliar to me, even in my early years.

Then, when I was in eighth grade, my family moved to Salt Lake City, where several of my close friends were RLDS, in part because they were just as marginalized as I was! And over the years I have been privileged to have friends such as Dale Luffman, who has served with me on the National Council's Faith and Order Commission, and Gail Mengel, an ecumenical colleague through Church Women United—friends whose witness I have deeply appreciated. I say all of this to let you know that I am very aware of who you are—and who you aren't!

Greetings from the National Council of Churches, a community of 36 denominations that range from the Greek Orthodox to the National Baptist Convention, from the Evangelical Lutherans to the Quakers, from the Malankara Syrian Orthodox to really strange churches called Methodists and Presbyterians! The diversity of the Council, like the church as a whole, is part of the point.

Others should look at us and ask, "I wonder what holds them together? What do they have in common?" Which is when we point to Jesus Christ and say, "In him is the power to transcend the barriers of a fearful and fragmented culture."

The NCC is well-known for things we *do* together, such as Bible translation, common church school curricula, theological studies and dialogues aimed at promoting deeper Christian unity and better interfaith relations, TV programs like our 2008 Christmas eve special, as well as public witness on behalf of such things as immigration reform or environmental protection or peace in the Middle East.

I will let you in on a secret: Churches as diverse as the ones I mentioned do not agree on all things! But, thanks be to God, we have arrived at an astonishing number of shared commitments—including a commitment to say "No!" to racism in all its forms as a denial of God's image, a commitment to express God's special concern for the poor, a commitment to declare the preciousness of God's creation, and a commitment to bear witness (as the World Council of Churches once put it) that "war is contrary to the will of God."

The essence of the NCC, however, is not what the churches *do* together; it is what we *are* together. Our constitution is very clear: The NCC is a "community of Christian communions" who, because of their shared faith in Jesus Christ, "covenant with one another" to manifest ever more fully the unity that is our gift (not our achievement, but our *gift*) in Christ, and, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to engage in mission together to the glory of God.

As I tell our church leaders, this is not really an organization you have joined; it is a covenant you have made with 35 other churches in order to visibly express something of the reconciliation that God has accomplished. There are lots of organizations around that do things for the churches, but a council *of the churches* is a different animal. Its essence is not an office in New York but the relationship of the churches to one another.

Let me approach all of this from another direction. I am, as I hope you can tell, delighted to be with you here in beautiful Independence. But surely there is no word that less belongs in the Christian vocabulary than “independence.”

Yes, we are set free in Christ; but, as Paul puts it in Galatians, it is the freedom to be servants to one another. Yes, we have each received spirited gifts; but, as he tells us in I Corinthians, they are all to be used for the common good. Yes, we are diverse; but it is the diversity of the parts of an interdependent body in which the eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you.”

You know what an oxymoron is: words that don’t seem to go together—like jumbo shrimp or Quaker hit man, or Senate intelligence committee, or united Methodists. Well, add another one to the list: independent Christian or independent church. We belong to one another, are fundamentally dependent on one another, because we belong in common to the same Lord.

Friends, I have spent so much time talking about the National Council of Churches because, as you probably know, Community of Christ in this country has applied for membership, an application that is now under consideration. I would not have accepted the gracious invitation to be with you today if I, as general secretary, did not strongly support your application.

Remember, I know who you are! And I know, therefore, that you have gifts to bring to the rest of us—including a sense of being “on the margins,” which makes you particularly sensitive to others who have been marginalized and misunderstood.

The sharing of gifts is really what the ecumenical movement is all about. I sometimes am asked, “What do we have to give up to be part of the NCC?” But that, of course, misses the point. Ecumenism, the effort to make the church’s given unity visible before the world, is not about giving things up but of receiving gifts that others have held in trust for the whole body of Christ.

Another question I get is, “Will we have to change?” Well, the object is not to refashion you in the image of another church; your particular identity is part of the gift you bring. But, yes, I hope and pray that *every* church is changed as a result of its encounter with others. *All* churches need to deepen their life in Christ; and it may just be that the witness of others, as well as our witness together, helps each of us grow in our knowledge and love of God.

When I was a seminary professor, I used to tell students that the goal of the ecumenical movement is to improve our grammar. Baptist, to take that example, is a wonderful adjective but an idolatrous noun. Our sisters and brothers down the street aren’t “Baptists,” they are “Baptist *Christians*.”

In the same way, your identity is not to be *the* Community of Christ, but to be Community of Christ Christians, part of one body that, thanks be to God, stretches around the world and across time. Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, Protestant. American, Haitian, Congolese, and Indian.

Through Christ we have been reconciled to God and one another. This is the gospel! And it is very good news!

—Michael Kinnamon  
general secretary  
National Council of Churches