

**Wesleyan Catholicity and Accountability:
A Retrospective and Prospective about the NCC
Theological Dialogue on Matters of Faith and Order Convening Table**

By Don Thorsen, Ph.D., Professor of Theology, Azusa Pacific University

Preface

I will talk about my support of ecumenism, based primarily upon my past and present work with the Theological Dialogue on Matters of Faith and Order Convening Table (Faith and Order), which is part of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. (NCC). As such, I will talk retrospectively, but I will also talk prospectively about the future of ecumenism. My Christian background nurtured my advocacy for ecumenical work and my thoughts about its future, particularly as influenced by John Wesley's emphases upon a catholic spirit and upon the importance of accountability.

Background

In March 2003, I attended my first meeting of the NCC's Faith and Order Commission, which has since been renamed the Theological Dialogue on Matters of Faith and Order Convening Table. My first meeting of Faith and Order took place in the United Methodist Building, which is the only non-governmental building on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. It is of interest that, after the NCC consolidated its offices in 2013, the headquarters of the NCC moved from the Interchurch Center on 475 Riverside Drive in New York City, to the United Methodist Building.

The work of Faith and Order, as a movement, involves more than the work of the NCC. Faith and Order is a worldwide effort, both in the World Council of Churches, as well as in national commissions in Ghana, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere. In addition, regional and local commissions exist in the United States (US). Faith and Order meetings occur in

regions, states, and cities. In fact, for the past ten years, I have served on the regional Faith and Order Commission of the Southern California Christian Forum. However, in this paper, I will primarily be discussing the NCC Faith and Order.

My colleague Don Dayton first invited me to attend a meeting of Faith and Order. We both served as representatives of the Wesley Theological Society (WTS), which has sent representatives since the 1980s. Kevin Mannoia, Dean of the School of Theology at Azusa Pacific University, helped to fund my participation in Faith and Order. Mannoia's previous position of leadership had been to serve as President of the National Association of Evangelicals. Both Dayton and Mannoia helped to put in action my longstanding interest in ecumenism and interreligious dialogue.

I grew up in and was ordained in the Free Methodist Church; the denomination was a Holiness Movement offshoot of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the nineteenth century. I earned my M.Div. from Asbury Theological Seminary and my Ph.D. in Theological and Religious Studies from Drew University, both of which served to strengthen my Wesleyanism. My doctoral dissertation was on the topic of *Theological Method in John Wesley*.¹ Because of my commitment to the Wesleyan tradition, I have continued to participate in the WTS, and I have represented the WTS in ecumenical and interfaith work with the NCC, since 2003. I am not currently a member of a denomination, but I have attended a United Methodist Church for the past five years where I live in Upland, California.

Wesleyan Emphases

Over the years, Wesley's concept of a *catholic spirit* strengthened my commitment to ecumenism.² Many in the Wesleyan, Methodist, and Holiness traditions experienced inspiration

¹ Don Thorsen, *Theological Method in John Wesley*, dissertation, Drew University, Madison, NJ (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1988). UMI Publication Number 8817640; see <http://dissexpress.umi.com/dxweb/results.html?QryTxt=&By=donald+a.d.+thorsen&Title=theological+method+in+john+wesley&pubnum>). See also Don Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral* (1990; Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2005); and *Calvin versus Wesley: Bringing Belief in Line with Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013).

² John Wesley, "Catholic Spirit" (sermon 39, 1750), in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 2.79-96.

for their ecumenical resolve in light of Wesley's "catholic or universal love;" he said: "If then we take this word in the strictest sense, a man of a catholic spirit is one who in the manner above mentioned 'gives his hand' to all whose 'hearts are right with his heart'."³ Of course, this catholic spirit does not give one license to "speculative latitudinarianism," "practical latitudinarianism," and "indifference to all congregations...another sort of latitudinarianism."⁴ Moreover, in his description of "The Character of a Methodist," Wesley memorably said, "we think and let think," only after having affirmed the importance of theological orthodoxy, namely, involving "all opinions...at the root of Christianity."⁵

