

KENTUCKY COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

The Nature of the Unity We Seek, Four Assumptions

Adopted at the 44th Annual Assembly, October 11-12, 1991

1) The ultimate goal of the ecumenical movement is not merely tolerance of other theological positions or cooperation with other denominations, but the visible unity of the church of Jesus Christ, a unity of which Paul speaks in his epistles and for which Jesus prayed according to John's gospel (John 17). This unity is a mutual interdependence as intimate as the members of a single body (I Cor. 12), the branches of a single vine (John 15), the stones of a single house (I Peter 2) -- a unity which yet preserves the dignity of its diverse parts. There is no single commonly-accepted blueprint for such unity, but we, members of the Kentucky Council of Churches, envision it will ultimately enable Christians to confess together the gospel of Jesus Christ, to join in common service and worship, to make decisions together as circumstances require, to recognize one another's members and ministers, and to join in eucharistic fellowship. Such unity is inseparable from the renewal, even transformation, of the existing churches.

2) We believe that the unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity of the church shine forth more clearly when churches engage through councils in worship, witness and common service, than when a church attempts to do these things alone. Councils of churches do not claim, however, to be adequate manifestations of Christ's one church. Their "ecclesiological significance" resides in their ability to nurture growing unity among their members and to anticipate that unity, however partially, in their present life.

3) For many people, the most obvious function of councils of churches is to serve as channels for practical cooperation among churches in such fields as disaster relief, development, social justice, public policy advocacy, education, and communications. This work, however, must not be separated from discussion of faith and order or from acts of common worship. Councils, as expressions of the ecumenical movement, should not understand themselves only as service and development agencies but as instruments for promoting unity (described above) and common witness. Thus, while they leave final decisions to the governing bodies of the churches involved, councils can stimulate a growing thrust toward this unity among the churches, build essential trust and foster multi-lateral discussion of divisive theological issues.

4) It follows from what's been said that the ecumenical significance of councils of churches derives from their self-understanding. We believe that councils are not permanent cooperative agencies, structures alongside the churches that only enable the churches to do certain things together. They are not ends of themselves but rather are means to reconciliation, urgently calling the churches to unity. As they see themselves as steps on the way toward deeper communion, councils are invaluable catalysts for ecumenical growth. The following quotation from Lukas Vischer, former Director of the WCC's Faith and Order Commission, expresses the hope of many ecumenists: "Christian councils are, so to speak, the thorn in the flesh of the churches. They are a constant reminder to the churches of the anomalous situation in which they live. They prod the churches to expose themselves continually to the power of the Holy Spirit. They constitute the setting, created by the churches themselves, within which the promise of renewal may be heard,

within which the churches can share their experiences and gradually establish a common tradition."

Councils of Churches have authority only to the extent that the churches that compose them are willing to recognize the claim of ecumenical work on their internal lives. We call the churches to respond to the claim and command of greater unity, and realize the true nature and purpose of councils. We challenge the member churches of the Kentucky Council of Churches to take the council seriously as a vehicle for promoting and expressing greater oneness in the body of Christ in this State.