Ecumenical Insights for Overcoming Obstacles to Unity in Christ

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The universal church is already broken. It has been for centuries. The United Methodist Church in its current situation regarding human sexuality must consider whether or not it will add to that brokenness. The universal church is already seeking unity to overcome its brokenness, and The United Methodist Church has been deeply committed to that project. The United Methodist Church must consider what that commitment means for its current situation regarding human sexuality.

Our forebears may not have fully realized the consequences of separation from one another, but we cannot plead such ignorance. The ecumenical movement that started in the twentieth century has boldly faced this sad legacy with the hope of finding the way forward to a united church. The United Methodist Church is so committed to unity that it makes a statement about ecumenical relations in its Constitution.[1] This paper will examine the work of two prominent ecumenists in the Methodist tradition, Albert C. Outler and John Deschner, in order to bring into the conversation regarding human sexuality some of the lessons we might learn from theologians in our tradition about what unity is, how to deal with obstacles that stand in the way of unity, and what unity for an already divided church might look like.

Christian Unity

At times, the ecumenical movement has described the unity it is working toward with adjectives: visible unity or organic unity. Intended to suggest models (eyesight, an organism) for understanding the goal, the adjectives have not always produced a common understanding of structural unity because the models have been construed in different ways. However, there has been a deep and broadly shared ecumenical insight that has guided Methodist participation in ecumenical work, namely, as Outler puts it, that “unity is not so much an achievement as a gift.”[2] By our baptisms, we are already one in Jesus Christ, so the work of ecumenists is not to create unity out of disunity but to make this gift of unity visible. John Deschner, Outler’s younger colleague at Perkins School of Theology and another leader in ecumenism, described that already existing unity in a vivid way. He pointed out that the situation of the churches is not, as people often take it to be, like two people who are courting and deciding whether or not to get married, but “of married people fooling around, and pretending that they are not married.”[3] The presupposition of ecumenism as Outler and Deschner saw it was that God has already made us one, but we deny it by the way we live “as if God had not joined us together”; so we need to stop being unfaithful to one another and to God and get on with acting as the one church we actually are.[4] The unity of the church, then, is both a gift and a task. It is a gift to be gratefully received that we have been made one in Christ. It is our task to show that gift visibly to the world by living as God intended us to live.

By 1962, Outler showed dissatisfaction with two possible approaches to unity: merger and spiritual unity. The strictly structural approach of merger, even if it could be pulled off, was likely to lead to bureaucracy rather than renewal.[5] Settling for only spiritual unity could lead to hypocrisy or delusion by claiming unity without actually living and showing it. A few years later, Outler also warned about settling for mere cooperation. In 1968, when ecumenical success sparked energy on the ground at the same time that voices were shouting for social change, Outler observed that there were those who would claim that enough ecumenical barriers had fallen for us to cooperate to work for social change. Outler thought the subtle danger in this attitude was that the deeper sacramental unity of the church might be ignored. He believed that if the world saw the deep division that remained at the heart of what the church was about, even cooperative work for social change would be undermined.[6]

Instead, he spoke of the aim of ecumenism as having three components: "unity in membership, ministry, and communion (*communicatio in sacris*)."[7] Certainly this aim presupposes spiritual oneness, it may require some structural approach to support it, and it should lead to cooperation; however, unity in membership, ministry, and communion constitute the real aim of ecumenism. Where you see unity in these three, you see the unity of the church.

For Outler, even unity in these three, though, is in service to something greater. This unity is "instrumental to our ultimate ecumenical concern, which is for the renewal of faith," namely that people "may hear God's Word in faith, may be turned from the ways of death to the ways of life, that they may be confronted with the live option of a community of graced and graceful living."[8] But the church in its divided state does not present this live option to the world. Outler calls the divided church "'the sixth wound of Christ'—his sundered body."[9] Our witness to the reality we call the world to see is a corporate witness, and this witness is compromised with every division. If Paul is right in 2 Corinthians that we have been given a "ministry of reconciliation" (5:18 NRSV), then an unreconciled church is not a credible witness.