Another aspect of Wesleyanism has not, in my opinion, been emphasized enough in ecumenical work, namely, that of *accountability*. Wesley famously emphasized accountability in his understanding and application of the *Christian Conference* in Methodist Societies. For example, Wesley talked about the "Christian Conference," and about the questions that help Methodists become more accountable in various strata of small group meetings: class meetings, bands, penitent bands, and select societies.⁶ To these questions, Wesley added "prudential means" by which small groups were practically organized and managed."⁷

During my years of ecumenical work, I rarely heard much about accountability. To be sure, there has been a kind of accountability, but it was accountability to listen, dialogue, and include as many voices as possible, especially those who have not had sufficient opportunity to speak in the past. I am supportive of these values. However, too often talk about accountability for creating or making something as the result of ecumenical dialogue was set aside. Ecumenists were so fearful of insufficient dialogue that they went out of their way to avoid setting goals, outcomes, or measureable artifacts. Excellent dialogue occurred, but few tangible results

³ Wesley, "Catholic Spirit," III.4-5, in *Works*, 2.94. Pentecostal churches have also been inspired by the theology and ministry of John Wesley, and they share a family resemblance with Methodist and Holiness churches. Therefore, when I talk about the Wesleyan tradition, I include Pentecostals as being a part of it, historically as well as theologically.

⁴ Wesley, "Catholic Spirit," III.1-3, in *Works*, 2.92-93.

⁵ John Wesley, "The Character of a Methodist," §1, in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Rupert E. Davies, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 9.34.

⁶ John Wesley, "'Large' Minutes, 1753-63," I.5, in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Henry D. Rack, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2011), 10.856-857. For more information about these accountability groups, see Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 212-213.

⁷ Wesley, "'Large' Minutes, 1753-63," II, *Works*, 10:857.

were produced. The fruit of our labors was seldom disseminated beyond the confines of Faith and Order meetings, other than to provide year-end reports to the leadership of their respective denominations and societies.

Retrospective and Prospective

In this paper, I want to do both a retrospective and prospective with regard to the Theological Dialogue on Matters of Faith and Order Convening Table of the NCC. As such, my comments are autobiographical. I base my assessments upon experience, rather than upon quantitative and qualitative research per se. Some of the latter research occurred around 2013, during the reorganization of the NCC. Moreover, leadership in Faith and Order, under the direction of Dr. Antonios (Tony) Kireopoulos, Associate General Secretary, has increasingly undertaken evaluations of meetings that occur. However, such evaluations take place more for the sake of appraising individual meetings, rather than for broader evaluations of Faith and Order. Accordingly, my evaluations come more from my observations of ecumenical work done, and as I have said, I do so through the lenses of my Wesleyan perspective.

In particular, I will talk about three aspects of the work of Faith and Order. First, I will talk about accountability to the task of Faith and Order. Second, I will talk about the relationship between ecumenical dialogue and the making of tangible outcomes—past and present—that may help the future work of Faith and Order. Third, I will talk about accountability and the financial sustainability of its ecumenical work.

Although Wesley's hallmark emphasis on a *catholic spirit* should continue to inspire Methodist participation in ecumenical work, *accountability* needs to be emphasized more both for the sake of the quality of ecumenical work to be done and for its sustainability in the future. I am no expert when it comes to ecumenism; however, I have spent many years working with Faith and Order, including service on its executive committee and in co-chairing Study Groups. I have also participated in regional ecumenical work in the Faith and Order Commission of the Southern California Christian Forum, and in the Interreligious Relations and Collaboration Convening Table of the NCC.

Mission of Faith and Order

Faith and Order does not list a mission statement per se on the NCC website. However, its task appears in a description about the importance of “Christian Unity”:

Faith and Order affirms the oneness of the Church of Jesus Christ and keeps before the churches the Gospel call to visible unity in one faith and one Eucharistic communion, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ, in order that the world may believe.⁸

This statement represents the task of Faith and Order, though there are differences of opinion among members of Faith and Order about the work it entails. Some emphasize the “call to visible unity;” others emphasize how visible unity contributes to the goal “that the world may believe;” still others emphasize that the world will believe, once churches are unified; finally, others emphasize visible unity for the sake of advocating justice.

