

**Lancaster Theological Seminary Opening Convocation**  
**September 23, 2010**

First things first: May God richly bless Lancaster Theological Seminary during this academic year. May this be a year filled with inspiring worship, insightful dialogue, supportive community – and big donations!

Seminaries, this will not be a surprise to you, are made up of sinful people. But at their best, seminaries can be places where those people manifest the gospel – focusing less on what “I can accomplish” than on the gifts God offers us through others in the community. There is a sense in which no one succeeds at seminary unless everyone succeeds, because the “goal” is to build up the one body of Christ through preparation of those called to leadership in that body. May it be so here during the 2010-11 academic year.

Lancaster Theological Seminary describes itself on the website as “a richly diverse, ecumenical graduate school of theology.” And so I want to begin this academic year by recalling that this is the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the modern ecumenical movement. The symbolic beginning of this movement for Christian unity and common witness was a great mission conference held in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1910.

Of course, one hundred years has a different meaning for different people – depending, in part, on how close to it you happen to be. About twenty years ago, when my daughter Anna was seven or eight, we were riding together in the car as NPR offered a tribute to the classical pianist, Mieczyslaw Horszowski, who was turning one hundred that day – and still playing the piano. “Listen to this,” I said to Anna. “The man who is playing is one hundred years old.” “Wow,” she said, “he is middle aged.” “No,” I said, “I’m middle aged. He’s old.” “No,” she said, “I mean he’s from the Middle Ages.”

Edinburgh wasn’t quite a medieval assembly of the churches, but it is far enough removed from us that we can see several major shifts in thinking about mission. In this

address, I want to name several of those shifts before focusing on one dimension of mission that raises particular challenges these days for the National Council of Churches and will be of real importance in all our ministries.

First, a few observations about the Edinburgh conference itself. The crucial question is what made this event so significant? After all, there had been prominent (even larger) mission conferences in London and New York in 1878, 1888, and 1900. Edinburgh was, at the time, seen as a continuation of these previous assemblies – none of which is now much remembered. In my judgment, there are four reasons why Edinburgh is now seen as a kind of jumping off point for modern ecumenism.

1. This conference, unlike previous ones, was composed of official delegates from missionary societies. This was not a gathering of churches as such; that would only come later with the advent of councils of churches. But since many of these mission societies were directly related to denominations, this conference came closer than any before it to being able to speak for the churches.

This probably needs a bit more explanation. Today we take it for granted that the church as a whole is responsible for mission, but this was not the assumption in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. My own “denomination,” the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), gave rise to what was called the United Christian Missionary Society, but this society was distinct from the church per se. Individual Disciples supported it because of their personal commitment to mission – but it wasn’t an “agency of the church.” I think it is fair to say that with Edinburgh the bond between mission and church grew stronger.

2. The Edinburgh conference was more theologically and ecclesiastically comprehensive – more diverse – than its predecessors. Traditional Anglicans (Anglo-Catholics), for example, agreed to participate once the organizers affirmed

that divisive matters of faith (like ministry and sacraments and authority) would not be brought before the assembly for discussion, let alone for vote.

Having said that, we should acknowledge that the conference was still not very “ecumenical” (very diverse) by our standards. There were no Roman Catholic or Orthodox participants, since these traditions were not yet ecumenically engaged (as, of course, they are now); and, even more significantly, only seventeen of the 1300 delegates actually came from what they called “the younger churches.” To take one example, at the conference there were a number of missionaries working in India, but hardly any Indian Christians.

On the other hand, these seventeen indigenous representatives were invited to deliver six of the public addresses; and one of these - by the great Indian leader, V.S. Azariah - is the best remembered, most widely quoted speech from the entire conference. I plead with you, said Rev. (later Bishop) Azariah, “that an advance step be taken by transferring from foreigners to Indians responsibilities and privileges that are now too exclusively in the hands of the foreign missionary.” And he ended with these words: “Through all the ages to come, the Indian church will rise up in gratitude to attest the heroism and self-denying labors of [foreign missionaries]. You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. [But] we also ask for love. Give us friends!”

3. There is a third reason this event is seen as the beginning of the ecumenical movement. At Edinburgh, there was a stronger emphasis on the visible unity of the church than at previous conferences. Throughout the report is an awareness that missionaries were fighting over the same souls in the mission fields, and that this (to say the least) undermined their witness to the reconciling love of God made known in Christ! Our goal, said the delegates (quite astonishingly!), is not the planting of competing churches but the establishment of one united church in

each place. But it went even deeper than that. In his closing remarks, the conference chairperson and great ecumenical leader, John R. Mott, asked directly: “Have we not [even here] begun to realize our given oneness in Christ?” This is the key theme of the ecumenical movement: Unity is, first and foremost, a gift, not an achievement – and it is this insight that has enabled Christians to stay at the table even in the face of severe disagreement.

4. The Edinburgh Conference was by no means an end in itself. Mott’s closing remarks anticipated that what happened here will “course out through us to the very ends of the earth.” And the vehicle for this was a Continuation Committee that, among other things, gave rise to a permanent International Missionary Council – and with that, ecumenism as a structured movement was born.

