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*A Ministry of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement*

## Church in Transit: Developing the Already/Not Yet of Miroslav Volf's Trinitarian Ecclesiology

By Ryan Patrick McLaughlin

The church may be the only tangible manifestation of the triune God that some people are aware that they see. To those people, the Trinity looks like the church. What do they see? In the tenth chapter of his book, *What on Earth is the Church*, Kevin Giles states that the early church “unreflectively” accepted hierarchal structures in society as a model for ecclesiology.<sup>1</sup> In his view, this accommodation to historical norms continued in the West with Roman Catholicism and did not cease with the Reformation, whose proponents failed to implement the practical ramifications of justification by faith and the universal priesthood. Likewise, the counter-reformation, states Giles, continued in this trend by emphasizing “the visible, institutional, and hierarchal aspects of the church.”<sup>2</sup> However, Giles believes that renewed interest in the doctrine of the Trinity, “arguably the most fundamental doctrine for Christians,”<sup>3</sup> “provides the conceptual foundation for a much-needed reformulation of ecclesiology.”<sup>4</sup>

While Giles certainly overstates the naivety of the early church and over-simplifies its relationship with the surrounding culture, his enthusiasm over ecclesial reform based on reflection on the Trinity is well-placed. In recent years, many theologians have sought to establish an ecclesiology that permits full weight to the doctrine of the Trinity. That is, they construct a trinitarian ecclesiology. However, Giles fails to mention that variants within trinitarian doctrines in some cases translate into divergent ecclesiologies, some of which support a hierarchal view of the church.

In this paper, I seek to explore the trinitarian ecclesiology of Miroslav Volf as he develops it in contrast to Joseph Ratzinger and John Zizioulas. To do this effectively, I begin by offering some preliminary considerations, which delineate the facet of trinitarian

ecclesiology I examine in this paper. These thoughts serve to qualify, justify, and delimit my approach. Next, I outline Volf's interaction with Ratzinger and Zizioulas, afterwards presenting his own view. Finally, utilizing the concept of a “pilgrim church” as a church in transit, I seek to explain the tension between the historical and eschatological elements of Volf's view. I will ultimately suggest that applying Volf's trinitarian ecclesiology to a church on a pilgrimage toward its *telos* offers balanced insights into how theologians think about the ongoing development of the trinitarian church in transit.

### Preliminary Considerations

In this first section, I delineate different facets of trinitarian theology. As I will only explore one of these facets, I then seek to justify this approach. Finally, after setting limits to the general approach of trinitarian ecclesiology, I further qualify my specific endeavor.

### *Different Facets of Trinitarian Ecclesiology*

Trinitarian ecclesiology has three major dimensions. The first explores the institution of the church and its ongoing mission in trinitarian terms. This is the constitutional dimension. It is evident in a dialogue between western and eastern churches, where one sees a difference in emphasis from the importance of christology to the importance of pneumatology, respectively.<sup>5</sup>

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Another facet examines how the inner trinitarian life provides a model for ecclesial structures. This is the reflective dimension. Theologians taking this approach attempt to establish precedence for relationships in the church based on the relationships of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to each other. Hence, Giles states, “the inner life of the divine Trinity provides a pattern, a model, an echo, or an icon of Christian communal existence in this world.”<sup>6</sup>

Cautioning against an over emphasis on this approach, Paul Fiddes notes that trinitarian ecclesiology must move beyond a simple model view. It must also include (and finds basis in) participation in the divine life.<sup>7</sup> John Behr offers a similar concern: “What is said of the Church is certainly based upon what is said of the Trinity, but the effect of speaking in this manner, paradoxically, is that the Church is separated from God, as a distinct entity reflecting the divine being.”<sup>8</sup> Hence, this third facet of trinitarian ecclesiology examines how participation in the church leads to participation in the triune God. I refer to this as the participatory dimension. Zizioulas, emphasizing this point from the Orthodox view of the centrality of the Eucharist, has been accused of advocating unity in the relationships within the church by participation in Christ to the point of a realized eschatology, but only at the Eucharist.<sup>9</sup>

While all three dimensions of trinitarian ecclesiology are important, in this paper I focus on the second, exploring how human relationships in the church should reflect the relationships in the Trinity. I am fully aware of the cautions offered by Fiddes and Behr. Nonetheless, I believe that completely ignoring the reflective dimension of the inner trinitarian life as an example for relationships in the church would constitute a fatal impoverishment for ecclesiology.

### Justifying the Model Facet of Trinitarian Ecclesiology

Is this exemplary facet of trinitarian ecclesiology justifiable? In response to this question, Volf states, “Conceiving the church in correspondence to the Trinity does not mean much more than thinking with theological consistency, all the while hoping that reality will not prove to be too recalcitrant.”<sup>10</sup> Zizioulas goes as far as to claim, “There is no model for the proper relation between communion and otherness either for the Church or for the human being other than the Trinitarian God.”<sup>11</sup> For Zizioulas, then, the Trinity embodies the proper relationships toward which the church strives. The foundation for these views emerges from Jesus’ prayer for all believers as recorded in John’s gospel. After praying for his disciples, Jesus says,

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:20-23).<sup>12</sup>

This oneness prayed for on behalf of all believers posits the trinitarian relationships as the hope for the relationships of those in the church with each other and the persons of the Trinity. Hence, the relationships between the persons of the Trinity form a model (and a calling) for the relationships between believers. However, this understanding is not without limitations.

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### Limitations to the Approach

Concerning the limitations of the reflective dimension of trinitarian ecclesiology, Volf suggests the following considerations. First, whatever views the church formulates of the Triune God reflect a limited understanding based on God’s self-revelation.<sup>13</sup> The church interprets God’s self-revelation as the doctrine of the Trinity. Even so, one recalls Karl Rahner’s famous dictum: “The ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity.”<sup>14</sup> Fred Sanders articulates how Rahner’s rule has been both radicalized and restricted by theologians who seek to maintain respectively the validity of the revelation of the economic Trinity and the priority and inexhaustibility of the immanent Trinity.<sup>15</sup> While this debate remains beyond the scope of this paper, I will operate under the interpretation that revelation of the Trinity is reliable but in no way exhausts the reality of the Trinity.<sup>16</sup> As such is the case, whatever correlation exists between human relationships and the inner relationships shared by the persons of the Trinity remains as limited as our understanding of the relationships shared by the trinitarian persons.

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### Ecumenical Trends

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Second, the perichoretic relationships of the Trinity are not experienced by members of the church in the same manner.<sup>17</sup> Hence, even what we confidently deduce from reflection on the self-revelation of the Trinity presents a limited model for the relationships of the church. I further explicate this point below.

Finally, the distance between the historical church and the eschatological church requires qualified analogies with trinitarian life. To whatever extent the trinitarian relations represent the hope for the church, they do not represent its historical reality. But, even with the difficulties of approaching ecclesiology from a trinitarian perspective, Volf rightly notes: “The *this-worldly character* of God’s self-revelation makes it possible to convert trinitarian ideas into ecclesiological ideas.”<sup>18</sup>

### Further Qualifying the Church’s Reflection of Trinitarian Relationships

One further qualification is necessary before proceeding. As stated above, regarding humanity’s participation in the trinitarian life, other theologians have accused Zizioulas of a realized eschatology. In certain passages Zizioulas does seem to come close to this line. However, he does hold that the church in history has yet to reach its eschatological reality.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, navigating between the tension inherent in the “already” and the “not yet” of ecclesial life proves difficult. Behr accomplishes this by advocating “the other trinitarian aspect of the Church” – namely, its eschatological calling.<sup>20</sup> The tension between the historical church and the eschatological people of God must find full expression in any trinitarian ecclesiology. For this point, the imagery of a “pilgrim church” moving toward an eschatological calling employed by Vatican II proves most helpful.<sup>21</sup> Based on the language of Vatican II, Francis Sullivan provides a valuable understanding of this pilgrimage toward the eschaton with his depiction of the church’s actual but imperfect holiness. The church both is holy and is called to be holy.<sup>22</sup> In a similar manner, reflecting the relationships of the inner Trinity expresses not just an historical reality but also an eschatological calling and hope – the *telos* of the church.<sup>23</sup>

In sum, trinitarian ecclesiology bears multiple facets. Each one is necessary, including the Trinity as a model for relationships in the church. This facet is limited by our imperfect understanding of the trinitarian relationships. However, as these relationships are the image of perfect communion, and as the triune God has truly revealed God’s self, the trinitarian relationships establish the *telos* of the church. As the *telos*, though, trinitarian communion is only partly experienced now. It remains an eschatological hope toward which the church moves.

### Trinitarian Ecclesiologies and Relationships in the Church

In dialogue with Volf, Ralph Del Colle notes that a common trinitarian approach to ecclesiology does not necessarily translate into similar ecclesiologies.<sup>24</sup> Thus, regarding the question of “how” the church lives toward its trinitarian *telos*, one must first substantiate a proper place to begin; namely, one must delineate the trinitarian relationships that constitute the example for the church. Volf claims that the one’s departure point for trinitarian thought influences ecclesiological structures.<sup>25</sup> In this section, I

explore Volf’s interaction with the Trinitarian ecclesiologies of Ratzinger and Zizioulas. Then, I outline a few key elements of Volf’s view of the Trinity and how this view affects his ecclesiology.