The church may never have completely failed at this witness, but it has never completely lived out its potential either.[10] The tendency of the church to think of itself and its unity after the manner of human societies contributes to its failure. The church has an institutional structure, but it is not merely an institution. The point of talking about unity is not to maintain an institutional structure, but rather to make that structure reflect what God is doing. The church needs to think of its unity as "the work of God in the hearts and minds of men and women who are willing to be remade into one body even as we were originally baptized and confirmed into the one body of Christ by the seal of the one Spirit."[11] How far the church lives out its potential may well depend on how far we are willing to be remade.

In 1985, in the face of "mighty ideological conflicts," Outler named the challenge that the church faced in this way: "Can it change to meet the needs of this day and generation without at the same time fatally cutting its tie with the past and thus forfeiting its heritage of truth and power?" He also described the church in this way:

> Christianity is not, primarily, a code of ethics or a pattern of conversion, but the continuing and continuously renewed life of the risen Christ in the community and fellowship of men and women who have met and been overmastered by the Spirit and truth of Jesus the Savior. Christianity is a "Gospel," the gospel of continually renewed life and power within the beloved community of God.[12]

The question that faces us now, as at every time in the church's history, is this: Are we willing to be remade in order to witness to this gospel? For Outler, if claims of unity did not include renewal, it was not the living and showing of God's unity after all.

Overcoming Obstacles

Outler recognized the severe challenge that current divisions pose to any dialogue about unity. He knew that once lived, our individual histories could not be unlived. What churches often understand as their distinctive witness consists "at least in part, of scar tissue formed over the ruptures that set us on our separate ways as denominations."[13] The ruptures hold so much emotional freight that talking about them often leads to stalemate rather than progress. Outler sometimes spoke of "immobilists," those who were unwilling to move at all, and so they often blocked the progress of the whole. Any engagement in dialogue requires willingness to exercise self-criticism regarding one's own self-understanding. Participants must be both loyal to the tradition they represent and capable of seeing it with critical eyes.

After thirty years of ecumenical work, on the occasion of addressing a Roman Catholic audience after Vatican II, Outler remarked that he had often been asked by "realists," "Why do you go on knocking yourself out in this visionary business of church renewal and Christian unity?" His response was

> the Gospel itself is at stake. The credibility and viability of the Christian message, the full impact and import of God's word made flesh to dwell among us men and for our salvation—all this turns on the visible manifestation of the unity of the Christian community, in faith, hope, and love. By *this* shall the world know that you are my disciples: that you love one another as you have been loved by God in Christ." And this means *community* in its essential reality: freedom, diversity, pluralism of one sort and another—yes—but community and consensus in basic truth and trust—in Christian worship, witness, and service.[14]

As an experienced ecumenist, Outler had known the highs and lows of the movement. In 1967, when this address was given, Protestants were trying to figure out what ecumenism looked like with the Roman Catholic Church as a new dialogue partner.[15] Although this development was an opening rather than an obstacle, it was not without hurdles to get over. Participants in earlier years of ecumenical dialogue had gone through a period of getting to know one another, but Catholics who wanted to enter this dialogue were unfamiliar with its methods and in some cases even with the traditions with whom they needed to dialogue.

In this new period for ecumenism, Outler reflected on what dialogue should and should not be. He said,

> Ecumenical dialogue does not mean a deliberation or a negotiation about reunification: dialogue is not the same thing as a council of reunion, nor is it an attempt at conversion. It means for both sides testifying to one's own beliefs in a clear, objective, understandable and psychologically suitable way.[16]

Furthermore, the aim of dialogue is not to make a "goulash" of ideas or to treat contrary opinions as if they do not matter. Rather:

> Far from abandoning our convictions or asking others to abandon theirs, the aim of ecumenical dialogue is to face and live with honest disagreements, carefully defined and faithfully interpreted, until some new resolution begins to appear, some breakthrough, some miracle of transformed insights on both sides—and to work at this in the spirit of sustained Christian charity and courtesy.[17]

Because we are not in control of when the Spirit will move and break through, our job is to remain in faithful listening and testifying with one another until it does. Refusal to keep talking to one another amounts to giving up on God's ability to perform this miracle.