A lot changes in one hundred years – and especially in the century beginning in 1910. It is interesting to note, for example, that historians regard 1910 as the point at which the world was most unified – but in what we would regard as the wrong way (i.e., western imperial powers controlled most of the earth’s population and resources). When the delegates at Edinburgh thought of unity, they envisioned a world united under the banner of a triumphant church – which, of course, was being spread along with western civilization by the colonial powers.

This past century has seen the end of colonialism, at least in its earlier form. It has seen the end of Christendom (i.e., the assumption of an homogenous Christian world in Europe and North America) along with the resurgence of other world religions. Beyond that, the past half century has seen a growing appreciation for religious and cultural diversity that has given rise to what we call post-modernism, along with an almost inevitable backlash on the part of those whose identity is threatened by such diversity, as we have seen quite dramatically this past month. This past century has also seen massive threats to human well-being and the survival of the planet, including two world wars and

countless regional conflicts, the advent of nuclear weapons, and the horrifying prevalence of genocide.

This list is very partial, but you get the point. Of course, our understanding of mission has changed during this period. Let's take it as a given that Christians have a biblically-grounded calling to witness to the God we have known in Christ in word and deed; but how we do so is surely shaped by the times in which we live. As I read this history, mission theology and practice have undergone four major shifts since Edinburgh – at least for those churches that are ecumenically engaged.

1. We now affirm that mission is always a two-way street. Reading the report from Edinburgh, for all of this conference's advances over previous ones, will still feel like fingernails on a blackboard because of its tone of "well-meaning condescension." The following passage is typical. "[The] awakening nations are looking to the West for intellectual enlightenment and for civilization. To give them this without religion would be to give them that which [would] prove [to be] a curse and not a blessing. The Christian religion has supplied what is distinctively good in western civilization...and Christianity alone ... can meet the needs of these awakening nations... It is more than ever incumbent on the Christian Church to realize its responsibility to carry the gospel to the lands which are now open to receive it, and to guide the awakening nations to God in Christ." The verbs are telling: we give and we guide, while they look to us and they receive.

Today, at least in theory if not always in practice, our churches affirm that we receive gifts from sisters and brothers in the Congo or Lebanon or China or Bolivia, even as we share with them what we have received from God. A major program of the World Council of Churches from the 1970s on was the "ecumenical sharing of resources" which emphasized the gifts of lively and

joyous worship, the gifts of character and insight associated with the struggle for dignity, as well as gifts of money and material goods. Behind this is the crucial realization that western culture – home to horrific violence, enduring racism, massive pollution, and vast disparities of wealth – has no claim to moral or spiritual superiority. This is a monumental shift in perspective.

2. We now affirm that mission is the responsibility of (is constitutive of) the whole church. The paradigm in 1910 was of congregations in, say, Pennsylvania giving dollars to be used by specialized mission agencies overseas, among the “unreached populations” on the frontier of Christendom. This is no longer the image. My own denomination’s mission statement speaks of mission “from our doorsteps to the ends of the earth.” Every congregation, we now acknowledge, is a mission center, including in the United States which, we now recognize, also needs to hear and experience the gospel anew.
3. Perhaps most significantly, we now affirm that mission starts with God (the often-used Latin phrase is missio Dei), not with the church. As we sometimes put it, it is not that the church has a mission but that God’s mission has a church. Which means (here’s the rub) that the purpose of mission is not just (or even primarily) the spread of the church but participation in all that God is doing – which, if scripture is our guide, includes working for peace, advocating on behalf of the most vulnerable in society, and exercising real stewardship of creation.

The first World Mission Conference to articulate this shift was in 1952, which is precisely where many evangelical scholars think the ecumenical movement went astray. They argue that broadening the definition of mission to include social transformation has devalued the importance of evangelism aimed at bringing people to Christ – which is humanity’s greatest need. This tension is obviously not resolved, but the shift for many Christians is undeniable. At Edinburgh, mission

and evangelism were practically synonymous. For most of us, I suspect, evangelism is one dimension of a much broader understanding of missio Dei.

4. We now affirm that, while mission involves bold witness to God's love in Christ, such witness can (should) happen through dialogue and partnership with people of other faiths. This, of course, was not the perspective of the early ecumenical movement whose favored slogan was "the evangelization of the world in this generation." According to the report from the Edinburgh conference, the world was then in a "plastic" condition, ready to be molded by the fire of the gospel. Today, our churches insist that Muslims or Buddhists are not disembodied objects of conversion but human neighbors in God's work in making peace and serving the needy.

I need to emphasize that the place of other faiths in God's plan of salvation remains a highly contentious question for the church as a whole. If there is a definitive position of the WCC, it is this paradoxical statement made at the World Conference on Mission and Evangelism in 1989: "We cannot point to another other way of salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time, we cannot set limits to the saving power of God.... We appreciate the tension and do not attempt to resolve it." Still, this is a far cry from the aggressive evangelizing posture of Edinburgh, where it was assumed by many, if not most, delegates that the other world religions were in retreat and would, fairly soon, disappear – at least as viable competitors with Christianity.