Since the reorganization of the NCC in 2013, all Convening Tables have placed emphasis upon advocating justice. For example, at the first national meeting of the NCC in 2014, after more than three years of not meeting, the topic of future ecumenical work focused on justice issues related to mass incarceration.⁹ Consequently, all Convening Tables were directed to study this issue. In 2015, the next topic of future ecumenical work in the NCC was introduced: Interreligious Relations with a Focus on Peace.¹⁰ These are great priorities, but the work of each Convening Table duplicated one another. Moreover, the other two Convening Tables, in addition to Faith and Order, were better suited for these topics. The Joint Action and Advocacy for Justice and Peace Convening Table was better suited for investigating mass incarceration and the Interreligious Relations and Collaboration Convening Table was better suited for investigating interreligious relations with a focus on peace. Making matters more challenging, Convening

⁸ “Christian Unity,” National Council of Churches, website, <https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/christian-unity/>, accessed July 18, 2018.

⁹ “Priorities,” National Council of Churches, website, <https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/priorities/>, accessed July 19, 2018.

¹⁰ “Priorities,” National Council of Churches, website, <https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/priorities/>, accessed July 19, 2018.

Tables were asked to meet only once per year. In the past, Faith and Order (and other Convening Tables) met twice per year, and were given a four-year period (or quadrennium) in which to investigate multiple topics. Although time was given to discuss the topic of mass incarceration at the inaugural meeting of the Christian Unity Gathering in 2014, no formal opportunities were given for Faith and Order participants to dialogue throughout the year. When the second Christian Unity Gathering occurred in 2015, Convening Tables were given a second topic to investigate, though it was not clear how one could be adequately addressed, much less two topics, meeting only once per year.

Dr. Tony Kireopoulos has given topnotch leadership to Faith and Order over the past decade, given the limitations of funding and extensive reorganization that occurred in the NCC, including the relocation of the headquarters, staff, and more. Starting in the Fall of 2015, Kireopoulos requested that Faith and Order meetings return to formal gatherings twice per year, and that some freedom might be given to Faith and Order attendees in order to investigate more than the NCC designated topics.

Historically, Faith and Order has been more theologically oriented, whereas the Joint Action and Advocacy for Justice and Peace Convening Table has advocated more for justice and peace, and the Interreligious Relations and Collaboration Convening Table has advocated more for bilateral dialogues between Christians and other faiths. This does not mean that Faith and Order has not focused upon putting theory into practice, advocating on behalf of matters of justice, peace, and interreligious relations. Participants from Faith and Order have annually presented some of their work at the Ecumenical Advocacy Days in Washington, DC. In addition, Faith and Order published an anthology of its work in *Thinking Theologically about Mass Incarceration*, in 2018, edited by Antonios Kireopoulos, Mitzi Budde, and Matthew Lundberg. So, Faith and Order has done its part in supporting the justice-oriented priorities of the NCC. However, can its time, effort, and financial resources be spent better, by not duplicating the work of other Convening Tables?

In the Fall of 2015, Kireopoulos successfully restored some of Faith and Order's previous structure, meeting twice per year, and in setting up discussion topics that last for more than one year. Nevertheless, the topics were still given to Faith and Order by the NCC: (1) Climate

Justice and Conflict; (2) Violence and Genocide; and (3) Christian Witness (a response to two documents of the World Council of Churches: *Christian Witness in the Multi-Religious World*, and *Who Do We Say We Are?*). Again, these are great topics. However, I continue to be concerned about whether the NCC is sufficiently utilizing Faith and Order for the sake of Christian unity, which is its task. Of course, all of these topics can be construed as supporting Christian unity, but too often focus seems unbalanced, due to ongoing emphases upon justice, peacemaking, and interfaith relations, which are part-and-parcel of the other Convening Tables.

Certainly, Wesleyan and Methodist participants in the NCC have been at the forefront of advocating on behalf of justice issues in the NCC, since its founding. For example, the Federal Council of Churches, which was the forerunner of the NCC, wrote “The Social Creed of the Churches” in 1908. It was written in response to a report about unjust conditions in factories and farms, prepared by Methodist minister Frank Mason North.¹¹ One hundred years later, the NCC and Church World Service updated its advocacy for justice by creating “A 21st Century Social Creed.”¹²

As a participant in Faith and Order over the past fifteen years, I have tried to hold others accountable to the task of Christian unity. I think that other Wesleyan and Methodist participants have tried to do the same. If ecumenical work wants to produce church unifying fruit, then all of the Convening Tables, Initiatives (e.g., Eco-Justice, Ecumenical Poverty Initiative), and Committees (e.g., Bible Translation and Utilization Committee) should undertake work based upon their strengths, rather than upon their weaknesses, in fulfilling the overall work of the NCC. Wesleyans and Methodists can advocate for accountability in how each part of the NCC can contribute to the whole—being faithful to their distinctive tasks—just as the church functions as a body, so that the whole equals more than the sum of its parts.¹³

¹¹ “History,” National Council of Churches, website, <http://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/about-us/history/>, accessed July 19, 2018.

