

**“Come to the Table of Justice and Peace”**  
**A Sermon Delivered at Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church, Chapel Hill**  
**By J. George Reed, February 28, 2010**

This year marks the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the North Carolina Council of Churches, and I want to use my time with you today to tell you what’s going on with your Council. For it truly is your Council. You are one of our eight congregational members, (most of our members are denominational units — Methodist conferences, Catholic dioceses, etc.) and you’ve been a member for some forty years. You participate actively in several of our program emphases. Many of you attend our events. (I marched with a couple of you at yesterday’s HKonJ rally in Raleigh, which was co-sponsored by the Council.) And Binkley is a generous financial supporter, as are several of your members. The Council is able to have the impact we have only because of the ways in which Binkley and our other member bodies support our work and participate in it. So, thank you.

The Council, for all of its 75 years, has had two primary purposes: to promote and model Christian unity and to enable people of faith to work together on issues of justice, compassion, and peace. I want to talk with you today about both of these areas.

First, Christian unity. The contemporary text for today regarding this part of our work is taken from Bill Moyers, who to my way of thinking is one of the most prophetic voices in American public life and certainly one of the most prophetic Baptist voices in American public life. He spoke in Greensboro a couple of years back and told a story which he also used at the National Conference for Media Reform. I’ll be reading that published version, though it differs a bit from what I remember him saying in Greensboro. (But isn’t that how it is with sacred texts? Sometimes the written story and the remembered story aren’t quite the same!)

One of my favorite stories is of the fellow who was about to jump off a bridge when another fellow runs up to him, crying: “Stop. Stop. Stop. Don’t do it.”

The man on the bridge looks down and asks, “Why not?”

“Well, there’s much to live for.”

“Like what?”

“Well, your faith. Are you religious?”

“Yes.”

“Me, too. Christian or Buddhist?”

“Christian.”

“Me, too. Are you Catholic or Protestant?”

“Protestant.”

“Me, too. Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist?”

“Baptist.”

“Me, too. Are you Original Baptist Church of God or Reformed Baptist Church of God?”

“Reformed Baptist Church of God.”

“Me, too. Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God Reformation of 1820, or Reformed Baptist Church of God Reformation of 1912?”

“1912.”

Whereupon the second fellow turned red in the face, shouted, “Die, you heretic scum,” and pushed him off the bridge.<sup>1</sup>

If you prefer a more traditional sacred text, there’s the passage from John (John 17:20-23) which I read earlier. Jesus, on his last night before the Crucifixion, praying repeatedly that all his followers might be one.

But isn’t it the sad truth that for much of the history of Christendom, we haven’t been one. The story has been one of division: Catholic and Protestant; various forms of Protestant; and divisions, sometimes seemingly as trivial as 1820 vs. 1912, within those Protestant bodies. Starting about a hundred years ago, there has been a concerted effort to reverse this history of division by bringing Christians together across the lines of denomination that have separated us. There are councils of churches at the international, national, state, and local levels. And, while there is no structural or financial connection between these various levels, we have many of the same denominational members and work on many of the same issues of justice and peace.

This spirit of coming together rather than splitting apart has yielded formal merger in some denominations. These merged denominations include the United Methodists, the United Church of Christ, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Presbyterian Church (USA).

The council of churches movement and these ecumenical conversations have also brought about many formal dialogues and formal agreements to share clergy or in other ways to work together structurally. There are now shared clergy agreements between the Episcopalians and the Lutherans; between the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ; between the Presbyterians and the Reformed Church, among others. There’s even been an agreement between Roman Catholics and Lutherans on justification by grace through faith.

While these formal agreements must take place at levels higher than the state offices of denominations, North Carolinians have participated in many of these dialogues. There are also several state-level counterparts to the national conversations, and many folks with the Council take part in those talks. And, at least in the case of a Moravian/Episcopalian agreement, the conversation actually began with Moravians and Episcopalians on our own Christian Unity Committee and escalated to a national dialogue. In addition to the structured work for unity, just about everything we do at the Council fosters Christian unity. So, for example, if we come to the table to work together on farmworker issues — a Baptist and an Episcopalian and a Catholic — we learn how much we share and that we are a whole lot more alike than we are different.