### Joseph Ratzinger’s Substantial Reflection according to Volf

Volf claims that Ratzinger locates the unity of God in God’s essence. Because of this starting point, Volf writes, “the one substance gains the upper hand over the three relations.”<sup>26</sup> This particular trinitarian emphasis, in turn, leads to what Volf calls a “monistic structure” of the church:

[T]he one Christ acting as subject in the church is represented by the one visible head of the church, namely, by the Pope as head of the universal church, and by the bishop as head of the local church. Thus only the one Pope and the one bishop, and not the college of bishops, can be grounded as structural elements through the doctrine of God.<sup>27</sup>

As the one essence behind the three persons constitutes the unity of God, so also Ratzinger gives a fundamental priority to hierarchal structures that place the one over the many and the universal church above the local.

Volf critiques this position as an inadequate ecclesiology deriving from an inadequate trinitarian doctrine – namely, dissolving the three persons into the one essence.<sup>28</sup> Is Volf correct? John Allen points out that many bishops look to Ratzinger to exercise collegiality as Pope at a higher level than his predecessors. However, in Allen’s view, this collegiality “amounts to collegiality within the context of a strong papal authority.”<sup>29</sup> This emphasis on the papacy highlights Volf’s critique of Ratzinger, who claims that to diminish the divinely established office of Peter is to diminish God by way of obstructing God’s means for Christian unity.<sup>30</sup> Hence again, unity is constituted in the one. On this point, the debate between Ratzinger and Walter Kasper concerning the priority of the universal church becomes relevant. Kilian McDonnell summarizes the important points of the dialogue.<sup>31</sup> Of import for this paper, Kasper critiques Ratzinger’s emphasis on the priority of the universal church and links this emphasis to a centralization of power unbefitting the developments of Vatican II.<sup>32</sup> Ratzinger, in reply,

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## IN MEMORIAM

### Sister Therese Dion, SSA

Sr. Therese Dion, SSA (Sister of St. Anne) passed away on Saturday, May 2, 2009 at St. Anne’s Convent in Marlboro, MA. Sr. Therese worked at the Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute for a year in the area of Orthodox Churches. She was one of the pioneers of the ecumenical movement in the American post-Vatican II Catholic Church. She was the first ecumenical officer of the Diocese of Worcester, where she served twice. She was also the ecumenical officer for the Diocese of Norwich, CT. Sr. Therese was active in NADEO (now CADEIO) all of her professional life. In 2002, she was the recipient of the James Fitzgerald Award which was granted by NADEO. May she be with the Risen Lord in glory.

*On this point, the debate between Ratzinger and Walter Kasper concerning the priority of the universal church becomes relevant.*

claims the priority of the universal church derives from his trinitarian understanding of the unity of the church.<sup>33</sup> This exchange at least lends weight to Volf's concerns. That is, he is not alone in his critique of Ratzinger's emphasis on the one prior to the many.

However, one must also note Del Colle's response to Volf's ecclesial work. He states that Volf misreads Ratzinger in claiming that his emphasis on the one essence of God leads to a monistic ecclesiology. Del Colle persuasively challenges Volf's critique.<sup>34</sup> But Zizioulas also reflects negatively on Ratzinger's ecclesiology because it is drawn from a "substantialist Trinitarian theology." He laments that such a view "turns hierarchy into a means not of producing and securing otherness, as is the case for the Cappadocian understanding of divine causality, but of enforcing unity." He goes on to say that it is no wonder that such a hierarchy derived from a monistic trinitarian view "provokes negative reactions."<sup>35</sup>

#### *John Zizioulas's Monarchical Reflection*

In contrast to Ratzinger, Zizioulas does not posit a divine substance ontologically prior to the persons in the Trinity. On the contrary, for Zizioulas, person (always in relation) constitutes being.<sup>36</sup> Combining this premise with Zizioulas's monarchical view of the Trinity, the source of trinitarian unity stems not from a substance, but instead from a person, namely, the Father.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, in contrast to a priority on the universal church, Zizioulas emphasizes the local church as a truly catholic church.<sup>38</sup> However, against both Afanasiev and Schmemmann, he equates a local church not with a parish, but with a diocese, as a Bishop is necessary for fullness.<sup>39</sup> It is also pertinent that Zizioulas connects the monarchy of the Father constituting the Son and the Spirit to the *arche* of Adam constituting all human persons.<sup>40</sup> In short, for Zizioulas, the one constitutes the many.<sup>41</sup>

Volf believes that by claiming the unity of the Trinity is grounded in the person of the Father, Zizioulas creates a "kind of subordination," a phrase Zizioulas uses himself,<sup>42</sup> where the unity of the three persons rests in the monarchy of the Father.<sup>43</sup> This structure carries over into Zizioulas's ecclesiology as well, where the bishop constitutes the unity of the many, which in turn are subject to a "kind of subordination" to the one.<sup>44</sup> That is, even though Zizioulas emphasizes the ontological importance of person instead of substance, his monarchical Trinity still translates, in Volf's opinion, into a priority of the one (bishop) over the many (laity).<sup>45</sup>

#### *Miroslav Volf's Relational Reflection*

In contrast to Ratzinger and Zizioulas, Volf follows Jürgen Moltmann in positing a difference between the relational level ("innertrinitarian form") and the processional level ("hypostatic divinity") of the trinitarian persons.<sup>46</sup> The latter preserves the

uniqueness of the persons, where the Father is the source of divinity for the Son and the Spirit, thus constituting them with regard to procession. The former deals with how the constituted persons exist in trinitarian life.<sup>47</sup> Even though the persons of the Trinity differ in processions, relationally the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit pour into each other in a perichoretic equality where "[i]n every divine person as a subject, the other persons also indwell; all mutually permeate one another, though in so doing they do not cease to be distinct persons."<sup>48</sup> As Del Colle recognizes, "The import of this distinction is that the constitutional level does not necessarily inform the relational level."<sup>49</sup> This mutual indwelling relationally sustains and provides identity to each person.<sup>50</sup> That is, relationally speaking, "[t]he Son is Son only insofar as the Father and the Spirit indwell him.... The same applies to the Father and to the Spirit."<sup>51</sup> Therefore, like Moltmann, Volf holds that the monarchy of the Father rests only in the processional level of the Trinity. On the relational level, the monarchy of the Father disappears and all persons are fully equal.<sup>52</sup> In this manner, "the unilinear hierarchical relations can disappear from the trinitarian communion, since maintaining that the Father constitutes the Son and Spirit says nothing as yet about *how* the relations between them are structured," rendering hierarchy or subordination inconceivable.<sup>53</sup>

How does this trinitarian theology shape Volf's ecclesiology? Relationally, Volf posits an important framework: "The relations between the many in the church must reflect the mutual *love* of the divine persons."<sup>54</sup> Here, the word "reflect" importantly limits the trinitarian model of the church. As I already mentioned, perichoresis – as experienced by the divine persons – is not possible for human beings who are separate subjects.<sup>55</sup> However, the Spirit indwells these separate subjects and forms a communion between them *and* communion with them.<sup>56</sup> The church does not simply reflect, but also participates in divine communion as the Spirit draws it in.<sup>57</sup> In this way, participation in God turns individuals in the church toward each other.<sup>58</sup> A social trinitarian view<sup>59</sup> mandates a social ecclesiology. Most importantly, because Volf places the priority on the person – as does Zizioulas – but unlike Zizioulas also relationally perceives each person to be, by nature of their perichoretic union, "a personal center of action internal to the other person,"<sup>60</sup> the ecclesiological structure of the church is a polycentric reality of equal communion.<sup>61</sup>

Thus, the principle of unity in the church must rest in the relationships of the many filled with the one (Spirit), not in the priority of the one (bishop or Pope) representing the many.<sup>62</sup> This is the heart of the community of equals. Just as God "cannot act externally as the one tripersonal divine self, but rather only as a communion of the different persons existing within one another,"<sup>63</sup> so also no person (or group) in the polycentric church can act apart from the many.<sup>64</sup> Hence, the Pope's power to act *ex cathedra* or to deny the ordination of bishops apart from the college is, in Volf's view, insufficiently trinitarian.<sup>65</sup> For Volf, then, every structure and power must remain "of the church" and never "over the church."<sup>66</sup> In this way, Volf's trinitarian ecclesiology decentralizes the authority within both the (anticipated) universal and the (historical) local church.<sup>67</sup>

In sum, Volf develops his own ecclesiology in contrast to those of Ratzinger and Zizioulas by exploring their respective

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trinitarian theologies. He sees in Ratzinger a priority on the divine essence in the Trinity and in Zizioulas a priority on the person of the Father. Respectively, Volf claims these views create either a monistic or a monarchial ecclesiology. Both of these views end in a hierarchy that, in Volf's view, fails to make room for the polycentric nature of the church. In contrast, Volf sees the Trinity as a community of different but equal persons indwelling each other in perichoretic union. While the persons of the Trinity differ in processions, they are relationally equal. Hence, Volf's ideal trinitarian ecclesiology defines the church as a polycentric community formed by different but equal persons where no act or decision occurs above the community or without its participation. However, the perfection of this image remains a future hope toward which the church strives. In this striving, the institutional elements of the church do have a place. To appreciate this fully, I now turn to the image of the pilgrim church journeying toward its eschatological hope.