¹² “A 21st Century Social Creed,” National Council of Churches, website, <https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/christian-unity/a-21st-century-social-creed/>, accessed July 23, 2018.

¹³ Cf. 1 Corinthians 12:12-31.

I am biased, of course, regarding the theological importance of Faith and Order. After all, I am a theologian, and I consider theological reflection on ecumenism (and related priorities) to be inextricably bound up with its practice (*praxis*) and creating (*poiesis*). I have never been in agreement with the cliché that “Doctrine divides, service unites!”¹⁴

Ecumenical Dialogue and Outcomes

Perhaps the greatest challenge to the success of ecumenical work, in my experience, has been balancing dialogue and tangible outcomes, based upon that dialogue. On the one hand, how do we encourage dialogue that includes as many voices as possible, while on the other hand, producing tangible outcomes that are useful to people outside of Faith and Order? One may easily say that the two are compatible, and indeed Faith and Order produced many useful artifacts over the past half century. However, I think that insufficient attention has been given to outcomes—setting them, measuring them, and being accountable to them.

There are many ways to disseminate the ecumenical work of Faith and Order to churches and to others. I will begin by talking about the publication of books, which has historically been the main way to communicate. However, as we all know, there are many other ways to communicate, especially in an increasingly diverse technological world, made up of various social media.

During my decade and a half of involvement with Faith and Order, I think that I—along with others—have regularly emphasized the importance of sharing the results of our ecumenical dialogue and work outside of our meetings. (Both the current and past Director of Faith and Order, Ann Riggs, have lamented that NCC leadership bemoaned the paucity of theological publications by Faith and Order.) It is a matter of accountability to our constituency, in my opinion, to disseminate the work of Faith and Order, and I think that changes have begun to occur, for example, in a renewed emphasis upon publishing. During the 2000s, Faith and Order published a book in the Faith and Order Commission Theological Series, published by Paulist Press, which

¹⁴ “Service for Visible Unity in the Truth of the Gospel,” Ecumenical Institute, website, <https://www.ecumenical-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Wainwright1.pdf>, accessed July 19, 2018.

has been the main publishing outlet for its ecumenical work. In 2005, Faith and Order published *Ancient Faith and American-Born Churches: Dialogues between Christian Traditions*, edited by Ted A. Campbell, Ann K. Riggs, and Gilbert W. Stafford.¹⁵

In the 2010s, more publishing has occurred in the Faith and Order Commission Theological Series. For example, Antonios Kireopoulos and Juliana Mecera edited papers from the Fiftieth Anniversary of Faith and Order in a book entitled *Ecumenical Directions in the United States Today: Churches on a Theological Journey* (2012).¹⁶ Mitzi Budde and I edited papers from the Study Group we co-chaired on the topic of “Unity in Mission.” The book published was entitled *Unity in Mission: Reflections on the Pilgrimage of Mission* (2013).¹⁷ It was the first book published in a long time that came out of the work of a single Study Group, rather than as a publication by Faith and Order as a whole.

Publishing the ecumenical work of Faith and Order has continued this decade with *Thinking Theologically about Mass Incarceration: Biblical Foundations and Justice Imperatives*, edited by Antonios Kireopoulos, Mitzi Budde, and Matthew Lundberg (2017).¹⁸ Another anthology being prepared by the Study Group on “Climate Justice and Conflict,” of which I am a part, will be submitted for publication in 2019.