This last point, regarding new approaches to interfaith relations, poses real challenges for our ministry at the NCC, and in the brief time remaining, I want to name some of those challenges. By the way, I wrote this address before the last month with its awful eruption of anti-Muslim rhetoric. My colleagues on the staff of the NCC and I wrote or contributed to at least six statements, and I personally did something like twenty

interviews with television networks around the world, denouncing categorically the derision, misinformation, and outright bigotry being directed against America's Muslim community. Calls to burn the Quran because it "teaches violence" are nothing less than a violation of the commandment not to bear false witness against the neighbor. I trust you agree.

But, having said that, interfaith relations still raises theological, moral, and missional challenges that deserve serious attention.

Theologically-speaking, the NCC, which has a membership ranging from Orthodox to Quakers, reflects the same ambivalence seen in the earlier sentences from the WCC. Our policy statement, "Interfaith Relations and the Churches," adopted in 1999, obviously encourages interfaith dialogue and cooperation. But when it comes to the question, "Can non-Christians be reconciled to God, and if so, how?" the statement reverts the language of comparison: some say this and some say that. There is now broad agreement that God is revealed in other faiths and, thus, that engagement with them affords real opportunity to experience God's presence – perhaps in ways that are new to us. But are we now prepared to say more? Are we ready, for example, to say that God wills the diversity of religions? Those are questions I have presented to the NCC's Interfaith Relations Commission for their consideration.

We often point to human sexuality as the most profound, transformative theological challenge facing churches; but seen in wider historical perspective, the interfaith challenge is more radical. If we don't face it seriously and sensitively, we will only widen the already-enormous gap between the "dialoguers" and the "evangelizers".

A good indication of this for me was the 2005 world mission conference in Athens, which was the first such conference in decades to include a large number of representatives from Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Not coincidentally, interfaith relations did



not figure at all in the conference theme or plenary presentations because it would have been too divisive. It was a vivid reminder that, while new partners at the table can enrich the conversation, they can also complicate it – a reminder that Christian unity in interfaith relations stand in real tension. During my years of seminary teaching, students would regularly suggest that it is far easier to relate to “ecumenically-minded” Jews or Hindus than to many of the narrow-minded jerks who insist on calling themselves Christians! Suffice it to say that this is not an overly ecumenical sentiment – but I suspect many of us feel the same.

The moral challenge is even tougher: How can we be both open to religious diversity and firmly opposed to diversities, including some called “religious,” that are demonic. Or as the theologian Marjorie Suchocki once put it, (appropo of Lancaster) we must be able to distinguish between Jonestown and an Amish community. The very experience of religious and cultural diversity has led many persons in our era to conclude that religious beliefs and moral values are a matter of personal preference – which has the benefit of opening us to differences, but won’t stand the test of evil. If one belief is really as good as the next, than how do we say “No!” to Nazis or white supremacist churches or advocates of religiously-based terrorism or Quran-burning congregations with sufficient clarity and conviction? Saying yes to neighbors of another faith means saying no to those things that harm them, even things done in the name of religion.

I don’t need to tell you how agonizingly complicated this is. Are certain forms of traditional Muslim practice regarding women to be accepted as religious diversity or denounced as violations of human rights? What are we prepared to say about the rejection or support of homosexuality? Is this an area where it is appropriate to agree to disagree?

Notice how all of this profoundly complicates ecumenism. Let me pose the matter this way: Is Christian exclusivism a form of religion that we must denounce because it

threatens the neighbor? The idea that faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation, that Christianity is a spiritually superior religion, does have grounding in our sacred texts and can be affirmed as an expression of our deepest love for others. But, while there is not a necessary link between exclusivist theology and violence, there is surely a possible link between claiming that our faith is superior and calling for aggression against those who do not accept it.

Finally, there is the missional challenge. The leaders of the NCC are now clear, it is fair to say, that mission, which used to be aimed at interfaith neighbors, must now be done with them. To take one example, the council has an extensive program on ecojustice which is not reticent to name the Christian witness about creation as precious to God; we work hard to articulate this Christian perspective and to mobilize the churches. But we also are very aware that it really makes no sense to talk about the Christian response to climate change! Such an issue is simply too big to be dealt with apart from other religious communities. If God's mission calls us to protect the environment, then surely our participation in that mission demands collaboration with interfaith partners. It is not just expedient but faithful to do so.

The challenge comes in living out the full implications of such a claim. Until recently, the NCC's work of interfaith relations was pretty much confined to a particular commission. Can the NCC retain its character as a "community of Christian churches" if that work becomes more integrated throughout our commissions? Until now, persons of other faiths have been occasional "guests" at our assemblies. What will it mean for them to be present as full partners in our mission?

Thank you for thinking with me about these important issues. I pray that they may be useful to your own reflections – and that through your learning together in this very fine community, God's name will be praised.

Michael Kinnamon  
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