

John George HUBER

What is the Ultimate Ecumenical Challenge on the Bumpy Road to Christian Unity?

My ventures in interchurch journalism are a way of “carrying the ecumenical torch” from the global level to the local koinonia of Jesus Christ’s followers. While identifying what I believe to be the ultimate ecumenical challenge, namely, church-dividing ecclesiological issues, I rejoice in the many significant agreements that have been reached across confessional lines to advance the cause of that unity for which our Lord prayed (John 17). May this example of spiritual ecumenism inspire us to go and do likewise with passion and perseverance.

Where a Missouri Synod Ecumenist Became the Village Elder

I have always been urging others to pursue lifelong learning. Then, as if to “put my money where my mouth is,” I invested in a two-semester Master of Ecumenical Studies program near Geneva, Switzerland, at the age of seventy.

Bossey, the Ecumenical Institute of the World Council of Churches (WCC), each term attracts around fifty seminarians, younger pastors and lay people from every continent, who represent a wide range of cultures and Christian traditions.

Among them are about a dozen Master students who take additional seminars and then translate their more focused theological research into a major hundred-page dissertation that must be defended before a jury of professors from three faculties, including a representative from the University of Geneva, the institution that accredits the academic program.

In a plenary session during the opening week, a student voiced concern over an interpersonal conflict that was brewing within our community, which she said could cause an explosion.

Another student suggested that someone in our midst is a person with much experience, and could mediate the dispute. I thanked him for this vote of confidence, but pointed to the vicar of Bossey, an ordained Evangelical-Lutheran pastor, as a more viable resource.

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The director of the Ecumenical Institute then noted: “So we have a choice between the vicar and the *village elder!*” The name stuck during all ten months of my stay, and I regarded it as a badge of honor.

The Bossey program has an academic focus that involves listening to lectures, giving reports on assigned readings, making oral presentations at seminars, engaging in small-group discussions and writing papers

So, doing research in the library was a frequent haunt that also provided access to documents on the Internet, as well as a daily opportunity to keep in email contact with distant loved ones at home.

The Institute is regarded as an *ecumenical laboratory* that includes an experimental and experiential dimension of dreaming ecumenical dreams together, dining with one another and worshipping.

There was also singing, planning, arguing, playing, hiking the nearby Jura mountains, sharing some food and demonstrating the customs of our culture, laughing, dancing, and sometimes grieving together.

Guiding us through this ecumenical journey were gifted professors for whom English is not their native tongue, each representing a different confessional and national context. At my time, one was a Romanian Orthodox priest from Romania.

Another was a Congregational pastor and Rugby coach from Samoa. Another hailed from Tanzania and was a priest appointed to Bossey by the Vatican. A fourth professor was a Methodist from Uruguay.

Let me be more specific about my ecumenical discoveries. Through the process of writing my paper, an overarching impression was that the many bilateral and multilateral dialogues between and among the separated denominations have produced many agreements.

These include topics like baptism, the Eucharistic presence of Christ, Scripture and Tradition, Mary and the saints, the centrality of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, and some aspects of the papacy, among others.

All these topics and aspects indicate the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, most of these ecumenical achievements and results are not known by lay people and even pastors in the local parish.

Therefore, I have decided to tell this ecumenical story to all who are interested and will listen to it, in order to share the results of four interconfessional initiatives that are documented in my paper.

These are the following: (1) the nine U.S. Lutheran–Roman Catholic dialogues that began in 1965 and are now entering Round 11; (2) the agreements on the Eucharist and the ecumenical goal facilitated by the Faith and Order (F&O) Commission of the World Council of Churches (WCC); (3) the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999), resulting from years of international conversations between the Vatican and churches belonging to the Lutheran World Federation (LWF); and (4) the full communion agreements between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and five other churches, with a sixth entering this process later.

All of these positive impressions of the quest for visible Christian unity are matched by a new realization of the remaining ecclesiological challenges of the historic episcopate and papal primacy, as well as ongoing disagreements over ethical questions.

Feasting on an Ecumenical Smorgasbord

The annual National Workshop on Christian Unity that was held in San Jose, California, in May 2006, had a rich variety of worship experiences, personal contacts, lectures, seminars and luncheon gatherings. The bottom line is that this ecumenical smorgasbord was a truly delectable feast.

While the emphasis at the workshop is to relate to one another ecumenically, the various denominational groupings also hold their own separate caucuses to deal with in-house issues that bear upon our common quest for Christian unity.

Worshipping together is a vital venture in spiritual ecumenism. During the processional of the opening liturgy, we all sang “In Christ there is no East or West.” Liturgical dance was also a grace moment, and the choral group was outstanding.

In the homily we heard that nobody and no denomination has the whole truth. The only way that we can get the truth is to come together. We must strive to be in full communion with one another.

