

serving **SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA ECUMENICAL COUNCIL**

Together

celebrating Christian unity . . . respecting diversity

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Director's Column
FROM UNITY TO KOINONIA

Rev. Albert G. Cohen

It seems to me that personal friendships are the foundation of our experience of community. Whether we are considering the congregation or the service club, the quality of our relationships with the others will shape our commitment to the group. St. Paul often spoke of koinonia, Christian fellowship, as an essential ingredient of church life. Michael Kinnamon, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, made the same point two years ago at our SCEC luncheon when he said that koinonia matches unity and relationships equal structures and as the goal of our ecumenical strategies.



Rev. Cohen at the service for Christian Unity

In the last few months I have attended two national gatherings of national, regional and local ecumenical practitioners, one in New Orleans, the other in San Antonio. These meetings were designed to help us live out in real time our institutional connections to each other. As Kinnamon points out we all belong, one does not join the ecumenical movement and hence become a member. We are baptized into the Body of Christ and therefore are a part of the Church of Jesus Christ.

In New Orleans 60 of us agreed that whatever the polity conclusions, mission is the work of the church at every level. Some believe that power centers are shifting in the direction of the congregations. Will this mean that the responsibility for mission, so often initiated and supported at the national level, will be equally cared for by local judicatories and congregations? I have a personal experience in this issue for during my 40-year career in university campus ministry I watched this mission task

shrink away as the support for this evangelistic enterprise moved from the macro bodies to the local congregations. But the same question applies to our ministry with the United Nations and hunger in Darfur.

Passionate projections of the future were offered by several panels at these meetings. Two contrasting opinions defined our responses. Scott Anderson, now from Wisconsin but who was here in California, said "We are entering a season of grief" so that in the future the ecumenical ministry will be carried on by those ready to forego a salary. On the other hand Peg Chamberlin, president of the NCC, along with others reminded us that "the future starts today." And it is in some ways in our hands. Also she asked to whom are pastors and congregations accountable if not to the authority that looks like a denomination, even if called by another name.

In San Antonio 30 members of the National Association of Ecumenical and Interreligious Staff gathered explored ways in which the Christian community could welcome the outsider into the fellowship of the church. Foremost for me was the challenge of including young adults as partners in the ecumenical and interreligious work we do. There are three youth movements which are actively engaged in contacting councils with the intention of being represented where the ecumenical conversation is happening. They are the World Student Christian Fellowship, or more specifically the SCM, Student Christian Movement USA; the New Fire Network; and the Interfaith Youth Corps. They work now with the National Council of Churches and want to work with us.

Ecumenical formation is one side of the coin; mission and justice are the other side. We are not choosing one over the other but affirming the need to hold both approaches to the ministry in the life of this Council. So these remain challenging days for all of us interested in

the ecumenical commitment given to those who call themselves “Christians.” Jesus made it clear that we are supposed to be “one in the Spirit,” a worthy goal in these contentious days.



Galt, Smith, Meyers, Guernsey and Hixon

SCEC installed its new officers at the February 17 Board of Directors meeting. Sister Mary Elizabeth Galt, Chancellor of the Los Angeles Archdiocese of the Roman Catholic Church officiated at the installation. She called on the officers to “lead a life worthy of this calling, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of Peace.” After officers declared their covenant of fidelity and acceptance of the responsibilities of their offices, the Board covenanted their “eager support” of those being installed. Officers for 2011 are President, Alexei Smith; Vice President, Carol Kostura; Treasurer, Larry Hixon; Secretary, Arshag Khatchadourian; Past President, Kenny Bowen; Members-at-Large, Ken Ellis, Terry Read, Darrel Meyers, and Lucy Guernsey; Chair of Faith and Order, Ray Kibler.

Ecumenism a “Moral Imperative”