As he explained the work on the statement on unity adopted by the World Council of Churches (WCC) in New Delhi, Outler observed “For this is the way progress is made: a loggerhead-issue is described as clearly and candidly as possible, with no premature answers supplied. Then in the ensuing reflections of the various parties, slight shifts in perspective tend gradually to move the whole discussion forward, toward the point where another forward step is possible.”[18]

Not only is this dialogue not easy and the breakthrough often slow to come, new questions also arise. As Deschner’s ecumenical work extended for some years after Outler’s, the membership of the WCC grew to include more churches from the developing world. Not only were these churches impatient with what they saw as the narrowness of ecumenical questions born in the European context, they also pointed out the pressing need to address the healing of divisions in the human community. Deschner’s work demonstrates how a committed ecumenist connected the work of church unity to the unity of the human community.

Deschner described the impact of the questions raised by the developing world as pressing the ecumenical vision of “church unity as a ‘sign’ of the renewal of the human community” toward “a profounder view of what church unity can mean for justice and peace for human community and for the integrity of creation itself.”[19] Outler had been concerned that cooperation for social action was in itself an inadequate model for unity, but Deschner looked at the challenge social action posed to find the link between church unity and justice. Deschner noted that churches in the northern and southern hemispheres were “all too divided not simply by traditional doctrine and praxis but in their witness about justice and peace in the human community and indeed in the whole creation.”[20]

Although inclusiveness is necessary to church unity, Deschner saw “mere inclusiveness” as potentially leading to “cheap, controversy-avoiding ‘reconciliation’” inadequate to the concerns of the southern churches. “Real church unity requires,” he said, “justice and truth as well as inclusiveness. Love and truth are inseparably tied together. Without both we can have neither. And that is even more true of love and justice.”[21]

Deschner suggested that what was needed instead of mere inclusiveness was “a more vigorous diversity, a more honest and courageous controversy, and a more creative future convergence, a convergence which does not minimize but provides more adequate expression for the basic concerns of each.” To show how mere inclusiveness can shut out this more vigorous diversity, he describes three ways it can distort church unity.

The first way he calls “indiscriminate inclusiveness,” which holds people together by settling for the lowest common denominator. This way gains unity at the expense of truth and justice because it simply tolerates another point of view rather than struggling for a genuine way forward. The second, he calls “partisan inclusiveness,” where one side sets the priorities or values within which the other side is accepted. That is, one side determines what is important and can include the other side to the extent that it can adapt itself to that scale of importance. Deschner says instead, “a transvaluation of priorities must be accepted on both sides as a real possibility, even an ecumenical necessity.” Finally, Deschner names the distortion of “polaristic inclusiveness,” which may be described as the majority and its loyal opposition. This model may hold people together in some way, but it “leaves unreconciled and untranscended” the polarities in conflict.[22]

Instead of settling for mere inclusiveness, Deschner calls for a church “which not only includes but bears witness to the right diversity and vocation of each.” This model seeks unity as “pluriformity, not uniformity.”[23] Comparing this pluriformity to Buber’s I and Thou, he says neither absorbs the other but rather understands the other and itself through the relationship. This approach leads to what he calls "ecumenism under the cross," namely holding that "controversy under God *belongs* to unity in church and human community and can bear good fruit." To see what conflict looks like under the cross he points out that the church empowered by grace can accept and bear the tensions of conflict, just as Jesus Christ accepted but transcended the necessity of conflict in his death on the cross. The church anticipates this transcendence so it must:

> bear the tension of conflicts within itself, and so fulfill its ministry of reconciliation, in obedience to the Lord who chooses to sacrifice himself rather than confer on the forces of division any ultimate authority. The church accordingly is called to work for unity, through suffering, under the sign of the cross.[24]

Although I am uneasy about the way Deschner accepts suffering in this model, because I am aware how this, too, could slip into distortion where one side suffers more than the other, I think his vision of a church that bears controversy within itself, trusting that God will someday provide a way to transcend that conflict is compelling. Deschner himself recognizes the eschatological tension of his understanding—embracing a vision of unity before actually managing to live it out—but he points out that such "cross-bearing" has proven to be creative in ecumenical dialogue, leading to the kind of convergence demonstrated in *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (*BEM*). Adopted by the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC in 1982, *BEM* is known as a "convergence" document because it identifies significant agreement among member churches on the three topics of its title and clarifies many of the differences that remain. A remarkably productive document, *BEM* has provided the ground for many "mutual recognition" agreements between churches.[25] The achievement of *BEM* came about because of "the patient and persistent attempt" to see what was not yet attained by the divided churches, but could be seen and claimed as a goal in the faithful judgment of each church.[26]

Both Outler and Deschner knew the difficulty of the kind of dialogue that church unity requires, but they also trusted that because God wanted the oneness of Christians to be visibly displayed by the church, God would provide grace to empower the task. Both understood that the church could not display its God-given unity apart from full and frank facing of conflict. In its effort to hold together people in disagreement, the church could display the kind of community God wants not only for the church but for the whole human community.