Each day began with a morning prayer. On one occasion there was a service that featured Taizé chants. An Episcopal-Lutheran Eucharist was celebrated one evening, followed by a reception.

Another memorable Eucharistic service was sponsored by the nine mainline Protestant “COCU” denominations that, since 2002, have affirmed a covenanted relationship known as Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC).

Their greatest challenge is to recognize and reconcile one another’s ministries. A special committee is engaged in dialogue and study, with the determination to present the final draft of a document for a vote on this issue by the member communions.

The homilist urged a new approach to unity by offering the acronym “COYOTE,” which stands for “Call Off Your Old-Time Ecumenism.” In an effort to become more ecumenically inclusive, the National Workshop invited two prominent “conservative evangelicals” to make presentations.

Richard J. MOUW, president of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, was the keynote speaker. He identified four characteristics of the evangelicals: (1) advocating conversion to Jesus Christ and a personal relationship with him; (2) accepting the supreme authority of the Bible; (3) the centrality of the cross; and (4) an activism that is engaged in evangelism and working for justice and peace. Evangelicals resist conciliar ecumenism. They are more committed to parachurch networks like Promise Keepers.

The closing lecture of the Workshop featured another evangelical, Kevin MANNOIA, chaplain of Azusa Pacific University’s Graduate and Professional programs. He drew upon the river imagery of Ezekiel 37 to describe the Reign of God.

Kevin MANNOIA said that God’s Reign brings life to the disenfranchised, the abused, and the poor. We are the called-out ones engaged in this task. My prayer, he said, is that God will make us one.

One of the inspiring high points of the Workshop was the LARC (Evangelical-Lutheran, Anglican and Roman Catholic) luncheon, followed by a brilliant presentation on *Papal Authority* by the former Archbishop of San Francisco, John QUINN.

He compared concepts of authority at the First Vatican Council (1870) and the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), and insisted that the role of the Pope includes a collegial relationship with all the bishops. The evidence he cited for this collegiality is the encyclical of Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, written in 1995.

Archbishop QUINN said it is time to ask other Christians about their attitudes toward the papacy. He assured the audience that communion with Rome does not mean absorption by the Roman Catholic Church.

I came away from this ecumenical smorgasbord with what my father used to describe, after enjoying a delicious meal, as a “pleasant sufficiency.” Ringing in my ears are the closing words of Lorelei FUCHS SA, who chaired this whole workshop: “Let us go forward to renew our commitment.”

The Road to Unity

Shortly after the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City in 2001, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) President, Gerald KIESCHNICK, went to Ground Zero together with former ELCA Presiding Bishop, H. George ANDERSON, and then joined him in a gathering of pastors who prayed and sang hymns together.

Missouri Synod critics accused Gerald KIESCHNICK of *unionism*, because these pastors were not in total doctrinal agreement. Nevertheless, Gerald KIESCHNICK has been re-elected to his presidential post.

Then-Atlantic District President David BENKE offered a prayer in Jesus Christ’s name at Yankee Stadium, standing together on the same platform with representatives of various Christian and non-Christian religions.

He was charged with the heresy of *syncretism*, but has since been acquitted. Admittedly, interreligious worship has its controversial aspects, because it can mislead people into assuming that all religious traditions are basically the same, thus compromising our conviction of the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ.

Even Pope JOHN PAUL II, when gathering Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians and other members of a whole spectrum of religious faiths at Assisi in 1986, made this subtle theological distinction: “We have not come here to pray together, but we have come together to pray.”

Without dealing with the interreligious issue for the moment (although my attendance at the Parliament of the World Religions in 1993 equips me to do this), I want to highlight the ingenious policy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in striving for “full communion” with other Christian denominations.

It was with an ecumenical vision that the creative staff in the ELCA’s Department for Ecumenical Affairs applied some important Evangelical-Lutheran principles to meet the challenge of Christian unity. Here are three of them:

1. *The satis est of the Augsburg Confession.* Article VII of this historic statement of faith (from 1530) that is regarded as normative by all Evangelical-Lutherans worldwide says that “for the true unity of the Church it is enough (*satis est*) to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.”

Critics might call the ecumenical application of this principle Gospel reductionism. I suggest that it is *Gospel centralism*, and those who deny its intended potential for fostering unity with other Christians have, in effect, altered the Unaltered Augsburg Confession.

2. *The concept of adiaphora.* Moving from a Latin to a Greek term, this means that

some cherished points of controversy, like the historic episcopate of the Anglican tradition, are not considered essential for unity.

They are *adiaphora*, or “indifferent things, neither commanded nor forbidden by God” (Formula of Concord, Article X). Thus, the Evangelical-Lutherans made a distinction between what is essential and what is important.

They also exercised some useful Evangelical-Lutheran freedom, as did other Evangelical-Lutheran communions, to interpret the historic episcopate more broadly and accept it for the sake of unity.