### A Pilgrim Church in Transit

I have established Volf's ideal image of the church, which derives from his understanding of the Trinity. In this section, I explore the image of the pilgrim church employed by Vatican II. I then place this imagery in dialogue with Volf's trinitarian ecclesiology, suggesting that all *ordo* – indeed all charisms – within the church should move toward equality as the church journeys toward its eschatological hope of perfect relationships.

#### *Vatican II and the Pilgrim Church as Already and Not Yet*

Thomas Rausch notes that, prior to Vatican II, many Catholic theologians imaged the church as a perfect society. In his words, the church stood “distinct from and superior to other societies, and [lacked] nothing for its own completeness. Its symbol was the pyramid, with all authority descending from above.”<sup>68</sup> This stringently institutional view of the church placed the hierarchy above the laity in a juridical and authoritarian sense, leaving little room for the charisms of the people.<sup>69</sup> However, the Second Vatican Council drastically qualified this ecclesial image with the concept of the church as a pilgrim people of God.<sup>70</sup>

*Lumen Gentium* 48 serves to highlight Rausch's point. “The Church... will attain its full perfection only in the glory of heaven, when there will come the time of the restoration of all things.” Furthermore, “the promised restoration which we are awaiting has already begun in Christ, is carried forward in the mission of the Holy Spirit and through Him continues in the Church in which we learn the meaning of our terrestrial life through our faith, while we perform with hope in the future the work committed to us in this world by the Father, and thus work out our salvation.” Thus, the perfection of the church is an eschatological quality. However, the church already possesses this quality in varying and increasing degrees: “Already the final age of the world has come upon us and the renovation of the world is irrevocably decreed and is already anticipated in some kind of a real way; for the Church already on this earth is signed with a sanctity which is real although imperfect.” Even so, the “already” of the church's perfection, prior to eschaton, remains simultaneously an anticipated quality: “[U]ntil there shall be new heavens and a new earth in which justice dwells, the pilgrim Church in her sacraments and institutions, which pertain

to this present time, has the appearance of this world which is passing and she herself dwells among creatures who groan and travail in pain until now and await the revelation of the sons of God.”<sup>71</sup>

The church bears a “sanctity which is real although imperfect”<sup>72</sup> as it travels on the path toward its eschatological hope. The gifts endowed to the church, “which pertain to this present time,” equip it to move toward the goal to which it is called.<sup>73</sup> However, as a pilgrim in journey, the church has often failed to live out its eschatological hope.

Theologians from all traditions readily admit the repeated failures of the church. History demands as much.<sup>74</sup> Countless examples of power abuse, from witch hunts to holy wars to economic exploitation to hasty anathemas, continue to stain the church's past. The church's imperfections paint much of history's portrait. It thus seems that the church's *telos* of perfection remains a future hope, as *Lumen Gentium* holds. As such, one cannot ignore these tensions between the historical and the eschatological dimensions of the church. On the other hand, as Rembert Weakland notes, the notion of the church as a pilgrim people of God provides bishops with “the freedom to talk about the sinfulness of the Church and so come to terms with some of the less pleasant aspects of history.”<sup>75</sup>

Thus the church is simultaneously “already” and “not yet.” Yves Congar, using similar language, sees the church as the bride of Christ that is not yet perfectly pure. Indeed, it “will only be perfect eschatologically.” Even so, Congar states that the church “aspires to that perfection.”<sup>76</sup> The church strives toward its hope, but often falls short of it. With this in mind, Weakland states, “As long as it is *in via*... the Church must constantly admit its own need for reform.”<sup>77</sup>

#### *The Pilgrim Church and Volf's Ecclesiology*

If the church is truly a pilgrim church on a journey, then it should progressively move toward its eschatological hope. Otherwise, it is not on a journey at all. Rather, it merely waits for the fulfillment of its hope. In that case, the church need only maintain its position, and movement along the path to its hope is not a concern. But as Congar and others state, the church is on a journey and aspires toward its fulfillment. It must strive for the eschatological perfection for which it hopes. But how does the pilgrim church endeavor to reach that perfection? What are its faculties that help it *in via*? According to Vatican II, the sacraments and institutions compose the gifts that “pertain to this present time.”<sup>78</sup> Likewise, Kasper and Ratzinger hold that the offices of the church, especially the Petrine ministry, are gifts to lead the church into full unity and safeguard the unity it already shares.<sup>79</sup> Do these views preclude Volf's trinitarian ecclesiology? Not necessarily.

After all, Volf in no way negates – and actually deems necessary – the role of offices in the church.<sup>80</sup> However, his trinitarian theology does demand that all offices exercise power with the highest level of communion and mutual subordination.<sup>81</sup> Here, Dennis Doyle claims that Volf's arguments to maintain the validity of the episcopacy while rendering it differently than traditional Catholic and Orthodox theologians prove inconsistent. Quite simply he states, “One must be cautious of trying to make a ‘both/and’ out of what can only be a contradiction.”<sup>82</sup> Even so, for Volf the issue of

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the hierarchy is not in and of itself divisive. Rather, the divisive issue is the manner in which the hierarchy is understood and exercised.

On this point, many Catholic theologians have proposed helpful ways for their tradition to reform, including increasing active collegiality in the Petrine office, greater emphasis on the universal priesthood and the necessary charisms of all believers, a return to the local selection of bishops, and augmenting the local church's power, thus encouraging subsidiarity.<sup>83</sup> Such reforms would render Catholicism more conducive to Volf's trinitarian ecclesiology as they decentralize power, making all the people of God an essential part of the polycentric church. Giles nicely summarizes his view on how the church ought to reflect the Trinity. I believe his position is similar to that of Volf. For Giles, the reflective dimension of the Trinity demands reform in terms of community (a group of persons in relation to each other), ecumenism (different churches working together in *communio* toward true unity that embraces diversity), egalitarianism (a democratic approach to church structure that precludes all forms of hierarchy, a pejorative term for Giles), and non-sexism (an extension of egalitarianism where the distinctions of male and female are upheld, but not in a sense that tilts all positions of authority to males).<sup>84</sup>

While such reforms may seem to challenge any form of hierarchy in the church, Volf does not take his ecclesiology in this direction. On the contrary, Volf freely admits that the church is an institution. For him, this reality derives from our symbolic language of the Trinity. "The institutionality of the church can be conceived in correspondence to the Trinity only because the Trinity itself is in a certain sense an 'institution.'"<sup>85</sup> Structure and order – *taxis* – within the church is necessary, especially for the church journeying toward a not-yet-attained hope. But these structures, at least in part, highlight the separation between what the church is in history and what the church is moving toward in the eschaton.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, they do not exist to perpetuate their own reality, but to lead the church toward the depth of true relationality seen in the Trinity. Hence, Volf states,

Although the life and structure of the church should correspond to the divine communion, a communion through which the church is constituted and from and toward which it lives, the conditions under which it lives on this side of God's new creation must be considered in order to know *how* the church is to correspond concretely to the divine communion during its actual sojourn toward ecclesiological consummation.<sup>87</sup>

Volf echoes this sentiment elsewhere, stating that "ecclesial communion on this side of God's new creation can correspond to the perfect mutual love of the trinitarian persons only in a broken fashion."<sup>88</sup> Nonetheless, as the above quote reveals, he would also affirm with Moltmann that our eschatological hope expresses itself in a movement toward that which it envisions.<sup>89</sup> Thus, "the church's fellowship is always in transit between the historical minimum and the eschatological maximum of the correspondence to the love in which the trinitarian persons live."<sup>90</sup> Moreover, "the more a church is characterized by symmetrical and decentralized distribution of power and freely affirmed interaction, the more will it correspond to the trinitarian communion."<sup>91</sup> This statement implicitly suggests progressive levels of reflecting trinitarian communion. This point is the final piece. The church's trinitarian reality in history is simultaneously an eschatological calling. As

the pilgrim community, the church journeys toward its hope. The church enjoys fellowship and seeks fellowship in its fullness.<sup>92</sup>


How will the church arrive? Paul claims that the charisms of the church, including the hierarchal offices, exist for the purpose of building up the church (1 Cor. 12:7-11). The church requires this building up for its ongoing mission as it progresses toward its ultimate end: full participation in the trinitarian life when God will be "all in all." In this sense, what the church ought to look like tomorrow rests largely on what one claims the church ought to look like ultimately, because it is this ultimate goal to which the church aspires progressively. Hence, for Volf, the offices of the church, along with every charism and thus every member, thrust the church toward its eschatological hope of perfect relationships of equality and love. Charisms do not exist for the simple perpetuation of a hierarchal system; rather, they exist to move the entirety of the church – and the world – toward an equal participation in the divine life.<sup>93</sup> From Volf's viewpoint, as the pilgrim church moves into God's promised future, it ought to resemble more and more the relationships of mutual love and complete equality of the Trinity.

