

A Globally Inclusive Ecumenical Model for the 21st Century (Brian E. Konkol)

[1] One of the central debates facing Christianity from its onset surrounded *essential requirements* for acceptance into the community of believers. More specifically, some wondered whether or not particular ethnic heritage or cultural traditions were mandatory, whereas others considered various beliefs and behaviors surrounding food and other existing customs. As the small number of Jesus' original disciples expanded both numerically and geographically, complicated deliberations continually surfaced: What is central? What is indispensable? What aspects of the Christian faith are open to change, and which can be considered non-negotiable?

[2] Approximately two-thousand years after Jesus' death and resurrection, the critical questions remain: What is essential to faith in Jesus and acceptance in Christian communities, and what can be negotiated depending upon time and place? The Christian church has expanded to nearly every corner of the globe, and as churches are located in diverse cultural settings, such considerations are critically important for the future of global church companionship. In addition, as a result of numerous disagreements about the essentials of Christian faith, there is also difference of opinion between a growing list of Christian denominations: Anabaptist, Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, and so forth. While each church body claims the label of "Christian," there are discrepancies in opinion, variation in belief, and sadly, often heated dispute about authority and authenticity. The resulting reality is often a great deal of confusion and disregard, especially amongst young people and others who search for a more meaningful sense of purpose, community, peace, and genuine belief in a higher power greater than themselves.

[3] When trying to better understand the nature of differences, denominationalism, and division within Christian churches, the best lesson I received came from a group of women in a local kitchen in South Africa, where I work. I was in the midst of a cultural cooking lesson when I overheard a discussion about one of the favorite local dishes: chicken fried rice. As I listened to the animated conversation, I soon learned that nearly every person in the community had her/his special style of chicken fried rice, to the point that one could eat the dish each day at a different home and it would never taste the same (and yes, I can speak from personal experience on this matter!). However, while each dish had its own unique spices and side ingredients which added to the overall flavor (and nearly each person was convinced her own style was best!), what remained *essential* to the dish of chicken fried rice was, of course, chicken and rice. It was *essential*. While the ingredients surrounding the chicken and rice could be altered depending upon individual taste and availability of resources, the dish *required* chicken and rice. This culinary reality, and the subsequent discussion amongst the cooks that day, provided a fresh method to interpret global Christianity and ecumenical cooperation in our world today.

[4] Similar to immense levels of pride bestowed upon a home-made dish of chicken fried rice, there are many Christian denominational leaders who are convinced they have the "best tasting brand" of organized Christian faith (and those who believe otherwise must be corrected, convinced, and converted!). Whether one considers denominational affiliation or even geographical location, there is all too often a sense amongst leadership that their own interpretation of Christian faith "tastes" better than the rest. While there is nothing inherently wrong with a high sense of denominational self-esteem, such beliefs all too often transform into institutional arrogance, which in turn leads to competition and distrust amongst Christian denominations. Sadly, but not surprisingly, such irresponsible behavior amongst church leaders typically leads to growing division and provides numerous stumbling blocks for those wishing to increase their participation in communities of faith.

[5] While denominational leaders may feel strongly about their own taste of church, one of the great ills of Christian history, at its beginning as well as today, is when non-essential items are expressed as fundamental.

[6] When missionaries from the global north arrived on African soil there were few instances in which local believers were allowed to place "local spice" upon the imported brand of Christian faith. More often than not, instead of allowing African churches to take on a native flavor, the northern hemisphere essence was forced upon indigenous people, to the point that countless non-essential items were considered as vital to Christian faith and acceptance within particular denominations. As a result, for numerous generations various Africans have been required to sing, speak, sit, stand, dress, believe, and administer in a specific (European) manner in order to be considered "proper Christians" and receive love from God. As a result of ongoing foreign control and localized fear of retribution, numerous church bodies in Africa and throughout the global south continue to strongly resemble those in the north, often at the tragic expense of indigenous belief and expression.

[7] In addition to challenges surrounding global church companionship, there is also disturbing levels of ecumenical dispute, strained cooperative attempts, and even "communion breaking" between Christian denominations. Due to various strong convictions surrounding use of the Bible, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and as of late, female ordination, homosexuality, abortion, and issues surrounding faith and social justice, instead of collaboration and mutual support around common causes, numerous church bodies refuse communication and even reject others from full participation in worship and joint leadership opportunities. With too many leaders soaked in stubbornness and convinced of their own theological certainty and superiority, not enough are willing to acknowledge that "different" does not necessarily equate to "wrong", and that genuine dialogue and relationship building requires openness and vulnerability from all sides involved. Unfortunately, as pastors and other institutional directors wish to exude public confidence for their followers, it would appear that too many perceive openness and flexibility as signs of weakness, instead of acknowledging humility and the ability to listen as signs of faithfulness, maturity, and Christ-like leadership.