Models for Going Forward

Even though Outler worked within the framework of working for "organic union," he was well aware that the need to honor both unity and freedom made "return" to one particular church and "merger" poor ways to express organic union. Unity cannot squelch freedom, which allows us to represent our diversity and is often needed for reform. Structure matters, but old structural models are inadequate for honoring the distinct histories that have now been lived. New structures are called for.

When he reflected on organic unity, Outler spoke of a growing vision of a community "in which the distinctive witness of divers denominations, functioning as 'orders,' 'societies,' or 'movements' under their own self-appointed heads, will be conserved within a wider catholic perimeter, organized constitutionally on some collegial and conciliar pattern."[27] This vision speaks to the need of allowing distinct identities within some common, yet-to-be-determined framework. Though retaining distinct identities, the common framework makes them more than a collection of independent bodies, but rather provides for common membership and ministry. One might think of a complex organism, with different parts playing different roles, but all acting together for the benefit of the life in which they participate. In other words, church unity would require some new structural expression, allowing the distinct histories to be honored and lived, not be made to fit into some pre-existing model.

In an address to the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), Outler spoke about some of the problems involved in trying to find a structure that would adequately mingle ministries together in some shared ministerial order.[28] He distinguished structure as "practical management" to serve missional ends from the "vital essence or the mission of the church" itself. He saw no theological reason why some new structure might not evolve, but he also recognized a "fearful tangle" of "doctrine, human feelings, 'spiritual' convictions that cannot be compromised, cherished practices that cannot readily be reconciled."[29] Although the heart of this tangle for COCU was ordination, The United Methodist Church today faces a similarly complex tangle of doctrine, convictions, feelings, and practices regarding human sexuality. Outler did not suggest any particular plan to COCU, but he did give both a warning and a positive recommendation. He warned against any suggestions that would repudiate the ordination of another church—not only repudiation of those who carried out that ordination but also a "denial of the blessing of the Holy Spirit" upon the ministry.[30] He also said that the formation of a united church structure would require a "'new covenant' of mutual understandings and commitments" that would state clearly mutual acceptance of one another and designate the implications of such acceptance.[31] Such a covenant names the things from the tangle of our histories that are being brought to the new structure to be transformed into a new history. I suspect that no matter what the tangle, foregoing repudiation and showing mutual acceptance are essential to any effort toward unity.

Some years later, John Deschner wrote about the goal of visible unity.[32] He noted that the term "visible unity" could mislead as well as inform. He said:

> [I]t can tempt us to think that what needs to become visible is merely the merger of church organizations. No, what needs to become visible is a witness which embodies among Christians and Christian churches a believable sign of the liberating unity-in-controversy which God has promised to all humankind.[33]

In other words, unity is not only, or even primarily, seen in structure. It is seen in the way we show we are one even when we have disagreements. At the point he made this observation, ecumenical thinking was considering the idea of "conciliar fellowship" as a way to describe visible unity, so he draws from Acts 15 and Galatians 2 to explore the fellowship of the Jerusalem "council." I can highlight only the major points of his description of this meeting. First, he notes that the "young church is badly polarized about mission and message," regarding the need for Gentile followers of Jesus to be circumcised. In this polarization, the local communities of Jesus' followers not only argue but reach out for each other by sending delegates to "express visibly the fellowship already there, and to clarify the whole church's mind about its badly divided mission."[34] Second, as the representatives from Antioch arrive, they are "welcomed" by the others. Deschner takes this welcoming to be not merely cultural hospitality but a recognition that they are there to speak for the church. Third, although little is said about worship at this meeting, Deschner notes that Paul insists its decision must be expressed in table fellowship. Fourth, there was "frank and open debate," which Deschner describes as "not a mere sharing of experience, not a mere quest for a majority, but a sensitive search for the Church's common mind under the commonly acknowledged authority of God's Word."[35] Finally, the decision is one of both freedom and unity arrived at because "each side is able to see in it what seems good to the Holy Spirit and the whole Church (Acts 15:28, 22)" and so "each side then works for the interest of the other."[36]

Deschner expresses the decision of this early council according to Acts 15:19 (NRSV), "We should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God." This, he says is a decision of both unity and freedom. "The two missions will continue," but whereas the two missions were previously tearing the church apart, now "a common life and mission under two forms had become thinkable, possible, 'seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us,' can be fully recognized and understood as manifesting the life and will 'of the whole church.'" There is still controversy, but now it is not understood to be church-dividing.[37] This model differs from Outler's in that it shows how a not-yet-divided church can prevent division, rather than how a divided church might overcome its divisions.

