Ecumenism: The Growing Pains of Relevance

Setting the Stage

“Oikoumene,” as used in New Testament Greek, refers to the whole inhabited world.

More recently, the term ecumenism has evolved to signify a movement among Christian groups seeking and working for the unity that draws us together as Christians.\(^1\) It gains voice and purpose from scripture such as John 17:20-23:

“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.”\(^2\)

Ephesians 4:3-6 also beckons ecumenists to create peace in their unifying efforts:

“I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 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. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

This unity in Christ, meant for the whole world, and grounded in scripture, becomes important to a common witness related to peace and justice issues. The unity created ecumenically is also important to interfaith involvement as cooperation becomes critical.

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when advocating solutions to world-wide social, economic, political, environmental, and other issues of justice.

For a denomination that competed for members as the “one true church” and tended to gather in isolation, ecumenism presents challenges of identity, theology, missional and sacramental practice, and community service. But it also has a distinctive message that informs the ecumenical community. The path to a viable ecumenical presence is tightly wound with a changing identity in response to a rapidly changing worldview and the scriptures that guide discernment.

**History**

From the very beginning of the Latter Day Saint movement, the church claimed an exclusive call to build God’s kingdom on earth. Joseph Smith Jr.’s grove experience convinced him that he should join no other--there was much to critique about current expressions and much lost from the original intent of the New Testament church. The Restoration of the original gospel in modern times would convince many that Christ would soon return to a particular place for a particular, righteous people. An 1828 revelation reads, “Behold, this is my doctrine; Whosoever repenteth and cometh unto me, the same is my church; whosoever declareth more or less than this, the same is not of me, but is against me; therefore, he is not of my church.” ³ In this same section, we are warned that those who do not fear God, who build up churches unto themselves to get gain, will thus be disturbed and shaken to the center.⁴ The Book of Mormon contains many references to a “great and abominable church,” where the devil is the foundation and riches are flaunted.⁵ While this could be a 19th century commentary on how the rich marginalized and held

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³ Doctrine and Covenants 3:16a, 1828.
⁴ Doctrine and Covenants 3:13, 1828.
⁵ For example, 1 Nephi 3:139-144.
captive “the saints,” it caused friction with Protestants and Catholics alike and led to continued suspicion of all who claimed the Book of Mormon as scripture.

This would cause what Judd and Lindgren term “authority-alienation” syndrome. Hostility from the larger religious community engendered by the Latter day Saints’ authoritarian claims tended to strengthen their emerging authoritarian style. Exacerbated by the hostile response, the Saints became even more judgmental towards society. The growing isolationist rhetoric from both sides threatened peace and caused several forced relocations.6

In the early Reorganization, conference resolutions authoritatively endorsed Joseph Smith Jr.’s revised/corrected/translated version of the Bible and then designated our three books of scripture as the standard of authority on all matters of church government and doctrine.7 This further cemented the church as “one true church” with inspired scripture that no one else had. Dissent arose from within as Jason Briggs was particularly adamant that biblical scholarship already available was not supportive of such a claim.8 Asserting that the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants had equal authority with the Bible would also continue the marginalization of the church by outside groups (and itself) for at least the next two generations. At this point, the church had no pastoral way of honoring and hearing dissent that would allow membership to maintain unity.

The start of the national ecumenical movement coincides with the later years of Joseph Smith III’s and the beginning of Frederick M. Smith’s presidencies. The emphasis of Social Gospel theology by Fred M. correlates well with ecumenical principles of service to the poor and

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suffering, but it pointed to the purpose of gathering in to Zion rather than a true commitment to the brotherhood of humankind without evangelical motive. Disunity (diversity) was discouraged and was admonished in several Doctrine and Covenants sections as in the example below. Unity through keeping the commandments needed to prevail.

“Let the church be admonished that the times are portentous and demand faithful adherence to the faith and work of the church, that mankind may be blessed by and find peace in those religiously social reforms and relationships which have been divinely imposed as a great task of achievement. Remember and keep the commandments, be alert to keep out of the church and from its members those forces which make for disunity, and in saintly accord be about the task of freeing Zion from her bondage.”