This viewpoint must apply to the sacraments as well. As already mentioned, Del Colle criticizes Volf for neglecting the importance of the sacraments for ecclesial life by emphasizing unmediated grace independent of the *ordo* of the church.<sup>94</sup> This assessment accurately highlights a weakness of Volf's ecclesial scope – especially as he develops it in contrast with Catholicism and Orthodoxy. However, my approach to Volf's position provides some space for this dialogue. First, based on the reflective dimension of Volf's trinitarian ecclesiology, no action in the church can occur apart from the community. This principle would include sacraments as well. Hence, grace-effecting sacraments depend on all the people of God, evidencing the equality of the trinitarian relationships. Second, the sacraments, if they draw the people of God further into the divine life and thus effect salvation, ought to propel the church toward its *telos* of perfect relationships. Interestingly, this understanding of the sacraments fits well with Vatican II. After all, the document explicitly states that the sacraments "pertain to this present time," aiding the pilgrim church journeying toward its eschatological hope. Hence, the necessity of the sacraments reveals the distance of the present church from its ultimate *telos*. But the sacraments also thrust the church toward its eschatological hope. Thus, to whatever extent the *ordo* in the church is necessary for the sake of the sacraments, it is only so because the church has not yet attained that for which it hopes. Furthermore, as the *ordo* administers the sacraments, the church ought to draw ever closer to what it hopes for: perfect and equal trinitarian relationships.<sup>95</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I have explored the reflective dimension of Volf's trinitarian ecclesiology as he contrasts it with those of Ratzinger and Zizioulas. Volf sees the Trinity as a perichoretic unity of equal persons who act together inasmuch as they fully penetrate each other. While this perichoretic union is not possible for human beings, the church reflects this reality as a polycentric community of equal persons. This reflection is both an historical reality and an eschatological calling. Hence, the Vatican II image

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of a pilgrim church traveling a path toward its hope fits well with Volf's thinking. Institutional elements of the church, along with all other charisms, exist to propel the church toward a greater reflection of trinitarian equality and love. In short, if the church is on a pilgrimage toward a *telos* it has not yet attained, it ought to reflect that *telos* ever clearer as the people of God approach it in history. 

Notes:

1. Kevin Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church? An Exploration in New Testament Theology* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1995), 215.
2. Giles, *Church*, 217.
3. Giles, *Church*, 213.
4. Giles, *Church*, 219.
5. See Nikos A. Nissiotis, "Pneumatological Christology as a Presupposition of Ecclesiology" in *Oecumenica, an Annual Symposium of Ecumenical Research* (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2002); cf. John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: Crestwood, 1985), 110-14; Giles, *Church*, 221-22.
6. Giles, *Church*, 222.
7. Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating In God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 5-8.
8. John Behr, "The Trinitarian Being of the Church", *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 48:1 (2003): 67-88, at 68.
9. See Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Company, 1998), 101; Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical and Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2002), 97; cf. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 160-61, 169.
10. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 194.
11. John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, ed. Paul McPartlan (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 4.
12. Unless otherwise stated, all biblical citations are taken from the NRSV.
13. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 198.
14. Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, translated by Joseph Donceel (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1970), 22.
15. Fred Sanders, *The Image of the Immanent Trinity: Rahner's Rule and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), chapters 4 and 5.
16. Regarding this position, I align myself with both Volf and Giles. See Miroslav Volf, "The Trinity Is Our Social Program", *Modern Theology* 14:3 (July 1998): 403-23, at 407; Giles, *Church*, 220.
17. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 211.
18. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 199; italics original.
19. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 186.
20. Behr, "The Trinitarian Being of the Church", 78.
21. See Documents of Vatican II, "Lumen Gentium", chapter VII, available from [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/index.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.htm); Internet; accessed October 2008; cf. Rembert Weakland, "Images of the Church: From 'Perfect Society' to 'God's People on Pilgrimage'" in *Unfinished Journey: The Church 40 Years After Vatican II (Essays for John Wilkins)*, ed. Austen Ivereigh (New York: Continuum, 2003), 78-90.
22. Francis A. Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In: On, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), chapter 4.
23. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 200.
24. Ralph Del Colle, "Communion and the Trinity: The Free Church Ecclesiology of Miroslav Volf – A Catholic Response", *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies*, 22 no. 2 (Fall 2000): 303-27, at 304.
25. Volf is careful not to overstate his case here: "One should not, however, overestimate the influence of trinitarian thinking on political and ecclesial reality... It does not seem that the conceptualization process proceeds simply in a straight line from above (Trinity) to below (church and society) and that social reality is shaped in this way." Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 194.
26. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 70.
27. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 71-72.
28. See Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 128; cf. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 67.
29. John L. Allen, Jr., *The Rise of Benedict XVI: The Inside Story of How the Pope was Elected and Where He Will Take the Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), 240.
30. See Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today*, translated by Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 73-74.
31. See Kilian McDonnell, "The Ratzinger/Kasper Debate: The Universal Church and Local Churches", *Theological Studies* 63 (2002): 227-250; cf. Walter Kasper, *Leadership in the Church: How Traditional Roles Can Serve the Christian Community Today*, translated by Brian McNeil (New York: Herder & Herder, 2003), chapter 6.
32. McDonnell, "Ratzinger/Kasper", 229-30, 239-41.
33. McDonnell, "Ratzinger/Kasper", 237.
34. While Del Colle admires Volf's work and even sees some validity in his critique of Ratzinger, he nonetheless sees in Volf some weaknesses that lead to a misrepresentation of Ratzinger. First, Volf does not delve deeply into sacramentality, which forms an essential crux of Ratzinger's position (305). Furthermore, Del Colle qualifies Ratzinger's emphasis on substance by placing his thoughts in the context of the fourth century trinitarian discussions. He also laments that one cannot mention substance without inviting the accusation of a monistic God. Del Colle continues his qualification of Ratzinger by stating that the view of person as relation (for example, that the Father is fatherhood) must be understood within the framework of persons subsisting in relation. As this framework derives from medieval scholastics such as Aquinas, Ratzinger would certainly not contradict it. Hence, Del Colle claims that Volf's understanding of Ratzinger is based on inferences that contradict the framework within which Ratzinger operates. Collectively, these critiques soften Volf's critique of Ratzinger. See Del Colle, "Communion and the Trinity", 314-26.
35. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 146.
36. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 76; cf. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 99-100.
37. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 77-78; cf. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, chapter 3.
38. John Zizioulas, *Eucharist, Bishop, Church: The Unity of the Church in the Divine Eucharist and the Bishop During the First Three Centuries*, translated by Elizabeth Theokritoff (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2001), 256; Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 132-33.
39. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 23-24; Zizioulas, *Eucharist, Bishop, Church*, 258-59.
40. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 106.
41. Kärkkäinen, along with Volf, points out that Zizioulas incorporates the many persons into the one person. Hence, at the Eucharist, the many become identical with Christ. Also, the bishop is able to "transcend his individuality and represent the whole congregation." Kärkkäinen, *Ecclesiology*, 97.; cf. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 112, 135-37.

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We gather at a rather astonishing moment in world history! As the global economic system undergoes major upheaval, can we advocate effectively for a system that pays greater attention to the world's most vulnerable citizens? As political life in the United States undergoes major transition, can we advocate effectively for a U.S. foreign policy that favors diplomacy over force, for a foreign policy that seeks "security" not through unilateral defense but through attentiveness to the injustice that afflicts other children of God? You may recall the wonderful line in Ezekiel where the prophet says that Pharaoh has grown so arrogant that he thinks he invented the Nile – for his own use! Can we lift up our voice on behalf of a U.S. policy which recognizes its more modest place within the community of nations and which affirms that all we have is gift to be used for the common good?

One of the tasks of advocacy, as you all know, is to discern the opportunities inherent in a particular place and time. Things have changed so rapidly in the past two months that, if the agenda for this week had been determined in October, it might have been somewhat different. And yet, our four themes still provide a fine framework for discussing the possibilities of this moment.

As far as advocacy in the U.S. is concerned, we are now facing the prospect – as my colleague at the NCC, Cassandra Carmichael, puts it – of being able to play offense, not just defense. We welcome this change, but it also comes with a real danger: that the churches of the National Council become so caught up in the allure of political influence that we lose our distinctive and more prophetic voice. This, too, is part of our discernment in this moment, and I ask for the prayers of international colleagues as we wrestle with the implications of our changed situation.

Finally, by way of introduction, I want to express my appreciation for the honor of this invitation; but I stand here acutely aware that many (most) of you have more experience than I when it comes to *global* advocacy. My only possible contribution is to speak from my position as a theologian who now has responsibility for a national council of churches – council, I should add, that has had real difficulty in recent years getting its act together when it comes to advocacy! So think of this as a case study on one country, with a hope that it also speaks to your varied contexts.

I am going to begin not by defining advocacy (which has been done at some length in various studies) but by clarifying my understanding of what it means to be ecumenical and what it means to be a council of churches. This will tell you a good deal about my particular perspective and also identify two tensions important for our discussion of global advocacy: the tension between unity and justice and the tension between working through the churches and being ahead of the churches. Following that, I will turn to four other tensions that, as I see it, are central to our advocacy work as the National Council of Churches in the USA.