Part of the problem in publishing the ecumenical work of Faith and Order has had to do with the NCC’s historical relationship with Paulist Press. Although no formal agreement has been explained to us, Faith and Order has not been permitted by the NCC leadership to publish any of its work, except through Paulist Press. What is more, Paulist Press requires a \$10,000 subvention for every book published, regardless of its length. This has been a very expensive

¹⁵ Campbell, Ted A., Ann K. Riggs, and Gilbert W. Stafford, eds., *Ancient Faith And American-Born Churches: Dialogues between Christian Traditions* (Faith and Order Commission Theological Series) (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005).

¹⁶ Antonios Kireopoulos and Juliana Mecera, eds., *Ecumenical Directions in the United States Today: Churches on a Theological Journey* (Faith and Order Commission Theological Series) (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012).

¹⁷ Mitzi J. Budde and Don Thorsen, eds., *Unity in Mission: Theological Reflections on the Pilgrimage of Mission* (Faith and Order Commission Theological Series) (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012).

¹⁸ Antonios Kireopoulos, Mitzi J. Budde, and Matthew Lundberg, eds., *Thinking Theologically about Mass Incarceration: Biblical Foundations and Justice Imperatives* (Faith and Order Commission Theological Series) (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2017).

hoop through which to jump. The NCC paid the subvention for the Fiftieth Anniversary anthology on *Ecumenical Directions*, but the Study Group on “Unity in Mission” raised more than half of the Paulist Press subvention for *Unity in Mission*, before the NCC provided the final \$5,000. Members in Faith and Order have long argued against the requirement for publishing exclusively through Paulist Press, however, to no avail.

Some relief may arrive due to a defunct press, owned by the NCC, which members of Faith and Order have tried to revive during the past decade. It is called Friendship Press, and the NCC recently published its first book by Friendship Press, since the 1990s. The book is entitled *United against Racism: Churches for Change*, and it came about as a result ecumenical work by the NCC in conjunction with its initiative: “Vision and Objectives for the ACT Now: United to End Racism.”¹⁹ Since the NCC owns Friendship Press, it is hoped that Convening Tables, including Faith and Order, can make use of the publishing house, without having to pay a subvention for every publication. Not having to pay \$10,000 per book may let leaders in Faith and Order not feel so compelled to publish long anthologies in order to justify costly subventions. After all, shorter books can get out information faster and more accessibly than the long books, which have been characteristic of Faith and Order in the past.

Over the past decade, Faith and Order participants have constantly talked about alternative ways of disseminating its work to churches, other than through the publication of books. Here are examples: website (updated daily), blogs (updated weekly, monthly), Facebook, Google+, MySpace, Stitcher, iTunes, Twitter, and more. However, maintaining social media requires expertise and money that neither Faith and Order nor the NCC currently possesses. The NCC has a website, but it is not regularly updated; it is not very interactive. To be sure, investing in social media would be enormously helpful in our current technological age; however, the NCC is not at present able to take advantage of them.

Other methods of dissemination have been considered, which could communicate ecumenical expertise more immediately in churches, even by using old-fashioned methods. Here are some examples: tracts, pamphlets, bulletin inserts, and other materials that could be

¹⁹ National Council of Churches, *United Against Racism: Churches for Change* (New York: Friendship Press, 2018).

printed or made available online for printing. These suggestions, in my experience, have not gained much support in Faith and Order, much to my dismay. There is an expectation, both among participants and among leadership in the NCC, that Faith and Order does not deal with the dissemination of information in churches. Such dissemination is considered to be more educational in orientation, which has been the purview of other offices in the NCC (e.g., Committee on the Uniform Series).

As an academic, I have experienced a variety of thoughts and feelings about growing emphases upon outcomes, since the turn of the twenty-first century. Goal setting and assessment of outcomes have taken up an enormous amount of time and money in US higher education, and the motives for quantifying the quality of education have not always been clear. Certainly, a lot of politicking has been going on with the promotion of outcomes in public education—both primary and secondary education. Nevertheless, I think that the overall results have been positive. In my opinion, the ecumenical work of Faith and Order would benefit by more goal setting and assessment of outcomes, especially with regard to the dissemination of its expertise for the benefit of Christians and churches. In my experience, participants in Faith and Order have been suspicious of and resistant to outcome-oriented work, due especially to the fear that the quality and diversity of ecumenical dialogue would suffer. I certainly do not want to squelch such dialogue, but I also think that more attention needs to be given to the dissemination of ideas to Christians and churches. Thus, I think that Faith and Order needs to be more accountable in setting and assessing outcomes that help to disseminate the ecumenical work that is done.