No model for unity is easily or quickly made real. In 1970, with some disappointment that the initial energy around Vatican II was already dissipating and with awareness that the coming decade looked to be difficult, Outler spoke of the hope needed to sustain the work of decisions made with "glacial slowness."[38] He draws hope from apocalyptic literature: Daniel and Revelation. He says what impresses him most about Daniel and John is "their rock solid confidence in God's eventual victory—the triumph of his gracious purpose in this world and the next. God's will that men and women shall learn to live together in justice, love, and peace cannot finally be thwarted." He uses the image of a waiting room—waiting for God's miracle, but also "working like crazy to be ready for God's eventualities."[39]

Conclusion

How do we work like crazy to be ready for what God will do to lead the church into a fuller expression of its corporate witness to a divided world? I acknowledge the differences between working for unity among already structurally divided churches and working for unity in a church not yet structurally divided. I think, though, that the skills and commitments of the former can be usefully employed for the latter. Furthermore, I am not claiming that Outler or Deschner had in mind the current circumstance of our potential division. I note, however, that Deschner's vivid comparison of the unity of the church to faithfulness in marriage appears in an address given to the Twelfth World Methodist Conference in 1971, where his subject was the self-understanding of Methodism. In this address, Deschner reflected on unity in light of the divisiveness of racism, and he mentions that the question "can a confessed homosexual be a Methodist minister" had just been raised for the first time in his annual conference. Deschner at least saw a connection between reflection on unity ecumenically and unity internally, and he understood the kinds of threats to unity the church faces now.

So I think we might find useful guidance and encouragement by paying attention to descriptions of their work in their circumstances. If not yet divided structurally, we are already divided theologically.[40] Scar tissue is already forming through the battles that are being fought, even though they have not yet resulted in actual separation. In that respect, we are not so far from the situation ecumenists face. We could learn much about how to talk with one another and how to deal with differences from the ecumenical experience gained by Outler and Deschner.

Both ecumenists recognize the need to distinguish the structure of the church from its nature and mission. Structure, as Outler says, is about practical management to enable the church's life and work. Although structural separation will surely harm the witness of the church, structural maintenance will not guarantee its witness. This means that structural changes can, and perhaps must, be made for more effective management when conflict puts the church under stress. Given differences that are as yet unresolved, we may need to seek, as Deschner calls it, “pluriformity” rather than uniformity. How can the consciences of all who have been baptized together in The United Methodist Church be regarded with respect? Many different structural plans have been proposed, at least informally. To judge their value for reflecting the unity we already share through God, we must hold them against the standard identified in ecumenical work. Will this plan support unity in membership, ministry, and communion? The recognition that we are members of one body, acknowledging the authorized ministry of one another with the possibility of interchange, and sharing the means of grace offered by our common Lord constitute the way the world can see our corporate witness. Any plan should allow for difference and even controversy, but it is when this fundamental unity of membership, ministry, and communion is broken, not by conflict but rather by refusal to acknowledge our shared life in God, that our corporate witness fails.

As I have just suggested, these ecumenists remind us to take our baptisms seriously. The ecumenical commitment that God has already made us one is rooted in our understanding of how God brings us into shared life in Christ through baptism. How much more should this matter when we have been baptized into the same church. As The United Methodist Church says in *By Water and the Spirit*,

> Baptism brings us into union with Christ, with each other, and with the Church in every time and place. . . . One baptism calls the various churches to overcome their divisions and visibly manifest their unity. Our oneness in Christ calls for mutual recognition of baptism in these communions as a means of expressing the unity that Christ intends (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).[41]

This call is no less true for life in our own church than it is for life in the universal church. This prevenient action by God is the ground for our life together in the church, so it should guide our interactions and decisions about what practical management is needed to support our corporate witness to this gracious reality.