What so captivated me when I went to work for the World Council of Churches in 1980 was that, in order to do justice to the Council, you had to say "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" and Program to Combat Racism in the same breath. Racism, we were arguing, is a denial of the very nature of the church, while the

eucharist is the very foundation of the church's calling to racial justice. I remember Philip Potter speaking about the human problem as both oppression *and* fragmentation – which is why, in the words of the Nairobi Assembly, we proclaim a savior who "frees *and* unites." Break the tension between these and, in my judgment, you have lost the vision that impels this movement. Christians acting and advocating for justice, without major concern for how this deepens and expands the life of Christian community, are not "ecumenical" in any full sense of the word. Just as Christians pursuing sacramental fellowship, without major concern for how this deepens and expands their engagement with the world (their advocacy), are not "ecumenical" in any full sense of the word.

Of course, it has always been difficult to hold these together (that's what makes the vision profound); but today, at least in the U.S., we witness an increasing split between two quite different ways of being "ecumenical," two quite different sets of ecumenical priorities – to the point that it is difficult to speak of one movement. In March, hundreds of Christians gather in Washington for Ecumenical Advocacy Days (which the NCC co-sponsors) in order to promote interdenominational collaboration on behalf of peace and justice. In April or May, hundreds of Christians gather somewhere in the U.S. for the National Workshop on Christian Unity (which the NCC helps plan) in order to promote unity through theological dialogue. But my own unscientific survey tells me that very few who participate in one participate in, or even know about, the other.

Three years ago, in *The Christian Century*, the well-known Lutheran theologian, George Lindbeck, attacked what he called the "MK approach" to ecumenism. Michael Kinnamon, he wrote, tries to make Faith and Order and Life and Work (unity and justice) inseparable, co-equal ends to the ecumenical movement – but it is a futile and misguided effort. Faith and Order must take precedence over Life and Work in the same way that faith takes precedence over works in Reformation teaching. Otherwise, theology will always end up subordinated to politics and the ecumenical movement will become "simply another arena for pursuing political agendas."

Of course, the jury *is* still out on whether it is possible to make bold public witness on pressing social, economic issues while also taking full account of the diversity of voices that now make up the theological life of the church, nationally as well as globally. Perhaps, Dr. Lindbeck is correct. But I sure hope not, and I hope we will talk about it – about what it means to be ecumenical – during this week.

All of this leads to the second question: What does it mean to be a council of churches? The very helpful "Review of Global Advocacy" – undertaken by the WCC, the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, ACT International, and ACT Development – reads as if the World Council were an entity alongside the churches. The

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*Rev. Dr. Michael Kinnamon is the General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in the USA.*

*The above address was delivered at the United Nations on November 17, 2008.*

WCC, it says, "...coordinates its member churches around the world to raise their voices," and accompanies its members in times of trouble.

I believe this is a mistaken formulation. As the "Common Understanding and Vision" statement makes clear, the essence of the WCC is the relationship of the churches with one another. There are countless organizations that provide services, even do advocacy, on behalf of the churches; but these should not be confused with a council, a fellowship, of the churches themselves. There is no council over here *and* churches over there. The language we use is that the NCC is a "community of Christian communions" which covenant with one another to manifest the unity that is ours in Christ and, with God's help, to engage in common mission – which includes political advocacy.

All of this ups the ante, makes it harder to leave the table, since the churches are accountable not to an organization but to one another. It also, however, makes the tension between unity and justice all the more acute. I try to maintain this tension by insisting that the NCC is *both* a forum where conflicting perspectives meet in dialogue and a renewal effort that boldly declares the gospel's partisanship on behalf of the excluded and oppressed. Willem Visser't Hooft, the WCC's first General Secretary, has given me language for this (although Jose Miguez Bonino also made the case in his discussion, in the late 1980s, of the WCC's theological coherence). The fellowship between member churches, with all its tensions, wrote Visser't Hooft in one of his last books, is the *raison d'être* of the Council. "But it is a fellowship based on common convictions and called to common witness. An important element in the very substance of our fellowship is what we have hammered out together in our assemblies" – including commitment to combat racism, a preferential option for the poor, a conviction that war is contrary to the will of God, and a commitment to protect God's precious creation.

Such commitments and convictions are not a *prerequisite* for ecumenical participation; rather, they are part of the fabric of public witness now woven through our life together as a result of our common submission to the gospel. They are sinews in this body. My task as General Secretary is to help the churches build up their relationships and to hold them accountable to the commitments they have made to *one another* through participation in this community of communions.

*The language we use is that the NCC is a "community of Christian communions" which covenant with one another to manifest the unity that is ours in Christ and, with God's help, to engage in common mission – which includes political advocacy.*

This is tricky! Councils of churches are *both* instruments of the churches *and* of the ecumenical movement. It is not my job to press an advocacy agenda on the members; but is precisely my job to push them when they cling to marks of division or bear only tepid witness to affirmations they have made together with regard to justice and peace. To put it another way, the fellowship experienced in conciliar ecumenism is not only rooted in what the churches are but in what they are called to become. Only with this in mind can we sustain the paradox of both working through the churches and being ahead of the churches.

I hope that this has been an at – least – somewhat – useful way to begin. I suspect that it is almost always easier to do advocacy through a coalition approach, which seeks common cause with like – minded partners, than through a conciliar approach, which seeks consensus within a community of divergent perspectives – especially in an era that exalts diversity. I am convinced, however, that a community of Jew and Greek, Orthodox and Protestant, liberal and conservative, is our most profound witness to the reconciling, liberating love of God. Or, to say it another way, our most effective advocacy stems not just from what we say or do, but from what we *are* – our unity with one another. And all of this raises very interesting questions for me as I try to assess what constitutes "successful" advocacy – another matter we may want to discuss.

There are at least four other tensions with which I wrestle. I will name the first two quickly since I am sure they are familiar to you.

First is the need for focused advocacy attention on particular priorities *and* the need for advocacy that integrates multiple themes. At last week's General Assembly of the NCC, we emphasized the importance of focused attention on racial justice (lest anyone think that the problem is now behind us thanks to the election of Barack Obama). This would be an important new development. In recent years, racial justice has been part of our broader agenda – as, for example, in the work of our Special Commission on the Just Rebuilding of the Gulf Coast, which brings together concern for poverty, racism, and environmental destruction in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina. Such an integrated approach, I think we said last week, is vital but not sufficient.

Since becoming General Secretary, I have come to appreciate, on the one hand, the need to be very specific in advocacy efforts (e.g., in my proposals to the Israeli ambassador and Ministry of the Interior about changing Israeli law regarding residency permits in Jerusalem and the West Bank); and, on the other hand, the need to name gospel values that potentially refocus public discussion (about which I will say more in a moment). It seems to me, however, that our advocacy work at the NCC often falls somewhere in between: not specific enough to get as much done as we would like, and not radical enough to lift up the counter – cultural voice of scripture.

I have also discovered the importance of responding to the particular priorities of various member communions. My speaking out last month on behalf of Indian Christians who are suffering persecution undoubtedly strengthened the involvement of the Mar Thoma and Malankara Orthodox churches in the NCC. But I have also forcefully insisted that conciliar life means being concerned with the priority issues of *others*. Their agenda is now yours – difficult as that can sometimes be.

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And hidden in all of this is another real dilemma: The NCC, in my judgment, has often dissipated its energy and resources on an almost – endless list of causes. How are we as a community of communions to take seriously what the members – all of them – take seriously and at the same time stay focused on the overriding issues of the day? They don't teach you much of this in General Secretary school!

So that is the first tension: focus and integration. The second has to do with the need to respond with appropriate urgency to crises of the moment *and* the equally urgent need for long – term formation so that our advocacy grows from our very identity as Christian communities. In the U.S., our churches seem to discover issues with an evangelical zeal, but often retain only short – term interest because they are missing long – term formation.

A person who powerfully makes this case in the U.S. is Audrey Chapman, former executive of the United Church Board for World Ministries, in her book, *Faith, Power and Politics*. “In the absence of shared understandings about identity and vocation,” she writes, “... political ministry tends to be unfocused and diffuse, lacking explicit theological grounding and sustained membership support and involvement. Political witness tends to become a specialized mission activity undertaken primarily by national agencies ... on behalf of the denominations, rather than an expression of the community's faith journey.” And this leads to a familiar form of hypocrisy whereby what we preach to the world (what we advocate) is not exemplified in our own structures and lifestyles – thereby undercutting the impact of our advocacy. Things like climate change will not wait for long – term education, but surely such education must accompany our efforts and immediate response.

Perhaps this is a good place to name other factors that have, as I see it, diminished the public witness of many of our churches in this country. I will use my own denomination, the Disciples of Christ, as an example.

Faced with declining numbers and resources, leaders within the Disciples fear that controversy will further weaken the church. In response, we have, since the mid – 1990s, eliminated virtually all national staff positions responsible for social justice ministries and are on the verge of eliminating General Assembly resolutions dealing with contemporary issues.

Within the Disciples, as in other mainline churches, there is an evident gap between the commitment of at least some leaders and many local church members. As a result, our assemblies will sometimes offer prophetic witness only to discover that the initiatives lack the broad support needed for church – wide action. That is one reason people have argued for the elimination of resolutions: they too often have been “feel good” pronouncements that involve little serious cost or effort.