Two Caveats

At the expense of getting off topic, I want to make two observations. First, Faith and Order is committed to facilitating dialogue among Christians and churches for the sake of ecumenism. This is not an easy task, and perhaps the most difficult part has been including non-white voices in the dialogue. After all, the NCC is made up of denominations that include the African Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Korean Presbyterian

Church in America, and other racially and ethnically diverse communions. Nevertheless, it has been difficult to maintain their participation, for multiple reasons. Ongoing efforts have been made by Faith and Order leadership to include them, as well as other non-NCC denominational representatives, but the challenges are complex.

Second, I do not want to overlook the ongoing scholarship of Faith and Order Commissions worldwide. The World Council of Churches' Faith and Order, for example, has published *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, and *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*.²⁰ In the United Kingdom, several recent books have been published: *The Gospel, Sexual Abuse and the Church: A Theological Resource for the Local Church* (2016); *Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Aftermath of Abuse* (2017); and *The Five Guiding Principles*.²¹ Of course, the latter publications are short: 48, 128, and 64 pages, respectively. (I applaud the publication of short, albeit substantive ecumenical works. Faith and Order in the NCC could learn from the example of Faith and Order in the UK.) In sum, we need to remember that the work of Faith and Order is more than national or regional; it is international in scope, accomplishing sundry tasks and publications.

Ecumenism and Financial Accountability

One year after I began my formal involvement with Faith and Order, one of the leaders lectured about the state of its work. I no longer remember the name of the man who spoke, but I clearly remember his message: "We are in the twilight of the ecumenical movement." Of course, I realize that people have long prophesied the demise of ecumenism. However, it was disheartening to me in the early 2000s, since I had just made key life decisions in order to attend regularly the twice per year meetings of Faith and Order.

²⁰ World Council of Churches, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, Faith and Order (Paper 198) (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005); and World Council of Churches, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order (Paper 214) (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2013).

²¹ The Faith and Order Commission, *The Gospel, Sexual Abuse and the Church: A Theological Resource for the Local Church* (Church House Publishing, 2016); The Faith and Order Commission, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Aftermath of Abuse* (Church House Publishing, 2017); and The Faith and Order Commission, *The Five Guiding Principles*, foreword by Christopher Cocksworth (Church House Publishing, 2018).

Supporting this “twilight” message was my own experience. When I began attending Faith and Order in 2003, the NCC had occupied half a floor in the Interchurch Center on 475 Riverside Drive in New York City. Over the years, the NCC reduced to one quarter of a floor, and then to one eighth of a floor. Finally, the NCC headquarters moved to the United Methodist Building in Washington, DC. During that time, the NCC went through a major reorganization, due largely to insufficient funding. I was not a part of the reorganization, and I do not know all of the financial challenges the NCC leadership endured. (I know they were daunting!) I do know that not all member communions regularly paid their allotments, and that other denominations had to pay additionally, including the United Methodist Church. Eventually, the NCC reemerged smaller and leaner, including Faith and Order.

Faith and Order has a modest budget, but its participants are not privy to it. Therefore, there is no way for me to comment factually about the financial well-being of the NCC and its various parts. However, I have been involved with private Christian higher education for more than three decades, and I know quite a bit about its needs for financial sustainability, advancement fundraising, and so on. Moreover, anyone involved with church finances—on a local, regional, and national level—has some idea of how challenging finances have been, at least, since the great recession in 2008. Although finances are always a challenge to churches and denominations, Christian non-profits, and academic institutions, they have seemed especially challenging during the past decade.

After the NCC reorganization in 2013, I was not sure that I would be able to continue serving on Faith and Order, since special registrations and fees were instituted for non-communication members. These decisions affected parachurch groups, such as my own—the Wesleyan Theological Society. Other parachurch groups affected included the Society of Pentecostal Studies, Graymoor Ecumenical and Interreligious Institute, and others. Perhaps more importantly, it put a damper on participation by the Roman Catholic Church. Prior to the reorganization, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops sent multiple participants to Faith and Order. Coupled with participants from Catholic parachurch groups, six to twelve Catholics regularly attended meetings. Nowadays it is more likely to have one or two Catholic participants.