Fr. Alexei Smith, SCEC Board President

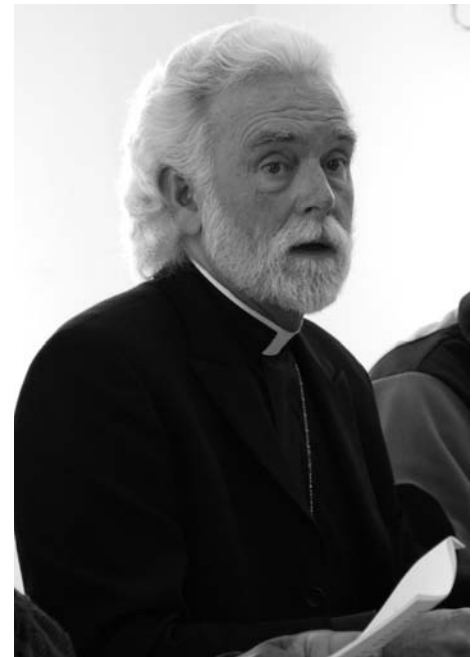
It seems almost like a miracle of Providence that more than 2,000 Catholic Bishops came to Rome to participate in the Second Vatican Council in 1962, many of them trained and formed in a theology of “exclusion,” according to which the Orthodox and Protestants – “schismatics and heretics,” in Catholic terminology of that time – were simply outside the Church. Three short years later they produced the decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the Decree of Ecumenism, which recognizes a real, although incomplete ecclesial communion among all the baptized and among the Churches and ecclesial communities.

It is important to recall that the restoration of unity - in Latin *Unitatis Redintegratio* - among all Christians was one of the main concerns of Vatican II, a point often overlooked. Two days after the opening of the Council, Pope John XXIII met with the non-Catholic Christian observers who had been formally invited to participate at the Council. Instead of sitting on the papal throne as was customary, Pope John used a chair similar to those

used by the observers, and he sat at their level. This small symbolic gesture of equality was not lost on those in attendance.

When the debate began on *Unitatis Redintegratio* at the Council’s first session, the first chapter of the document was entitled: “The Principles of Catholic Ecumenism.” This title might have given the impression that there is more than one ecumenical movement, that the Roman Catholic Church was setting up its own ecumenism alongside the ecumenism already underway among Protestants. Several bishops requested that the title be changed from “The Principles of Catholic Ecumenism” to “The Catholic Principles of Ecumenism”. The new title better reflects the fact that there is only one movement toward Christian unity, which the Catholic Church now joins.

This renewed perspective, in perfect harmony with the ecclesiology of the ancient Church Fathers, had enormous consequences for the new way that Catholics relate to other Christians, and for the irrevocable adherence of



Fr. Alexei Smith, President

the Catholic Church to the ecumenical movement. And although admittedly that decree spoke of Orthodox and Protestants as “our separated brethren,” thanks to the example and teachings of Pope John Paul II, Catholics are now taught to refer these Christians as “our fellow Christians.”

We have moved from an ecumenism of “return” to a mutual respect, using dialogue as the means of disclosing our agreements as well as those things needing resolution on the common pilgrimage toward that unity for which Christ prayed at the Last Supper. That very word “dialogue” appeared for the first time in a Catholic Church document with *Unitatis Redintegratio*.

As Pope John Paul II reminded us, "The commitment to re-establishing full and visible communion among all the baptized does not apply merely to a few ecumenical experts; it concerns every Christian, from every diocese and parish, and from everyone of the church's communities. All are called to take on this commitment, and no one can refuse to make his or her own the prayer of Jesus that all may be one; all are called to pray and work for the unity of Christ's disciples" [*Ut Unum Sint*].

And, speaking at an ecumenical prayer service marking the close of this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Pope Benedict XVI said that the search for Christian unity is "a moral imperative, a response to a precise call of the Lord."

I share these historical reflections with you as I become your new President. It is my hope and prayer that as our new SCEC officers begin their term, we might take this opportunity to reflect upon how far we have all progressed in the last fifty years toward enfleshing Christ's prayer that we might all be one and recommit ourselves to the ecumenical movement, responding to that "moral imperative".

A Letter from Birmingham

In mid January, the annual meeting of Christian Churches Together in the USA (CCT) centered on the issue of domestic poverty through the lens of racism. Participants noted that there does not appear to have been any response to Dr. Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." They decided to craft a response, which follows. Father Alexei Smith represented SCEC at this meeting and has shared this letter of response to Dr. King:

We have gathered this week in Birmingham as representatives of the churches and organizations that make up Christian Churches Together (CCT). We came to examine poverty through the lens of racism.

After experiences at the Civil Rights Institute and the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, we have felt compelled to make a response to the "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous letter was an answer to a message from a group of clergy in Birmingham. So far as we know, no one has ever issued a clergy response to Dr. King's letter.

Remembering. We begin by expressing profound gratitude to the leaders of the civil rights movement

whose sacrifices have moved us closer to God's justice. Those leaders and thousands who followed their lead accomplished more than many could imagine, and demonstrated the power of Christian, nonviolent action. We celebrate the remarkable strides made through their courageous witness.