[8] On a different note, while one "ditch" of global and ecumenical relations is division, the other is blind approval. As a result, while openness is indeed crucial in an increasingly connected and diverse global and ecumenical community, in no way should we advocate for an "anything goes" policy in which all beliefs and actions are always acceptable in all places and in every time. One who accepts everything usually stands for nothing. As Jesus spoke and acted in direct opposition against various destructive powers during his day and age, those who claim to live as his followers two thousand years later are also called to do likewise within their own cultural context. In addition, as Jesus promoted life in its fullness through forgiveness and reconciliation, those who strive to participate in God's mission today through Christian church participation are inspired through the Holy Spirit to respond to God's love through faith in Jesus and acts of kindness, peace, and justice. And so, while rigidity and dogmatism are dangers which threaten global and ecumenical companionship, an acceptance of extreme relativism or apathy is equally destructive.

[9] With the above being said, the journey of walking faithfully between the "two ditches" of global and ecumenical companionship requires reflection upon what is essential, or in other words, what truly constitutes a deliberate divide or intentional cooperation within the Christian church. However, such answers are difficult – or even impossible – to discover. On the one hand, we are *never* justified in excluding others as fellow participants within the church, but on the other hand, communion implies a sense of agreement. In other words, while *no* conflict should divide the church, *any* dispute has the potential to do just that! As a result, the "certain answer" so desperately desired cannot be found. Ultimately, the crucial and difficult task is that, just as Jesus was able to boldly *and* humbly live out his beliefs faithfully *and* fruitfully through appreciation *and* critique of his cultural *and* religious traditions, we in the present day and age must also engage in a consistent process of theological *and* cultural critique. In other words, instead of seeking answers of absolute certainty, we must – through faith – continually wrestle with the ongoing tensions of confessional and contextual fidelity.

[10] The friction surrounding basic elements of Christian faith is nothing new, for one of the many lessons that Jesus wished to instill upon his first followers was a grasp of the critical difference between essentials and expendables, or in other words, a healthy tension of diversity and unity. Jesus knew that loving God and all beings in the created world was essential for fullness of life, yet he also knew that such actions would take place in different ways depending upon circumstances impacted by place and time. In a sense, Jesus knew to stand firm when central ingredients of faith were under attack, yet he also recognized that diversity and unity work in cooperation with one another and serve as building blocks for a vibrant community of believers. Among other things, Jesus was well-aware that diversity in excess would lead to sustained division, yet he also realized that an obsession with unity would eventually lead to synthetic harmony and bland uniformity (with disputes and negativity lurking underneath the surface). As a result, Jesus repeatedly tried to promote the core values of faith while also empowering followers to engage in creative and diverse practice. With all the above in mind, these lessons from Jesus remain critically important today.

[11] There is nothing wrong with strong convictions surrounding theology and action, for those with passion and enthusiasm repeatedly steer Christian communities in bold and creative directions. However, it is equally important to acknowledge that a particular "taste" of faith and practice which one has acquired over numerous years may not be universally appropriate. In addition, as imperfect human beings with countless limitations, our beliefs and behaviors will always fall short of faultless faithfulness, thus our need for confession and forgiveness is constant and an attitude of graciousness a necessary consequence. While theological confidence is admirable and valuable, a lack of humility is extremely dangerous. As a result, because God continues to be revealed through ever-changing circumstances, perhaps our goal as participants in God's mission is not to duplicate one particular taste of Christianity and shove it down various theological throats. To the contrary, perhaps participation in God's mission is about empowering others and trusting the Holy Spirit to work through different people, methods, places, and circumstances. When such experiences of accompaniment take place, and dialogue for the purpose of understanding takes precedence over goals of persuasion or conquest, God is present in and through the interaction, unity and diversity is more fully realized, and a more faithful and fruitful global and ecumenical movement is a result.

The Rev. Brian Konkol is an ordained pastor with the ELCA and serves as a Country Coordinator for the South Africa-based Young Adults in Global Mission program.

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