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INTRODUCTION

Gilbert W. Stafford

CHURCHES IN "ANYWHERE," USA

Welcome to "Anywhere," USA! One finds in "Anywhere" many traditions of the Christian faith. These traditions are, in many ways, widely divergent in their doctrinal emphases, in the ways they live out their faith, and in their corporate worship. At the Church of Christ, for example, one finds a cappella singing of four part harmony songs, in a plain meetinghouse, and with a Bible study sermon. At the Orthodox Church the atmosphere is very different with its brightly colored icons of Christ and the saints, with incense filling the air, and with two processions-the Little Entrance with the Bible, and the Great Entrance with the holy gifts for the Eucharist.

If we were to attend the services of the Pentecostal and the Presbyterian churches in Anywhere, we would find significant differences between them as well. In the first, one would very likely find exuberant singing accompanied by hand clapping, maybe some tongues speaking, and spontaneous expressions both of joy and of concerns. In the Presbyterian Church, one would likely find a carefully ordered service with congregational responses already scripted for unison reading, a pastoral prayer with no spontaneous expressions from the congregation, and a sermon crafted as the centerpiece of the service.

Let us go to four additional churches in Anywhere. At the Roman Catholic Church the culmination of the service is the Eucharist with the whole congregation going forward to receive the holy sacrifice. However, at the Southern Baptist Church the culmination of the service is the altar call, during which time

are called to make a decision for Christ. At the nonprogrammed Friends Meeting, the congregants sit in silence until someone, moved by the Spirit, speaks. In fact, it might be that the greater part of the meeting time is spent in silence. Not so at the Episcopal Church: there the whole service is full of words and actions. And if one wants to worship with the Seventh-day Adventist Church one must do it on Saturday.

The examples of other churches in Anywhere, of course, could be greatly expanded. In terms of external expressions, it is as though one is in a different world in each of these churches. In too many instances, the churches in Anywhere do, in fact, function as though they are in completely different worlds. And yet when one looks beyond the obvious differences one finds in all of them the one faith in Jesus the Christ as Savior and Lord. But how can the churches of this one Lord deal with their divisive issues? What kind of conversation will lead to mutual enrichment and the end of functioning as though the churches in Anywhere were in different religious worlds? The Faith and Order Movement is a worldwide endeavor to answer these questions.

THE FAITH AND ORDER MOVEMENT

In the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, widely divergent churches and other missionary-sending agencies came together to consider how they could unite their witness around the world. The participants in the Edinburgh Conference were there as official representatives of their respective churches or agencies, and not merely because, as individuals, they had the desire to attend a missionary conference.

Near the end of the conference, Bishop Charles H. Brent of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States—at that time, he was bishop of the Philippine Islands—issued a challenge. He pled for the churches to convene in the future for the purpose of addressing not only missionary concerns but doctrinal concerns as well. That was the seed that eventually grew into what we now know as the Faith and Order Movement. Faith and Order has, from the beginning, been a forum where churches with very churches were present. Representatives from both ends of the spectrum of

the Restorationist Movement-the a cappella Churches of Christ and the Disciples-were sitting side by side affirming a common heritage. The range of sacramental theologies was there, from the Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican understandings to the Quaker understanding, and in between were Protestants whose theology on the subject, while not Catholic, Orthodox, or Anglican, nevertheless uses sacramental language, as well as those who avoid sacramental language, preferring ordinance language. Also a range of spiritual pieties characterized the group. In addition, the positions on church governance and polity ranged from the hierarchical to the strictly egalitarian. However, as we sat at the table of discourse, even with all of these differences and many more, we functioned on the assumption that this was the discourse of brothers and sisters who have the same Lord. We prayed with each other and for each other. When one shared a hurt it was in the atmosphere of sharing it with the fellowship of Christ gathered at that table. Though we live and work in different ecclesial communities we experienced the mystical body of Christ that is more comprehensive than the ecclesial demarcations of any one of our several traditions.

Sixth, it is the hope that this Faith and Order exercise will encourage the churches in Anywhere to do the same kind of thing; will give confidence to church traditions that as yet are not involved at the national level in such dialogues to become involved; will prompt state, regional, and local groupings of churches to devise plans whereby they can have focused discussions about theological and doctrinal issues; and will serve as an example of at least one way it can be done.

Seventh, this kind of dialogue dispels the misconception circulated in some quarters that the ecumenical movement is about finding the lowest common denominator for Christian understandings of the faith. Faith and Order is not about watered down doctrine and theology. It is about robust doctrine and the ology. It is not about easy solutions to thorny issues. It is not about sweeping differences under the rug. It is about living with those differences, respecting them, and seeking to find what "the Spirit says to the churches" (e.g., the traditions) so that we may hear more fully what the

Spirit is saying both to each tradition and to the whole church.

Eighth, we are reminded that when we are in settings like this, our role is not that of espousing our own personal theologies. Our role is to enunciate our best understanding of our respective traditions. Such dialogues are not about personal positions but about the dogmatic, doctrinal, confessional, and theological understandings of various church traditions. It is about their respective histories and operational modes. It is as though in one room, whole traditions themselves come together to converse about the faith. Whole traditions with thousands of years of history sit with whole traditions that are in the hundreds range. Whole traditions rooted in the European context converse with whole traditions rooted in the American context. The person across the table from me, for example, is not simply a person with a personal name. Yes, that to be sure! But that person is the embodiment of a whole tradition. I expect him or her to represent that tradition to me. In this context it is not what he or she thinks that is of greatest interest to me, but what his or her tradition holds.

Ninth, this exercise reminds us of a crucial guideline for all discourse of this type. We are to seek understanding of another tradition in light of its most recent reflective work and on the basis of its best and most official thinking. Each of our traditions has poor exponents who espouse distorted self-understandings. It is unfortunate whenever we look at another tradition in its poorest light instead of its best.

This raises the issue of the credibility of the spokespersons for a tradition. Is he or she well informed about the tradition? Does the tradition itself place its stamp of approval on him or her as one who is capable of speaking intelligently, accurately, and appreciatively of the tradition? Such credentials are given in a wide variety of ways in the respective traditions. In some traditions it is by *denominational appointment*; the initiative is taken by the denomination itself. In others it is by *denominational consent*. A professor, for example, desires to be part of Faith and Order and receives denominational consent to serve. In this case the person takes the initiative. In others it is by *approval from or at the*