Most of the registration and fee obstacles have been resolved. However, overall participation in Faith and Order has dropped significantly. In the 2000s, meetings regularly had approximately fifty participants, with some amounting to more than seventy participants. At the time, it seemed as if too many attended, thus making it difficult for everyone to contribute. However, after reorganization, attendance averages dropped to less than thirty participants. Coupled with the fact that Faith and Order meetings occurred only once per year, for several years, it became increasingly difficult to accomplish much for the sake of ecumenism.

Kireopoulos has improved communication with Faith and Order participants about financial matters. He was personally challenged in many ways, including his family's decision to remain in New York City, despite the fact that the NCC headquarters relocated to Washington, DC. Kireopoulos also received various treatments for cancer, which have complicated his work both with Faith and Order and with directorship of the Interreligious Relations and Collaboration Convening Table.

There needs to be regular communication within non-profit organizations, in general, so that people stay informed about finances. The more informed they are, the more active they may become in helping fiscal sustainability throughout an organization. When churches and denominations, non-profits, and academic institutions hold their financial cards—so to speak—close to their chest, it is difficult to be sympathetic toward, much less helpful, when financial challenges are finally revealed. I realize that I am not expert in finances and fundraising, but many times I have felt left out or marginalized from such discussions, just because I was not an expert. Yet, I am among those the experts want donations from, and so it seems counterintuitive to neglect or marginalize the very people needed for financial sustainability.

During my years of service in Faith and Order, I know that a third or more of the NCC income came from sales of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible. However, that income has diminished over the years, for various reasons. One of the reasons is due to the need for updating the NRSV, published in 1989, with a new edition. I know that there is talk about a new edition by the Bible Translation and Utilization Committee, and I support doing it as soon as possible. I also support making the NRSV more accessible for laity as well as for pastors and academics. For an academic, it is far easier to get access to other translations than it is

for the NRSV. For example, in 2009, Abingdon Press published *The Wesley Study Bible*, using the NRSV translation.²² In 2012, Abingdon Press re-released the prior publication as the *CEB Wesley Study Bible*, using the Common English Bible (CEB) translation, since it was cheaper to use than the NRSV translation.²³ It was astounding to me that Abingdon Press would make this decision, since it publishes on behalf of the United Methodist Church, and yet it was a matter of financial exigency to abandon the NRSV. These kinds of issues need further discussion by leadership in the NCC.

Although I know that financial experts have been hired to do advancement for the NCC, I think it would benefit everyone, including those serving on Faith and Order, to be kept better informed and thus accountable when it comes to meeting the financial challenges of ecumenical work. In the past, financial experts have not done as much as they promised (for example, Upland Free Methodist Church, where I attended, and Azusa Pacific University, where I work), due to lack of transparency and accountability. Although I do not have knowledge about such matters in the NCC, I do have it in my experience of local church life and of the university where I teach.

The Wesleyan tradition has, in my experience, tried to balance clergy and lay involvement in church matters, which makes it easier to maintain financial transparency and accountability. Wesleyan and Methodist churches have not been perfect, of course, with regard to finances. But accountability is especially important in meeting the challenges of financial sustainability for ecumenical work, since so many see it as being of “twilight” importance, vis-à-vis, all of the other demands of Christian life and ministry.

Prospective

In thinking about the future of ecumenism, I use my experiences of ecumenical work as a catalyst for what I want to say. Overall, I am committed to supporting ecumenism in the

²² *The Wesley Study Bible*, NRSV translation, eds. Joel B. Green and William H. Willimon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009).

²³ *CEB Wesley Study Bible*, CEB translation, eds. Joel B. Green and William H. Willimon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009).

future, and will dedicate time, effort, and money to it. Nevertheless, I support ecumenical work with “fear and trembling.”²⁴

I began my work with Faith and Order with rosy expectations. Perhaps too rosy. Doing ecumenical work helped to free me from past Christian conservatism that was stultifying, in many ways, including participation in ecumenical and interfaith ministries. Participating in Faith and Order also helped to fulfill my desire to contribute to unity among Christians, churches, and interfaith relations.