There is little scriptural evidence of a movement to ecumenical awareness beyond the status quo during the presidency of Israel A. Smith. W. Wallace Smith faced many social challenges during the 60s and 70s and was careful not to add further to the issues causing dissent within the membership. He did not favor the confrontational methods of the Civil Rights movement. F. Henry Edwards considered the race question to be a social issue and thus believed it inappropriate for the First Presidency to take a stand. Many members would be on opposite sides of issues, yet conference resolutions asked for their guidance in addressing social, economic, and moral problems. Disruption in society flowed over into church life and required answers the church did not have. Membership questioned leadership motives and there was much public airing of dissent.

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9 Doctrine and Covenants 137:6, April 7, 1938.
Taking the church to international places and Third World nations caused problems of identity. Beliefs needed to be identified in a manner that would preserve the essential nature of the movement but remove it from explanations born in the 1830s. From a church born in America, distinctives making us different from other Christians made no sense for peoples who had never received the Christian message.12 As our identity was presented in new ways, many members felt there was a loss of spirituality and a forfeiture of historical tradition. This is a criticism of ecumenism—that conformity and unity lead to sacrificing critical defining characteristics of an individual denomination.

Joint Council seminar meetings in 1967, with ecumenical leadership, guided church leadership in correcting claims from our Restoration heritage that we had replicated/fully restored the New Testament church in form, structure, and priesthood office.13 Since it was known that the New Testament church expressed much diversity, this claim of exclusive religious authority would only serve to continue to confuse those they wished to serve in non-Western cultures. It also caused adversarial relationships with other denominations locally and abroad. Amidst a growing concern from the membership that our identity was changing, we hear this counsel:

“Some of you have sought security in the words and phrases by which the faithful of earlier days have expressed their knowledge of me. My ways are still the ways of my son…..They must also bring to their searching for truth and their service to my people all the treasures of understanding I have opened for them elsewhere. It is necessary for all to promote unity so that my blessings can be yours as you willingly bend your strength to kingdom-building enterprises.”14

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12 Legacy of Faith, 263-264
14 Doctrine and Covenants 149:4, April 1, 1968.
Emerging understandings helped leadership see that the church was no longer a duplicate of the first-century church. The primary mission was recognized as a fellowship of those who acknowledged Jesus Christ as their Lord.\footnote{Legacy of Faith, 265.} This is a defining characteristic of ecumenical participants—that all are one in the body of Christ.

In working to define a Christian identity appropriate for the times, the church outlined objectives in 1966 that were updated in 1973. In hindsight, at least three correlate to an ecumenical awareness. These included clarifying its theology and unifying the membership, deepening the effectiveness of worship, and interpreting Zionic community.\footnote{“Statement on Objectives for the Church,” World Conference Bulletin (Monday, April 18, 1966): 239.} Education would be critical to developing a unified message inclusive of the world. Deepening the effectiveness of worship would obviate the concern of a loss of spirituality when becoming more focused on social justice mission; a reinterpretation of Zionic community would soon reveal that the job of creating kingdom conditions required the assistance of the whole body of Christ. A further call to ecumenical discipleship is heard as, “You who are my disciples must be found continuing in the forefront of those organizations and movements which are recognizing the worth of persons and are committed to bringing the ministry of my Son to bear on their lives.”\footnote{Doctrine and Covenants 151:9, April 1, 1974.}

The passing of WCR 1157, “Participation in Interdenominational Christian Ministries,” in 1980 honored the call heard in the scripture above. “The strength and voice of the church should be added to those of other Christian organizations and movements when they are engaged in ministries which are consistent with our own ministries and beliefs.”\footnote{WCR 1157 “Participation in Interdenominational Christian Ministries,” April 10, 1980.} This step was not to require the alteration or abandonment of any traditional beliefs and practices of the church, not to endorse any creeds or theological positions contrary to the church, and not to cost significant
time, money, or personnel. This significant resolution was passed coincidentally with the start of the Faith to Grow program supported through Wallace B. Smith’s leadership. The “Zionic Relations” commission of each congregation would be tasked with relationship building within the church and within other communities of the world, acting as leaven to work with others to change social, economic, or political structures that cause suffering or injustice. As I personally remember though, this was the least understood of the congregation commissions, and most likely to be dropped due to lack of interest or participation.