The descriptions that Outler and Deschner give of the glacial slowness of adequate dialogue and what it takes to make any progress suggests to me why General Conference has been such a poor venue for working out what we have needed to work out. Although there have been many attempts to have Christian conferencing along the way, the mechanism of deciding by majority vote finally undermines the ability to deliberate until the group reaches a common vision. Where there are winners and losers, there is bound to be political maneuvering rather than careful and clear testimony to God’s work in human life. Where numbers decide, calculation of votes matters more than a common mind. Certainly, the limited timeframe and pressure to handle multiple issues at one meeting also restrict the deliberation that is needed.

I suspect that what is needed is not just deliberation on human sexuality, but on the whole tangle of doctrine, convictions, feelings, and practices that come with it. Some have already seen that different understandings of the authority of scripture often lie behind different positions taken regarding human sexuality. I can easily imagine that different understandings of sin, grace, and holiness, as well as the image of God and human wholeness are also involved. Those differences need to be brought to light in the clear and candid descriptions Outler says are necessary for getting through loggerhead issues. It is very likely that understanding one another on these matters is an essential precursor to working out a practical solution.

Perhaps a specially called General Conference offers some opportunity to work differently. Although we are bound by Disciplinary rules, can some adjustments be made for this important work?[42] Equally important to consider, can we truly allow time for the conversation that is needed when we work to General Conference deadlines? I know from my own ecumenical experience that deadlines can help focus work, but I also know that deadlines should never be allowed to shortchange the dialogue needed to do the work.

Whether or not we will work differently, what will we work for? Neither Outler nor Deschner suggest that conflict can be eliminated, but they both worked to find a way the church can make a united witness to the world about how God is faithful to us and how we may be faithful to God even in conflict. Outler expressed most clearly that unity in membership, ministry, and communion is central to this witness. Whatever practical changes need to take place to allow conscientious holding of different positions, they must allow the world to see in our corporate life the oneness God has given to us through our baptisms.

Although the church and its mission cannot be equated with its structure, complete structural separation will surely harm this corporate witness as it has every time it has happened. It is certainly possible that enough are “fed up” with failed efforts of the past that they feel the need to walk away. What we know from our ecumenical commitment, though, is that even a ruptured structure cannot truly separate us from one another because it is God who holds us together in the communion of God’s own life. We are related to one another whether we like it or not. What we are actually doing in institutional separation is refusing to bear witness to the reality of God’s gift. We must acknowledge that if either side walks away then neither side bears this witness.

On a purely practical level, it is extremely hard to put a structure back together once it has been broken. As Outler recognized, once lived distinct histories and identities cannot be unlived. If we consider becoming two churches, we should also remember that even if we manage an amiable separation, friendly spiritual oneness and cooperation do not constitute an adequate expression of our unity in Christ. The church is not only invisible but also visible. Invisible unity may be felt by members, but it does not make a visible witness. Outler named clearly what we must guard against. Although cooperation may attempt to make common work visible, the world can still see that those cooperating are not more deeply joined in sacramental life. If we do actually divide into two (or more) structural churches, we should be compelled by the ecumenical commitment of the tradition we both share to work for unity in membership, ministry, and communion. This will be no easier than working to prevent such division in the first place. Separation will only delay the kind of dialogue Outler and Deschner have described, not allow us to avoid it.

It seems preferable to me to seek a structure that allows for difference, but also displays our oneness in God through shared membership, ministry and communion.[43] The pluriformity Deschner suggests allows, and even requires, space for two missions (along the lines of his account of Acts 15), but unity in membership, ministry, and communion shows that those distinct missions do not divide us from one another. As Outler advised COCU, we should not repudiate the work of the Holy Spirit in one another. Instead, our mutual acceptance in membership, ministry, and communion gives us reason to continue to work together and to continue to talk about our differences in order to increase our common understanding. I think our theology sets a clear challenge before us to open ourselves to the Spirit to show us a way to honor differences as well as honoring our shared life in Christ. The world needs such a witness to a live option of how to live together. And we should well consider what offering we want to make to God in our corporate life together.

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[1] Part I, Division One, Article VI "Ecumenical Relations." *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville, Tenn., The United Methodist Publishing House 2016) 27.