Familiarity, of course, has its downsides, and ecumenical work is no different. I like what Faith and Order accomplished, during the time of my involvement with it, and I think that I contributed meaningfully to its work. I do not regret the time, effort, and money that I spent doing ecumenical work. However, it seems that time, effort, and money spent around me—in both the NCC and Wesleyan Theological Society—has eroded. It has required greater and greater intentionality on my part, in order to compensate from the “twilight” arc of ecumenism.

Wesley’s catholic spirit is still present, in both Wesleyan and Methodist participants in Faith and Order. Non-Wesleyans have shared that spirit, though they may not be aware of it by name. Nevertheless, I have not witnessed the kind of accountability that I think is needed for the sustainability of ecumenical work. First, with regard to the task of Faith and Order, too often the work of justice or the work of interfaith dialogue has taken precedence over the historic Christian unity work of Faith and Order. However, I argue that the work of justice fits more appropriately in the Joint Action and Advocacy for Justice and Peace Convening Table, and that the work of interfaith dialogue fits more appropriately in the Interreligious Relations and Collaboration Convening Table. Although there needs to be communication and interconnectedness between the work of all Convening Tables of the NCC, each should focus their time and energy primarily within their respective tasks. Participants bring more expertise and passion to their respective missions, and morale and fruitfulness diminishes when they repeatedly are tasked to fulfill NCC priorities outside of the areas for which they were appointed and volunteered to serve.

²⁴ For example, see Philippians 2:12; cf. Søren Kierkegaard’s emphasis upon Christians’ need for a “leap of faith” in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, tr. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941), 105.

Second, the work of Faith and Order should become intentional about utilizing outcomes, involving the setting of measureable goals and artifacts. For example, dialogue is measureable, and so are artifacts that may disseminate the fruit of that dialogue. Talking about outcomes does not necessarily have to squelch ecumenical communication that helps to heal church divisions, and at the same time honor our diversity. Outcomes may be set tentatively and broadly; they may be revised over time. However, setting outcomes help ecumenical participants to become more accountable to one another, helping them to achieve the kind of collective benefit that Wesley advocated in spiritual formation, which contributed to participants' individual as well as social well-being. I have long been an advocate of talking about theory and practice, or theory, practice, and creating (*poiesis*). A strength of Faith and Order is the theoretical (or theological) discussion of ecumenical issues, reflecting at length upon the oneness of the church of Jesus Christ, and of the gospel call to visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic communion, expressed in worship and in common life and in ministry, in order that the world may believe. An emphasis upon utilizing outcomes more often in the work of Faith and Order will help the task of implementing ecumenical theory in practice and in creating new ways of advocating on behalf of Christian unity.

Third, I think that greater knowledge about and accountability for the financial status of the NCC, in general, and of Faith and Order, in particular, will help their long-term sustainability. Again, I am not an expert with regard to finances and advancement in non-profits. However, I know that the financial crunch of the past decade has seriously hurt the work of ecumenism, on the national as well as local level. As much as we do not want to allow money to influence ecumenical work, the reality is that money is needed for it, along with other church ministries. Wesley did not shy away from preaching about money, as well as teaching about it in the Methodist Societies, in ways that allowed for public accountability.²⁵ Methodism has long supported the NCC and Faith and Order, especially through the generosity of the United Methodist

²⁵ For example, see John Wesley, "The Use of Money" (sermon 50, 1760), in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 2.263-280; "The Danger of Riches" (sermon 87, 1781), in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 2.227-246; "On Riches" (sermon 108, 1788), in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 3.518-530; and "The Danger of Increasing Riches" (sermon 131, 1790), in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 4.177-186.

Church. However, such work cannot continue through the munificence of a few denominational supporters. Communion members of the NCC need to be held accountable to their fair share, and advancement by the NCC needs to be open to broad input, networking, and creativity with regard to the funding of ecumenical work.

Final Thoughts

Although I have focused on the work of Faith and Order in the NCC, it is hoped that Wesley's emphases upon a *catholic spirit* and upon *accountability* may become helpful to ecumenical work worldwide. These emphases have been beneficial to Wesleyan, Methodist, and Holiness churches. Thus, I think that they can be usefully implemented for all churches' call for visible unity in one faith and eucharistic communion, expressed in worship and in common life in Jesus Christ, in order that the world may believe.