Full ecumenical participation at the World Church level would move slowly towards National Council of Churches (NCC) membership through the passing of WCR 1222 (1992) requesting the First Presidency to investigate benefits, costs, and advisability of interfaith memberships. Congregations and national churches were also encouraged again to participate in local ministerial associations. Scripture guidance repeatedly expanded the call to consider a unified mission in response to issues of ecumenical concern. “Heed the urgent call to become a global family united in the name of the Christ, committed in love to one another, seeking the kingdom for which you yearn and to which you have always been summoned.” In response, an Ecumenical/Interfaith Relations committee was established in 2002 (WCR 1275) to establish a link between Community of Christ and ecumenical/interfaith groups. The successful process of NCC membership was completed on November 10, 2010. Key identity documents such as *We Share: Identity, Mission, Message and Beliefs* and *Scripture in Community of Christ* detailing belief and practice contributed to the successful application.

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22 Dale E. Luffman, “The Journey Into the National Council of Churches [NCC],” 2013, as shared by author March 5, 2016.
Finding Ecumenical Voice

“The real genius of the restoration lay not in recapturing the church of the past but in responding to the vital, contemporary revelation of the divine.”23 Restoration needs a new context.

Working in international community required the church to work with other Christians. This helped the church move away from an adversarial relationship to other churches (our one true church concept). For those groups who considered us less than Christian, it helped other ministry leaders see the church as fellow workers in the body of Christ.24 Taking the message away from its distinctives as expressed in the preaching charts was of concern to Apostle Neff. As summarized by Richard Howard, his question was related to the central message of the gospel. Neff asked the church to define itself as other than different from other churches. It was critical in non-Christian cultures to see other Christians more as allies than adversaries.25

Further encounters with scripture beyond the 1980s move the church towards an ever increasing mission to the least and the lost—an ecumenical friend of mine would say, “God goes to where life is being lost.”26 It is what makes Christ’s mission, our mission. That is what forms the base of ecumenical outreach and healing ministries. “The One who created all human kind grieves at the shameful divisions within the human family. A prophetic people must work tirelessly to tear down walls of separation and to build bridges of understanding.27

23 Legacy of Faith, 265-266.
24 Legacy of Faith, 261
26 Ron Werner, personal communication, Interfaith Council of Greater Portland, April 18, 2016.
Arguments Against Ecumenical Participation

The practice of close Communion and lack of recognition of other Christian baptisms for membership in the church created a barrier for ecumenical participation. Setting ourselves apart often did not inspire good will on either side as we considered our theology better and our scripture more “inspired.” There was little “oneness” to find.

Of particular concern to the membership as the church of the 1960’s and 70s was challenged by identity issues was that ecumenical efforts would cause us to lose our distinctiveness. We would be required to “give things up,” such as the image of a “one true church,” and would be swallowed up in Protestantism. The call to political advocacy on behalf of the marginalized could divide the community as they found themselves on opposite sides of issues. Or being involved in worldly concerns would bring a lack of emphasis on spirituality.

Critics of NCC and WCC involvement were paying attention to fundamentalist evangelical churches who were convinced that they were communist organizations. Claims that we had no intention or advantage to join were supported by the idea that we had our own social justice organizations (e.g. Outreach International) to accomplish the work of the gospel and only needed to “work alongside” others if we did not have the resources to accomplish some task alone. Discussions such as these—“what we shouldn’t be doing”—were only hindering our ability to

move forward in faith and personal response to discipleship. Theologically, this draws its reasoning historically as summarized by F. Henry Edwards:

“In general Latter Day Saints stood aloof from movements toward church union later to be known as ‘The Ecumenical Movement.’ Many thought that church union was a reasonable advance for the Protestants, but not for those who accepted the message of the Restoration. The Saints were willing to cooperate in matters of public morality, but they felt that the basic solutions of the social problems of mankind awaited the coming of the kingdom. It is to that that they pointed their prayers and their preaching and their works of faith. If anything about ecumenism disturbed them it was the growing tendency to regard church union as more important than sound doctrine. Many a missionary sermon was built around II John 9, “Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both Father and the Son” [from “Inspired Version”].