Polarization within the church on issues of social concern, and inability to deal constructively with conflict, mean that advocacy is increasingly confined to special interest groups that can be ignored by the rest of the body.

And, to return to my basic point, the Disciples have shown little capacity for integrating social witness with worship, pastoral care, stewardship, or the other things the church does and is. In the words of Lew Mudge, “...there seems little connection in the

*Polarization within the church on issues of social concern, and inability to deal constructively with conflict, mean that advocacy is increasingly confined to special interest groups that can be ignored by the rest of the body.*

minds of church members between the moral convictions to which they bear witness and the nature of the ecclesial community in which these convictions are nurtured” – which means that peace and justice can be relegated to one corner of the church.

The third tension I have in mind, and the one I have paid most attention to since becoming General Secretary, is nicely set forth in a much – neglected book from 2006, *Beyond Idealism: A Way Ahead for Ecumenical Social Ethics*. In it, the authors – who include such familiar ecumenical scholars as Julio de Santa Ana, Heidi Handzel, and Lew Mudge – argue for a perspective they call “hopeful realism” – realistic assessment of our social situation coupled with a willingness to imagine alternate realities. On the one hand, they argue, ecumenical councils have often responded to war or discrimination or environmental destruction with idealized slogans and utopian pronouncements. On the other hand, the NCC in particular has often been reactive to the world's agenda, promoting reforms that, while important, leave the underlying status quo basically untouched. Please do not misunderstand: I have no intention to stop pushing for raises in the minimum wage or calling for more recycling or prompting a reduction in U.S. military spending. But these are ways of tweaking the system that stop short of a truly prophetic witness which engenders hope for a different way of living in human society.

Another person who argues this case is the opening plenary speaker at last week's NCC/CWS General Assembly, Gary Dorrien – who, despite holding the Reinhold Niebuhr chair at Union Theological Seminary, attacks Niebuhr's “historical realism” in several of his books. Without a social vision of a Good Society that transcends the prevailing order, he contends, Christian ethics will remain captive to that order and social Christianity will restrict itself to marginal reforms. I also like the way Chapman puts it. “Our churches,” she writes, “seem limited to recommending incremental policy changes that differ little from secular political actors.” What is often missing, in her words, “is a compelling religious vision, a sense of the ‘now’ and the ‘not yet’ of God's [Reign] that challenges and opposes the injustices of the dominant reality by invoking God's peace and justice.”

You see this tension: hopeful realism. We cannot eradicate evil. The conceit of such utopianism has itself been the fuel of countless tyrannies. But we also must not allow those responsible for present systems of injustice to define what is possible, because we are followers of One whose promise is not just for another

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# The Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, France

By Sarah Hinlicky Wilson

Strasbourg was named for its role at the crossroads of Europe, as the word literally means: the city of streets. Situated on the Rhine, in the borderlands between German and French cultures, Strasbourg has a long history of dispute and reconciliation. It was a major center of the Reformation – and not incidentally for some time the home of Johannes Gutenberg, inventor of the printing press. It traded hands between Germany and France from the time of Napoleon onwards; fifty years ago locals would never have expected abiding political peace to settle on the city. Today it is the home to Council of Europe, the European Parliament, and the European Court of Human Rights – all witnesses to the extraordinary achievement of cease fire and lasting peace in this long-disputed territory.

It was for much the same reason that the Institute for Ecumenical Research landed in Strasbourg. In 1963, in the light of the burgeoning ecumenical movement and especially the Second Vatican Council, a global assembly of the Lutheran World Federation (which represents a little over 68 million of the world's Lutherans in 140 regional churches) approved the founding of a house of studies devoted to the theological scholarship necessary for ecclesial rapprochement. Strasbourg (and the surrounding region of Alsace) is home to the largest community of Protestants in France as well as the see of the Catholic archbishop, along with their respective theological faculties at the university. The setting itself declares that reconciliation is possible.

The Ecumenical Institute (as it is usually called for short) has four principal tasks: theological research into areas causing division in doctrine and church order; ecumenical communication to the churches, through such means as the hosting of an annual “Summer Seminar”, and teaching visits around the world; and the publication of joint and individual research for both technical and general audiences.

As part of this set of tasks, the staff members of the Institute were key figures in the composition of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification signed by the LWF and the Roman Catholic Church which will see its 10th anniversary on October 31st of this year. In addition to the ongoing Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, which just concluded a long study on apostolicity and is now moving on to the topic of baptism, the Institute is involved in a project proposed by the JDDJ to study the biblical foundation of the doctrine of justification. The Institute is also cooperating with the Catholic Johann-Adam-Moehler Institute in Paderborn, Germany, to produce a detailed commentary on each of Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses, with supporting background research on the history and theology of the early 16th century.

Institute staff were also instrumental in authoring the Leuenberg Agreement, which is not well known in the United States, but is probably the farthest-reaching ecumenical fellowship to date, establishing full communion between Lutheran and Reformed churches across Europe. 104 churches have signed the Leuenberg Agreement, including now also Waldensians, Methodists, and Moravian Brethren. As with the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, Leuenberg mandated ongoing joint theological study, assuming that the declaration of fellowship was the beginning, not the end,

of the common task of articulating the gospel. The resulting group is called the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, which is currently undertaking two major studies: one on “Ministry, Ordination, and Episcopate” and another on “Scripture, Confessions, and the Church.”

The Institute has long provided consultants to the various dialogues of the LWF. The Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Commission has been meeting since the early 1980s and issued a number of joint statements. Currently the topic is the “The Mystery of the Church”. A dialogue document has just reached a conclusion with the Mennonites, and there have also been dialogues with Baptists. The Strasbourg Institute at its own initiative has also begun a “proto-dialogue” with Pentecostals, the results of which will be presented at the next assembly of the LWF in Stuttgart, Germany, in July of 2010, with the hopes of commissioning a formal dialogue.

Anglican-Lutheran dialogue has also been an ongoing commitment, currently focusing on the subject of diakonia. Fellowship agreements already exist between the Church of England and the various Lutheran churches in Scandinavia (Porvoo), between the Church of England and the Evangelical Church of Germany (Meissen), between the British and Irish Anglican churches and the French Lutheran and Reformed churches (Reuilly), as well as North American agreements such as Waterloo in Canada and Called to Common Mission in the United States.

So far all of the work here described has focused on the task of doctrinal consensus between church bodies, but the Institute's mandate includes the equally challenging work of reception. For this reason, the Institute has offered for forty-three years now a Summer Seminar every July to gather both clergy and laity for a week to discuss a topic of great ecumenical importance. Past topics have included Spirituality, Church and State, and Liberation Theology; this year's will concern “The Liturgy as Ecumenical Chance and Challenge.” The speakers are drawn from a wide range of church bodies and nations, and accordingly attract attendees from all over the church and world as well. It is probably no small part of the success of the Seminar over the past four decades that it also includes spending time in the beautiful city of Strasbourg, trips to see Matthias Gruenwald's Isenheim altarpiece in neighboring Colmar, and wine-tasting!

The Institute has also produced a number of books, many of narrow scholarly interest, but equally many of broad popular interest. The recent book “Table Fellowship is Possible” (*Abendmahlsgemeinschaft ist Moeglich*) was a bestseller in Germany, as was a *Commentary on the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. The Strasbourg Institute staff also contributed significantly to the editing of the three “Growth in Agreement” volumes, familiar to any student of ecumenism.

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# Book Review

## Praying for Christian Unity

*A Century of Prayer for Christian Unity* by Catherine E. Clifford, editor, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan (2009), ISBN 978-0-8028-6366-9, paperback, 143 pages, \$26.00.

Reviewed by Timothy MacDonald, SA

At the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in 2008 at the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, Pope Benedict XVI asked:

What would the ecumenical movement become without the personal and communal prayer that ‘they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you’? (John 17:21) Where would we find the extra impetus of faith, hope and charity, of which our search for unity has a special need today? Our desire for unity must not be limited to isolated occasions; it must become an integral part of our whole prayer life. . . The ship of ecumenism would never have been put to sea had it not been lifted by this broad current of prayer and wafted by the breath of the Holy Spirit.

These words of the Pope are placed before the Introduction of the slim but informative book, *A Century of Prayer for Christian Unity*, edited by Catherine E. Clifford to commemorate one hundred years of prayer for the unity of Christians. It was certainly these same convictions about the power of Christians praying together that prompted Father Paul James Watson, co-founder of the Society of the Atonement, to establish the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity in 1908 and it was these same convictions that moved Abbe Paul Couturier in the 1930’s to encourage Christians to pray for the unity that Christ desires and thus opened the Octave to a more universal participation by Christians everywhere in what he called the “Universal Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.” Thus when Christians pray for the unity that Christ desires they seek to place their own wills in harmony with the will of Christ.