3. *Unity in Reconciled Diversity*. This is an ecumenical model advanced by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) that finds its theological basis again in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession:

“It is not necessary for the true unity of Christ’s Church that ceremonies, instituted by people, should be observed uniformly in all places.” The key concept here is not uniformity, but diversity.

It is the Anglicans who in the past have claimed to be the bridge church, as a rallying point for all other churches. But is it possible that the Evangelical-Lutherans, just by being confessionally Evangelical-Lutheran, have now earned this title?

Addressing the Ultimate Ecumenical Challenge

What is the ultimate ecumenical challenge for the Evangelical-Lutherans and Roman Catholics? Is it our differences regarding the authority of Scripture? Evangelical-Lutheran and Roman Catholic scholars were able to say together: “Holy Scripture has preeminent status as the Word of God.”

This was part of a dialogue report, *Scripture and Tradition* (1995), based on the ninth in a series of conversations in the United States, on a wide range of doctrinal issues that began in 1965 at the conclusion of the historic Second Vatican Council, convened by Popes JOHN XXIII and PAUL VI.

Other ultimate ecumenical challenges were met by reaching significant agreements on the *Nicene Creed* (1965), *Baptism* (1966), *Eucharist* (1967), *Ministry* (1970), *Papal Primacy* (1974), *Infallibility* (1978), *Justification by Faith* (1985), and the *One Mediator, the Saints and Mary* (1992).

One problem with these nine rounds of dialogues is that the agreements were never officially received by the sponsoring churches. The Evangelical-Lutheran and Roman Catholic theologians who participated did their work well. But the important results of the dialogues lacked widespread publicity and acceptance.

One ultimate ecumenical challenge, then, is moving forward together from theological conversation and convergence to the process of *reception*, that is, bringing these agreements into the life of the denominations so that they become officially accepted and taught and preached for the edifying and uniting of God’s people.

It happened on an international level when representatives of the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) signed the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* at Augsburg, Germany, on October 31, 1999. This has since led to a consideration of the wider ecumenical context of the *Joint Declaration*.

If there could be another historic signing ceremony, perhaps at Rome next time,

what might be the ultimate ecumenical challenge that would at long last be resolved? What is the primary obstacle to unity between the Roman Catholic Church and other churches?

The *Dominus Iesus* (DI) document has turned me into “a tamed ecumenical optimist.” Authored by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in 2000, it maintains that non-Roman Catholic churches “suffer from defects” and “are not Churches in the proper sense”.

Even the *Joint Declaration* includes a hint of this in footnote nine: “The word ‘church’ is used in this *Declaration* to reflect the self-understanding of the participating churches, without intending to resolve the ecclesiological issue related to this term.”

Dominus Iesus further identifies the crux of the matter by affirming that ecclesial entities outside of Rome “lack full communion with the Roman Catholic church, since they do not accept the Catholic doctrine of the Primacy” (of the Pope).

There are some encouraging developments, though, regarding what many would regard as the ultimate ecumenical challenge. There is a new realization that Christian unity requires agreement not only on matters of faith, but also of order.

It is not only doctrinal issues that divide us, but ecclesiological questions about structure, polity, episcopacy and papacy. These are more than upper-stratosphere issues reserved for the theologically elite to ponder.

It is my growing conviction that those denominations that are episcopally ordered are less likely to experience schism. We Evangelical-Lutherans cherish our documentary basis for unity by subscribing to the historic Confessions of the sixteenth century.

But those Christian denominations which emphasize loyalty to a bishop have developed a more personal basis for unity, identifying with a shepherd whose succession is traced to the apostles.

The ultimacy of all this lies in the possibility that one bishop might play the role of a universal shepherd for all Christians, a servant of the servants of God. Here are three recent efforts to sort all this out:

1. In Pope JOHN PAUL II's encyclical of 1995, *Ut Unum Sint*, he speaks of “the real but imperfect communion that exists between us” because the papacy itself, as presently constituted, is an obstacle to unity.

But he invites “Church leaders and their theologians to engage in a patient and fraternal dialogue” regarding the papacy, and declares that “the primacy is nonetheless open to a new situation.”

2. The U.S. Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogues completed Round Ten in 2004, and report six points of clear convergence on the theme: “The Church as Koinonia of Salvation: Its Structures and Ministries.”

3. On an international level, these ecclesiological issues, including the ultimate ecumenical challenge of the papacy, are currently being addressed in conversations between the LWF and the Vatican. They have chosen “Apostolicity of the Church” as their overarching topic.

The word “apostolicity” reminds me of a Roman Catholic priest and professor from Tanzania at the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey in Switzerland who admonished us not to become “abstract scholars,” but “apostles of unity.”

And this is truly a holy vocation. As a consequence of our calling, we are convinced that these ultimate ecumenical challenges must be addressed not only globally, regionally and nationally, but also locally, by all of us.