Repenting. We recognize, however, that some of us have not progressed far enough beyond the initial message from the Birmingham clergy. Though virtually all our institutions have formal statements against racism, too often our follow-through has been far less than our spoken commitments. Too often we have elected to be comfortable rather than prophetic. Too often we have chosen not to see the evidence of a racism that is less overt but still permeates our national life in corrosive ways.

Renewing. Though chastened by the unfinished nature of the work before us, we are inspired by the witness we saw reflected in both the history and the present-day ministry of the organizations we have visited in Birmingham. Dr. King's letter speaks powerfully to us today, even as it did in 1963.

We remember two windows in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. In one window, the face of Jesus had been blown away by the bomb that murdered four girls in 1963. The other window, a gift to the congregation after the tragedy, depicts a Christ figure who with one hand rejects the injustice of the world—and with the other extends forgiveness.

In the spirit of this loving Jesus, and in the spirit of those who committed their very lives to that love, we renew our struggle to end racism in all forms. We begin by taking time on Monday, January 17, to reread the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" – along with the message from the Birmingham clergy that prompted Dr. King's letter – and to reflect on its meaning for us today. We urge all within our churches to join us. (http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/liberation_curriculum/pdfs/letterfrombirmingham_wwcw.pdf)

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Bishop Dean Nelson

SCEC Celebrates Christian Unity

Claremont Presbyterian Church hosted SCEC's annual week of prayer for Christian unity service on January 23, 2011. A combined choir from Claremont area churches led the singing; the liturgy centered around the theme,

"You are witness of these

things (Luke 24)." This international week of unity, including 349 different Christian denominations globally, celebrated the centennial celebration of the formation of the modern ecumenical movement.

Bishop Dean Nelson, ELCA, reminded us of the fellowship and prayer of Christian churches in Jerusalem both in ancient times and today. Nelson called on the congregation to devote ourselves to the tasks of prayer and fellowship across denominational lines, reminding us how easy it is to fall back into denominational grouping once the week is over. "Our brothers and sisters in Jerusalem as well as our Lord Jesus himself urge us to do something different," said Nelson as he noted he would be praying that we find a new level of devotion to our life and work together.



Revs. Gene Boutilier, Diane Kenney, Albert Cohen

The Rev. Diane Kenney was awarded the Gene Boutilier Award for Outstanding Ecumenical Service. Citing Kenney's role as "ambassador among the denominations, an activist in interfaith dialogue and in antiwar witnessing, and a protagonist for decades in the unfinished ethical tasks of environmental responsibility, of equality and civil rights, of justice for women,"

Boutilier celebrated the often-challenging role of campus ministry in which Kenney has been engaged since 1969. He also noted her consistency in projects that "have transcended charity to energize a moral framework for the economic debate, to empower the community participants and not just the students, and to promote economic justice campaigns." In response to the award and the sermon, Kenney challenged all of us to think to the future of Christianity and the importance of campus ministry working with students seeking the purpose of life.

This year's worship service was developed by an SCEC Board planning committee in conjunction with a team of local clergy from the Claremont/Pomona area.

Ethics for a Globalized World

The Romero Center, the United Church of Christ's program of border issues and transformative education, will be holding its second annual Romero Lectures Series on April 29 in Claremont and April 30 in Long Beach. The theme for the Series is: Beyond Solidarity: Ethics for a Globalized World.

The keynote speaker is Leonardo Boff. Dr. Boff is "recognized as one of the most outspoken, controversial, and articulate proponents of Roman Catholic liberation theology. A staunch supporter of the ordination of women priests, Boff's controversial writings put him at odds with the Vatican and eventually led to his resignation from the priesthood."

The keynote responder, Dr. Rosemary Radford Reuther is an internationally acclaimed theologian, church historian, writer, and teacher specializing in the area of women and religion and a major voice in raising a feminist critique of the traditionally male field of Christian theology.

For further information and registration, go to www.scncucc/voices.

Progressive Christians Uniting

Distinguished environmental activist Bill McKibben will keynote an important PCU-sponsored conference in Claremont October 27 - 29, 2011. The conference theme is "Brave New Planet: Imagining Ecological Communities." More information will be posted on the PCU website (progressivechristiansuniting.org) and reported in PCU e-mail newsletters in coming weeks.

Pacific Network for Mission Education (PNME) has announced a scholarship program of up to \$1,000 in aid to anyone planning to go on a mission education trip of her or his choice. Applications are available from Barry Smedberg (smedbergb@earthlink.net). Deadline to apply for this year is April 15, 2011.