In her introductory essay “Prayer: The Soul of the Ecumenical Movement”, Dr. Clifford speaks of the progress of ecumenism in the past one hundred years in the formation of various organizations that preceded the World Council of Churches as well as the impact of the Second Vatican Council’s participation in the

*The essays that comprise this volume come from representatives of various Christian communities, Anglican, Baptist, Reformed, and Roman Catholic but also flow from persons who have dedicated their lives to the fulfillment of Christ’s prayer for unity.*

ecumenical movement in a multidimensional way. In her mind, Dr. Clifford believes none of this progress would have been possible had it not been for the change of hearts and minds opened through prayer in common. So important is this prayer that Clifford states that it must become “a constant feature of ecclesial life”. (p.15) In fact, in regard to the contemporary situation when religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue capture the imagination more readily today, Clifford believes that “the pressing need for harmony among the great religions in the context of the world community should heighten our sense of the urgent need for Christians to be reconciled, and of the necessity of strengthening our commitment to common prayer.” (p. 23)

The essays that comprise this volume come from representatives of various Christian communities, Anglican, Baptist, Reformed, and Roman Catholic but also flow from persons who have dedicated their lives to the fulfillment of Christ’s prayer for unity. Cardinal Walter Kasper makes a significant contribution in his explication of spiritual ecumenism which “means listening and opening oneself to the demands of the Spirit, who also speaks through different forms of piety; it means a readiness to rethink and to convert but also to bear the otherness of the other, requiring tolerance, patience and respect, and not least good will and love which does not boast but rejoices in the truth (1 Corinthians 13:4-6)”. (p. 31) Kasper explains that spirituality involves two components, the working of God’s Spirit and the human conditions of Christian existence. As such spiritual ecumenism demands discernment. This discernment involves attentiveness to the Creator Spirit as the source of all life. Spiritual ecumenism must seek out life and serve life. Discernment in spiritual ecumenism also requires Christology that rejects relativism, syncretism and safeguards the uniqueness and universality of the salvific significance of Jesus Christ. Finally this discernment within spiritual ecumenism involves the ecclesiological criterion which “reminds the churches not to withdraw into a confessional self-sufficiency but to undertake courageously all possible steps to promote Christian unity.” (p. 38) Kasper states that we must develop a spirituality of communion which “makes us able to share the joys and sufferings of the other, and which implies seeing what is positive in the others, welcoming it and prizing it as a gift from God not only for the other but for ourselves.” (p. 39) Kasper’s communal sense of spiritual ecumenism perceives the model for Christian and church unity as ultimately grounded in the triune love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Quoting documents of Vatican II he writes “this is the archetype of Church unity; the unity of the church is like an icon of the Trinity (LG 4; UR 3).” (p. 40)

In a real sense the essay by James F. Puglisi, Minister General of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement and Director of the

*continued on page 13*

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Centro Pro Unione in Rome, articulates why this book was written. Entitled “Prayer For Christian Unity in the Twentieth Century” this essay offers a detailed history of the movement of prayer for Christian unity from 1908 to the present day. The reader will find particularly helpful the theology of prayer that is offered here that helps to understand prayer for unity as our participation in the prayer of Christ through the Holy Spirit. Puglisi writes that when we pray the prayer of Christ for unity “we pray for unity in the power of the prayer of the Lord which we actualize in history.” (p. 46) Puglisi, along with Cardinal Kasper and Dr. Clifford, speaks of the necessity of our prayer for unity becoming an integral part of our spirituality rooted in baptism. Further, on the question of how we can move forward towards a greater manifestation of visible unity, he offers a provocative suggestion based on the example in Acts (15:28) when the apostles confronted the issue of whether or not non-Jews could become Christ’s followers without accepting all the prescriptions of Judaism. The solution was to place no burden greater than the Gospel requires. Puglisi asks whether it is time for “a serious discussion on what are burdens ‘greater than the Gospel requires’”. (p. 59) Through prayer to the Holy Spirit who prays through us, we will be able to discern together what it is that the Gospel requires of us.


Charles Sherlock offers an in-depth look at prayer for unity in the Anglican Communion as reflected in the Book of Common Prayer in its various renderings. Prayer for unity in the Church of England was inseparable from prayer for the nation under its sovereign. Prayer between Christians of different traditions did not take place until the middle of the nineteenth century in England through various influences as the week of prayer established by the Evangelical Alliance and in America through the evangelical revivals, especially of Jonathan Edwards; and again in England through the Tractarian revival whose intercessory prayers for unity prayed for the reunion of Christians but especially between the Church of England and Rome; as well as the concern for unity of various Lambeth Conferences beginning in 1867. The 1920 Lambeth Conference in the bishops’ “Appeal to All Christian People” represented a significant breakthrough for the Anglican Communion in setting the unity of Christians at the center of Anglican understanding and the Communion’s support for the initial Faith and Order Conference of 1927. It is significant that various Anglican churchmen were instrumental in developing a day or a week of prayer for Christian unity. These include the work of Spencer Jones and Paul James Wattson, the co-founder of the Friars and Sisters of the Atonement, who was to develop the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity.

For those who lived during the days of the Second Vatican Council and waited to hear the latest developments unfolding from that great event in the early 1960’s, the late Fr. George H. Tavard’s recollections of the Council especially in the writing of the *Decree on Ecumenism, Unitatis redintegratio*, will offer a nostalgic look to the past. A *peritus* at the Council, working with the Vatican Secretariat for the Promotion of the Unity of Christian, Fr. Tavard offers a very balanced view of the various influences both before and after the Council, especially the Decree on Ecumenism and the Ecumenical Directory that contributed to Roman Catholic understanding that spiritual ecumenism is at the heart of the ecumenical movement.

*Through prayer to the Holy Spirit who prays through us, we will be able to discern together what it is that the Gospel requires of us.*

A unique contribution to this volume is the essay of Sister Minke de Vries who writes of the Protestant monastic community of Grandchamp, a community of women dedicated to prayer for Christian unity. The awareness of Grandchamp’s vocation to pray for Christian unity was strongly influenced by Fr. Paul Coutourier who remained close to the Sisters until his death in 1953. This community identified with his spirituality and insights into prayer for unity. As Sr. de Vries states: “For Coutourier, prayer for unity was always a matter of letting Christ’s prayer for (h)is disciples, ‘that all be one,’ dwell in us.” (p. 103) De Vries presents Grandchamp as a microcosm of the Church as a communion in which there is great diversity. For Grandchamp this diversity includes various denominational confessions. De Vries points to the prophetic stance of the community when she writes: “This experience of being joined in a profound communion underlies our incessant prayer that our lived communion may one day be truly and freely expressed in the great thanksgiving meal of the eucharist”. (p. 112)

The final essay by Steven R. Harmon from the Baptist tradition relates ecumenism to eschatology as a way to ecumenical engagement. He writes: “Yet at the core of the Baptist theological tradition is a healthier sort of essential eschatological orientation that has the potential to help Baptists both to heed the dominical imperative of visible Christian unity and to offer their best gifts to the rest of the church through their participation in Faith and Order ecumenism.” (p. 117) Harmon explains the already present but not yet fully realized nature of the eschatology of ecumenism. He shares the ways in which this eschatology of ecumenism is manifested in the Baptist tradition when they pray for Christian unity. These ways include Baptists being moved to confess as sin their own contributions to divisions in the Body of Christ; by means of this prayer Baptists are made aware of the distinctive gifts they have to offer to the greater church through their participation in the quest for visible unity; such prayer embodies the Baptist emphasis on the priesthood of all believers and the calling of all Christians to respond to the ecumenical imperative; finally, such prayer provides Baptists and other Christians as well with a proper perspective on their participation in the search for visible unity in that prayer reminds us that the unity we seek is God’s gift and comes about as we are converted to Christ through the Holy Spirit and not by our own efforts.

*A Century of Prayer for Christian Unity* would be a welcomed addition to any collection on ecumenism, especially spiritual ecumenism. Its value lies in its clear presentation of spiritual ecumenism as a part of Christian spirituality, the process of discernment in spiritual ecumenism, the place of prayer in the quest for visible unity, the history of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity; the history of the involvement of various traditions and major actors in the search for unity; and exciting prospects for the future. 

42. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 89.
43. Volf is not the only theologian to see this tendency in Zizioulas' thought. See also Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 143-45. However, as I will show below, Volf claims that the Trinity is an institution with order (Greek, *taxis*). See Volf, *After our Likeness*, 235. The issue, which Volf addresses, is whether or not the top-down image of procession in the Trinity applies to the ongoing relationships between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father begets the Son and spirates the Spirit through the Son. But apart from that eternal reality, does the Father take any action or decision apart from the other persons of the Trinity? That is, in their ongoing relationships apart from processional reality, does any person of the Trinity act or will in isolation? Volf would reply negatively, based on his perichoretic notion of trinitarian relationships. However, as I footnote below, Del Colle is not convinced this distinction works.
44. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 215.
45. On this point see John Zizioulas, "Primacy in the Church: An Orthodox Approach" in *Petrine Ministry and the Unity of the Church: Toward a Patient and Fraternal Dialogue*, ed. James F. Puglisi (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 118-125.
46. Volf, *After our Likeness*, 217; cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993, 76-77.
47. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 216.
48. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 209
49. Del Colle, "Communion and the Trinity", 315. However, Del Colle questions the validity of this approach. "Does the constitutive dimension of trinitarian life have no bearing on the relational dimension? After all, it is the constitutive dimension that distinguishes the persons! The Father is Father by virtue of his relation to the Son. Hence, the inner-trinitarian relations must in some sense be shaped by the distinctive constitutive dimension of personhood that distinguishes the persons in the Trinity. The first and second persons will not relate as Father and Father of Father and Spirit, but as Father and Son." Del Colle, "Communion and the Trinity", 317.
50. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 181.
51. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 209.
52. Moltmann, *Trinity*, 176.
53. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 217.
54. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 195; italics original.
55. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 211.
56. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 213.
57. Miroslav Volf, "Being As God Is" in *God's Life in Trinity*, eds. Miroslav Volf and Michael Welker (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 6.
58. See Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 196-97; cf. 172-73.
59. By this, Volf means to align himself with Moltmann, who views the Trinity as separate but equal persons in perichoretic union with each other. Hence, the unity or oneness of the Trinity is established in the relationships between the three persons, not in a common shared substance. See Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 198; cf. Moltmann, *Trinity*, 10-20. Moltmann develops this view in contrast to trinitarian thought as it advanced in the West. However, Giles attributes the theoretical development of *perichoresis* to the Cappadocians, though applying the name to the concept followed hundreds of years later. Hence, a social model of the Trinity seems more conducive to Eastern thought. Perichoresis, states Giles, "is the most sure safeguard against subordinationism and tri-theism." Giles, *Church*, 219. Giles goes on to state, "When the Trinity is understood perichoretically then the Father exists in the Son, the Son in the Father, and both of them in the Spirit, just as the Spirit exists in the Father and the Son. On this principle, the divine life cannot be understood merely as one subject. It must exist as a living fellowship or communion (*koinonia*) of three persons who are related one to the other, exist in one another, and act in unison. In this conception of the triune God, a total break with pagan Greek hierarchal ontology was achieved." This is a good description of the social model of the Trinity as used by Volf. Giles, *Church*, 220.
60. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 203.
61. Miroslav Volf, "Trinity, Unity, Primacy on the Trinitarian Nature of Unity and Its Implications for the Question of Primacy", in *Petrine Ministry and the Unity of the Church: Toward a Patient and Fraternal Dialogue*, ed. James F. Puglisi (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 178; Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 224.
62. This statement makes Volf's ecclesiology appear overly pneumatological at the expense of a deficiency in christology. Indeed, this critique may apply. See Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 141-45.
63. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 215.
64. That is, no center can act apart from the other centers of the church.
65. Volf, "Trinity, Unity, Primacy", 180-84; Volf, *After our Likeness*, 217-18.
66. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 222; italics original.
67. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 154-58; cf. Del Colle, "Communion and the Trinity", 306.
68. Thomas P. Rausch, *Towards a Truly Catholic Church: An Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005), 63. Weakland delineates the contextual framework for this language. "[T]he concept, predominantly a juridical and defensive one, had its origins [in the Middle Ages], elaborated by canonists during the struggles for power between popes and emperors. Some civic officials, to limit the authority of the Church, postulated a division of powers into spiritual and temporal in an attempt to keep the Church out of the temporal order and limit it to the purely spiritual. Medieval canonists insisted that the Church was a complete society with all the means a society needed to pursue its own aims." Weakland, "Images of the Church", 79.
69. Rausch, *Towards a Truly Catholic Church*, 64.
70. Rausch, *Towards a Truly Catholic Church*, 24-25.
71. LG, 48.
72. See Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In*, chapter 4.
73. In LG, the gifts are sacraments and institutions. Congar states that in the church, the Spirit "is the principle of that presence of the past and the eschatological future in the here and now, of what can be called the 'sacramental ear.'" Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, translated by David Smith (New York: Herder and Herder, 1983), 2:18. He also cautions that, in the past, the Catholic Church has used the Holy Spirit simply as an adjudicator of institutional authority and has even gone as far as to replace the Spirit's role with institutional elements. See Congar, *Holy Spirit*, 1:152-53; 1:160-83
74. Doyle states, "Within the historical Church there have been many developments, changes, and downright errors. Any approach to understanding the church that minimizes the dark side of its historical track is severely lacking." Dennis Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology: Visions and Versions* (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 15.
75. Weakland, "Images of the Church", 88.
76. Congar, *Holy Spirit*, 2:56.
77. Weakland, "Images of the Church", 90.
78. LG, 48.
79. Kasper, *Leadership in the Church*, 55-68, 197; Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 73-74. Kasper, holding that the offices are essential for Christian unity, defines the goal of the ecumenical movement as "unity in faith, in the sacraments, and ecclesial ministries." Kasper, *Leadership in the Church*, 190.
80. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 248.

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## CHURCH IN TRANSIT..., from page 14

81. Volf, "Trinity, Unity, Primacy", 177-84.
82. Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 166.
83. See Karl Rahner, *Concern for the Church*, translated by Edward Quinn, Theological Investigations, vol. XX (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 115-42; Rausch, *Towards a Truly Catholic Church*, 201-23; Hans Küng, *Reforming the Church Today: Keeping Hope Alive* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), see especially chapters 8, 9, 10, and 14); Kasper, *Leadership in the Church*, 63; cf. with an Orthodox: John Zizioulas, "The Theological Problem of 'Reception'", *One in Christ* 21 no. 3 (1985), 193.
84. Giles, *Church*, 222-27.
85. Volf, *After our Likeness*, 235.
86. Volf, *After our Likeness*, 238; cf. Volf, "Trinity, Unity, Primacy", 183.
87. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 200; italics original.
88. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 207.
89. See Jürgen Moltmann, "Hope and History", *Theology Today*, 25/3 (October 1968), 369-86.
90. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 207.
91. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 236.
92. Volf would add that, most importantly, the fellowship experienced now and the complete fellowship hoped for in the eschaton is not just fellowship with each other, but is actual participation and communion with the Trinity. Miroslav Volf, "Being as God Is", 3.
93. See on this point, LG 18.
94. Del Colle, "Communion and the Trinity", 324-25.
95. On this point, I want to be cautious not to claim that the eschatological hope of the church is fully available prior to the eschaton. On the other hand, if the church is on a journey toward that hope, it ought reflect a church on a pilgrimage and not simply a church in waiting. See Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 207.

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## UN ADVOCACY WEEK, from page 10


world but for *this* world made other. This hopeful realism perspective, by the way, is written into the NCC's Strategic Plan for this quadrennium which endorses our current lobbying efforts but also sets forth an overarching goal of "promoting a vision of authentic common life as an alternative to that prevalent in contemporary North American culture." I have been disturbed to hear members of the NCC Governing Board dismiss this as unimportant, tacked on to the real plan.

The final tension I want to mention is the familiar dialectic of God's initiative *and* our human response. Much discussion about advocacy emphasizes what *we* accomplish. For example, the Covenant for Action of the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance speaks of advocacy as church – related witness "in order to bring about a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world." Yes, human effort is essential; but in Christian perspective such effort is understood as response to what God has done, is doing, and will do – as participation in God's mission. Getting this theological point straight, in my experience, has very practical benefits: It is a check against ecclesial self – righteousness. It is a spur to working with others. It is the foundation for deep hopefulness. And it is a reminder to ground all that we do in Bible study and prayer.

As I see it, one of the things that has undermined the National Council's social witness in recent years is inadequate theological and biblical foundation, which is usually a sign that we are pushing an ideological agenda rather than opening ourselves to genuine wrestling with our faith heritage. I still remember an NCC state-

ment opposing some military action of Ronald Regan which included only one biblical verse – "What then are we to say about these things?" – a snippet extracted from Paul's magnificent meditation in Romans 8 on God's love in Jesus Christ and used as mere window dressing for the statement. One of my goals for the coming year is to inaugurate serious theological and social study of several major issues in preparation for the ecumenical movement's centennial celebrations in 2010. I believe such study, while taking energy and resources in the short term, will greatly enhance our advocacy down the road.

There are many other things – tensions – that we probably ought to name, but perhaps these brief reflections will help stimulate conversation this week. I will end by returning to the tension between unity and justice.


Surely, there *are* times when Christians must take sides against sisters and brothers in the church. But what I have tried to argue in various writings is that, even in such moments, we must recognize that the "them" we oppose are, in some fundamental way, "us." The ecumenical church cannot fear the controversy or confrontation that comes with a bold witness for justice, because that would be paralyzing; but it must hate division, because the story by which we live tells us that we have been linked in communion with persons we otherwise might shun. And nothing else can testify so powerfully that our trust is in God, not in the things or even the communities of our devising. 

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## THE INSTITUTE FOR ECUMENICAL RESEARCH IN STRASBOURG, FRANCE, from page 11

The Institute also welcomes individual scholars as well as groups. Doctoral students working on subjects such as the reception of Leuenberg and the Women's World Day of Prayer have resided at the Institute while undertaking their studies. Our current research fellow, Herbert Moyo, is a Zimbabwean pastor and seminary professor, completing his studies in South Africa on political theology in the context of Mugabe's government. Groups

of pastors come to Strasbourg several times a year for intensive ecumenical formation through workshops and discussion. And for those who can't come to the Institute, the Institute can come to them: the staff have traveled to nearby points in Slovakia and Italy, and as far away as Hong Kong, to offer lectures and courses.

For more information, please visit [www.ecumenical-institute.org](http://www.ecumenical-institute.org). 

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