[Greater clarity of reasoning against ecumenism is seen when continuing to verses 10 and 11 from the NRSV: “Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching; for to welcome is to participate in the evil deeds of such a person.”]

Ecumenism was considered “blatant apostasy” by fundamentalists in the 1970s and 1980s as they observed doctrinal movement towards the Protestant Boundary evidenced in the “position papers, Joint Council Seminars, new curriculum, and implemented in the Faith to Grow program.”

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A Way Out to Relevance-- Ecumenism as Gift to the Church and Individual Discipleship Development

Ecumenical connections were first achieved through local congregations and individual ministers who had interest.34,35 Testimonies from those who have been accepted and worked with ecumenical associations are that they have never been asked to compromise their beliefs.36

In 1974, the church was challenged by revelation as follows:

“You who are my disciples must be found continuing in the forefront of those organizations and movements which are recognizing the worth of persons and are committed to bringing the ministry of my Son to bear on their lives. Working together to this end will promote unity, resolve conflicts, relieve tensions between individuals, and heal the wounds which have been sapping the strength of the church, spiritually and materially. This you must do in the spirit of love and compassion as revealed in my Son during his journey in your midst.”37

As one of the first women appointees for the church in the early 1990s, Barbara Carter found herself in the middle of two struggles as she sought a place in ecumenical ministries. The first was having to prove herself to our own members as a minister, and the second that we were even involved at all in ecumenical ministries in a visible way. In Springfield, Missouri, the church was not allowed in any ecumenical ministerial associations, which has been the historical experience of many of our approaches. In California, she was warmly welcomed and eventually served as Board President for the California Council of Churches. The welcome she received helped her set aside the occasional rejection she felt from her own community.

34 Evans, 37.
37 Doctrine and Covenants 151:9-10, April 1, 1974.
A brief survey of my Seminary colleagues (3 responses) revealed limited to no ecumenical involvement. They anticipate learning from other Christians—“seeing beyond the edge of my plate”—and finding creative solutions together in community rather than going it alone. I personally find companionship with other denominational ministers where I don’t have to be the pastor, and especially find a greater appreciation of my own faith journey as I gain understanding and lose fear in sharing with other faiths. As claimed by Barbara Carter, participating in mission and spirituality with other faith groups energizes and brings a sense of wholeness to those who engage, as well as the whole congregation.38 Unity in diversity prevails.

Successful ecumenical work requires an identity relevant to and capable of speaking to contemporary issues. In his reflections about his leadership experiences, Wallace B. Smith noted that we needed to grow numerically as well as spiritually. This would require the membership to “understand and embrace an interpretation of the gospel message that would not only be universal in its application, but also lead to a greater depth of commitment.”39

Challenging prophetic scripture, especially within the last two decades, required us to develop an expression of belief to aid in our response to the call. The Enduring Principles40 locate their home in such words as, “…invites all people to come and receive divine peace in the midst of the difficult questions and struggles of life,”41 or, “It is for divine purposes that you have been given the struggles as well as the joys of diversity. So must it always be in the

40 Sharing, 12-14.
peaceable kingdom.”42 Our Mission Initiatives43 related to ecumenical foundations such as peace, poverty, education, invitation, and mission work found themselves defined in Luke 4:18-19. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” This is another scripture underpinning the ecumenical movement.

As Ecumenical and Interfaith Officer for Community of Christ, Barbara Carter notes a need for us to create a network of congregations and individual members that are participating in ecumenical work. Other NCC members already have this route, but our headquarters has limited knowledge of individual involvements. This will aid in disseminating information related to advocacy from NCC, share creative ideas from other members, and network support for how to accomplish specific objectives. Social media groups and other contact opportunities should be in place by World Conference 2016.