[2] Albert C. Outler, "The Ecumenical Road Ahead" in *Albert Outler, the Churchman*, ed. Bob W Parrott, vol. 2 of The Albert Outler Library (Anderson, Ind.: Bristol Books, 1995), 38.

[3] John Deschner. "'One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Church,'" in *Perkins Journal* 25:1 (Fall 1971): 12–18.

[4] Ibid.

[5] In fact, Outler was one of the few to vote against the merger of The Methodist Church with the Evangelical United Brethren Church for precisely this reason. In research at Bridwell Library, I ran across Outler's handwritten notes for a staff seminar at Highland Park UMC about the background of the merger, dated March 22, 1983, in which he says, "You may or may not know that I was one of the 57 who voted *against* the merger (as ill-conceived, top-heavy, and involving next to no real renewal)—I, one of the more avid (and identified) ecumaniacs on that floor!"

[6] Outler, "Buildup to a Letdown?" in *Albert Outler, the Churchman*, 40–47.

[7] Outler, "The Ecumenical Road Ahead" in ibid., 36.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., 39.

[10] Outler, "The Church: Nature and Task" in ibid., 391–95.

[11] Outler, "The Ecumenical Road Ahead," 38–39.

[12] Outler, "The Church: Nature and Task," 394.

[13] Albert C. Outler, *That the World May Believe* (New York: Joint Commission on Education and Cultivation, Board of Missions of the Methodist Church, 1966), 58.

[14] Albert C. Outler, "Vatican II—The New Crisis of the Council," in *The Ecumenical Theologian: Essays by Albert Cook Outler* (Anderson, IN: Bristol Books, 2001), 95–108.

[15] Ibid., 75. Outler even said: "The fact is that we Protestants have been severely shaken by Vatican II and are still groping about for really appropriate patterns of effective response."

[16] Outler, "The Name of the Game Is Dialogue," in *The Ecumenical Theologian*, 88.

[17] Ibid., 92.

[18] Outler, *That the World May Believe*, 53.

[19] John Deschner, "More Than Inclusiveness: The New Christian Majority and the Shift in the Ecumenical Conversation about Church Unity" in *The Ecumenical Review* 43, no. 1 (January 1991): 59.

[20] Ibid., 58.

[21] Ibid., 59.

[22] Ibid., 59–61.

[23] Ibid., 63–64.

[24] Ibid., 65.

[25] For the text and a description of its significance, see https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/baptism-eucharist-and-ministry-faith-and-order-paper-no-111-the-lima-text.

[26] Deschner, "More Than Inclusiveness," 64–65.

[27] Outler, *That the World May Believe*, 54. Outler was not the only one with this kind of vision. In "On Ecumenism," he quotes Catholic bishop Edward McCarthy stating a similar hope. See *Albert Outler: The Ecumenical Theologian*, 122.

[28] Outler, "The Mingling of Ministries" in *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler*, eds. Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 227–39.

[29] Ibid., 228.

[30] Ibid., 229.

[31] Ibid., 238.

[32] John Deschner, "Visible Unity as Conciliar Fellowship" in *The Ecumenical Review* 28, no. 1 (January 1976): 22–27.

[33] Ibid., 22.

[34] Ibid., 24.

[35] Ibid., 25.

[36] Ibid., 26.

[37] Ibid., 26.

[38] Outler, "Christians in the Waiting Room," in *Albert Outler, the Churchman,* 50.
[39] Ibid., 53.
[40] We should also recognize other ways we are divided, for instance culturally and racially. These divisions also threaten our corporate witness.
[41] "By Water and the Spirit," in *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), resolution 8031, under "Baptism as Incorporation into the Body of Christ" Kindle e-book.
[42] After the adoption of the revision of "Our Theological Task" in 1988, Richard Heitzenrater wrote about the limitations of General Conference discussion on important documents and suggested an alternative approach in a footnote. See Richard Heitzenrater, "In Search of Continuity and Consensus: The Road to the 1988 Doctrinal Statement" in *Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church*, ed. Thomas A. Langford (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1991), 93–108; see especially p. 108 and p. 253 n39.
[43] One possibility is something like the full communion model we have with other churches. In this model, two churches have distinct identities, but we mutually acknowledge each other as churches to allow full participation with one another not only in work, but also in worship.