**Community of Christ as Gift to the World**

1) **Spirituality**

Community of Christ is small, yet we have been told our message is large. It is that message that seeks to bring healing to the world. We are called to “Claim your unique and sacred place within the circle of those who call upon the name of Jesus Christ. Be faithful to the Restoration, mindful that it is a spirit of adventure, openness, and searching.”44 What might that look like?

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44 Doctrine and Covenants 161:1b, April 4, 2000.
When leadership realized that the California Council of Churches was always “all business” around the table, Barbara Carter offered to lead creative worship for a year. It set a different path for the group, as many of the participants found themselves in tears while sharing together. It was humbling for Barb to know that something we take for granted—simple devotional worship—was moving and powerful for them. They kept referencing back to “when we shared in worship this morning” and it was one of the first times she realized the power of who we are and how our message and practices impacts and changes lives and organizations. At a later point she found herself asking permission to share what the 2007 World Conference had passed as continuing revelation and read Section 163 to the group. Many of them profusely thanked her and shared testimony of how it spoke as scripture to them. They declared it important to have in front of them and to move the people. Community of Christ needs to realize that we have a message and a presence that is huge to the ecumenical table—we impact, we change.45

In searching for a hopeful ecumenical theology for contemporary times, Enid Debarthe states:

“Christians are called to be leaven to the world. Leaven loses its identity in order to create delectable bread. Our distinctives as a church may be part of the leaven that the world needs. If we are to incarnate the life, teachings, and acts of Jesus, we must address the issues and needs of all people, as he did. To incarnate, embody, and make real the teachings of Jesus means to live what we proclaim. Can we truly be his disciples without incarnating hope, faith, agapic love, joy, and peace? Might incarnation theology become the ecumenical theology of the third millennium? Can there be ecumenical peace without ecumenical theology?”46

Jan Elfers, Executive Director of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon (EMO), points to our history and perspective on sacred community.\(^47\) She wants to see EMO “infused with the breath of God” and continue to take on vital peace and justice work. In commenting on what has caused a downturn nationally in ecumenical groups, she points to a concentration on policy and education without hands-on, grass roots efforts to live up to mission. That mission must also find its foundation in God through spiritual practice, and she quotes Matthew 25:40, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me,” as we answer the call to serve the stranger. As reflected in our Enduring Principles, many of the guiding statements correlate well with the foundations of ecumenism.

2) Take the Temple on the Road

We need to take the Temple to the world and further re-symbolize its life-giving message. As called for in the year 2000, we must:

“Become a people of the Temple—those who see violence but proclaim peace, who feel conflict yet extend the hand of reconciliation, who encounter broken spirits and find pathways for healing. Fulfill the purposes of the Temple by making its ministries manifest in your hearts. It was built from your sacrifices and searchings over many generations. Let it stand as a towering symbol of a people who knew injustice and strife on the frontier and who now seek the peace of Jesus Christ throughout the world.”\(^48\)

When the Independence Temple was being built, there were many complaints that the money would have been better spent in support of the healing mission it would be dedicated to support. Now, with our current troubling financial situation, I find myself wondering how the purposes of the Temple can be fulfilled when staffing and resources

\(^47\) Jan Elfers, personal interview, April 13, 2016.  
\(^48\) Doctrine and Covenants 161:2, April 4, 2000.
have been cut so severely. In essence, the dedicated purposes of the Temple/s are those of ecumenism—Peace, reconciliation, and healing of the spirit—strengthening of faith and preparation for witness—wholeness—education and advocacy. The Spiritual Formation Center at the Kirtland Temple is becoming known for its spiritual retreats, particularly relevant to healing and wholeness of body, mind, and spirit. The Temple in Independence is the place many of us gather for education and strengthening of faith. The Peace Colloquies have always had an ecumenical and/or interfaith focus and receive world recognition. Further postponements or cancellations because of funding and resource issues need to be avoided in order that the ministries that the world so desperately needs can be expanded in new ways. Offering of a Peace award by local congregations is an excellent first step in ecumenical connections. The Portland, Oregon congregation recently renewed its commitment to this Temple ministry by searching for local non-profit and ecumenical groups that were bringing ministry to the homeless. A day-long event was held where each group spoke about their mission, ministries made connections with each other for a common purpose, and a Peace grant was awarded to a group modeling Community of Christ enduring principles in resolving homelessness. The Orange, California congregation also offers an annual Peace award. Both congregations have gained expansive ecumenical relationships that further develop community and find new ways to share the peace of Jesus Christ. As a Community of Christ network of participating congregations is created, resources will be generated and connections made that can inspire the confidence of others in their efforts.

Can we also offer our local buildings as sanctuary for those community efforts bringing wholeness and healing of the spirit? As only one congregational example, Portland currently houses a gathering ministry for those experiencing mental health differences, creates quilts for homeless seniors being placed in their first safe place, and shares hosting weeks with an ecumenically sponsored homeless family shelter. Our visiting families claim we are the only group that sits down and listens to their stories rather than merely passing a plate over a counter. If these efforts are tied to the Temple with an explanation of the world-wide intent of its symbolic outreaching arms, we will “point beyond ourselves to steer us to our true calling to become God’s spiritual house, built on the witness and sacrifice of Jesus Christ—a household that unites, heals, restores, and frees people through community to express their best selves no matter who they are…a household in which Jesus would truly feel at home.”

This view comes to fruition as follows:

“As these ministries come to fuller expression, receptive congregations in the areas around the Temple and throughout the world will be revived and equipped for more effective ministry. Vital to this awakening is the understanding that the Temple calls the entire church to become a sanctuary of Christ’s peace, where people from all nations, ethnicities, and life circumstances can be gathered into a spiritual home without dividing walls, as a fulfillment of the vision for which Jesus Christ sacrificed his life.”

3) Common Consent and Faithful Dialogue

The extreme dissent and rhetoric that followed the extension of priesthood to women and the rapidly changing identity process of the late 20th century meant that the church needed to find new ways to dialogue together. Pre-legislative hearing sessions, Listening Circles, and at-home

pre-conference discussion guides that included spiritual practices have all improved our common consent processes. In a recently published report from the Special Committee in Response to WCR 1299, common consent has been freshly defined as “to think or to feel together about shared responsibilities.”52 Reliance on “majority rule” decisions in complex matters rarely ensures that all participants are heard with equal opportunity. Recent counsel asks us to “Listen to one another, without judgment or predisposition. Do not assume that the answers to matters of conflict have yet been perceived. There is much labor to be done. Reason together in love, and the Spirit of truth will prevail.”53 When I shared the 2013 USA Conference process of discernment through LGBT issues of priesthood and marriage with the Interfaith Council of Greater Portland, one person broke down. She had just returned from her own denominational conference regarding the same issue, and the principles of faithful disagreement54 and graceful process of common consent were not honored. She felt at risk of losing her teaching position at her denominational university because of her “more liberal” views. She hopes to attend World Conference this June to observe our process and teach it to her students and jurisdictional officers. I have used a modified process for a congregational business meeting that required we listen carefully to each other’s perspectives. Great success (and thanks!) were reported.

The End and The Beginning

Finding a voice to gift to the ecumenical world in turn gives voice to ourselves. In stepping outside of ourselves to share what we have learned from our story, we become

participants in our own welfare. As the world has become more divisive in its plurality, ecumenism progresses further to interfaith bridging in our communities. Can Community of Christ lead interfaith dialogue because we have already gone through the struggle to find relevance in our pluralistic world? Discernment practices that assist common consent and healthy dialogue that honors the perspectives of all participants are an endowment we can share as the world’s peoples grasp for restorative breath. “Oneness and equality in Christ do not mean uniformity. They mean Unity in Diversity and relating in Christ-like love to the circumstances of others as if they were one’s own. They also mean full opportunity for people to experience human worth and related rights, including expressing God-given giftedness in the church and society.”