This work has recently expanded into interfaith conversations. The primary vehicle for this has been a small group of Christians, Muslims, and Jews who began by discussing a document called “A Common Word Between Us and You,” written by a group of Muslim imams and focusing on the shared teachings of our sacred texts. Those initial meetings in Raleigh are now being used as a model for conversations in other parts of the state.

The second of the Council’s two broad purposes is to enable people of faith to work together on issues of justice, compassion, and peace. We cite numerous biblical texts as foundational for this work, from those parts of Mosaic law which protected the most vulnerable in the society; to the prophets who railed against those who took advantage of the weak and powerless; to Jesus, who called us to active assistance for those who are hungry, homeless, imprisoned; to Paul who stated that in Christ there is no distinction based on race or gender or other categories by which we tend to treat some people as superior and others as inferior. The passage I chose for this morning is the one you have just heard sung, from the prophet Micah (6:6-8): What does God require of us? It’s not religious rituals. It’s to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

The NC Council was birthed in the struggle for justice. One of the main issues which brought together the church leaders who founded the Council was their shared opposition to segregation. I would presume that that was not a majority position in the white church in NC in 1935. But one of the first issues addressed was – to use the language of that day – “this temper-upsetting area” of race. One of the first committees established was on race relations. By the early ’40s, this all-white Council of Churches had invited African-American

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<sup>1</sup> The speech and the story are found on several websites, including <http://www.truthout.org/article/bill-moyers-life-plantation>, accessed on February 22, 2010.

churches into full membership, and by 1944, the North Carolina conferences of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church had joined. (Keep in mind that this was a decade before *Brown v. Board of Education* and two decades before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 or the Voting Rights Act of '65.) The Council was deeply invested in the civil rights movement, calling for integration of all aspects of society and strongly supporting the public schools when many wanted to start private schools to maintain segregated education. One Council staff member was harassed at a Klan rally he was monitoring. Collins (Kilburn), both before and after coming to the Council, was a leader among white pastors on this issue. I've heard David Forbes speak movingly of Collins as one of the few who took to the streets with African Americans during those days. David, for those of you who don't know him, is now the pastor of Christian Faith Baptist Church in Raleigh. But he was also the first person arrested in sit-ins in Raleigh and was a co-founder of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) fifty years ago this winter.

Over the course of our history, we have tended to be a little bit ahead of the curve on other issues, too. These include:

- Encouraging unionization as a vehicle for economic justice.
- Supporting gender equality and working for the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment.
- Opposing our country's rush into wars before all non-military options have been exhausted.
- Calling for an end to discrimination and violence based on sexual orientation at a time when some national religious leaders were saying that AIDS was punishment from God.

To give you a better idea of where the Council is today, I want to say a bit more about four specific parts of our work, two of them well-established in the Council's agenda and two in areas of expanding work.

First, the established areas:

The Council's legislative program works through a grassroots network of more than a thousand faith-based activists. It is a program that Collins created and to which he gave strong leadership. During last year's General Assembly session, we saw successes in several areas where we had been working for years, or in some cases, decades:

- Securing tax increases in order to stave off the most draconian of budget cuts.
- Passing legislation under which almost all restaurants and bars are now smoke-free.
- Enacting the Racial Justice Act, which enables defendants in death penalty cases to show evidence of racial bias.
- Passage of an anti-bullying bill which included sexual orientation as one of the named categories of young people most likely to be bullied.
- Defeat of the e-verify bill, which would have had a chilling effect on the employment of immigrants, whether documented or not.
- Bottling up of a constitutional amendment defining marriage.

Of course, we do none of this by ourselves. But by lifting the voice of progressive people of faith, we have a unique contribution to make to these efforts. I might add parenthetically that churches like Binkley and organizations like the NC Council of Churches often take on difficult and unpopular issues. So it's important for me to remind myself, and perhaps for me to remind you, that these issues may take a long time and a lot of hard work, but that they can yield success.

Another established, though newer, part of our work is with global warming, through a Council program called NC Interfaith Power & Light. I know this is one area of our work where Binkley folks are especially active. When this program started a little over a decade ago, global warming wasn't on very many people's radar screens, and almost none of people of faith. In addition to sounding the alarm about global warming and helping people to see that this work is rooted in our faith, NC IPL is helping churches with energy audits, working for federal climate change legislation, opposing the construction of new coal-fired power plants in NC, and building support for an independent energy efficiency program in NC, rather than having these programs run by the power companies (which, after all, make their money by selling more, not less, electricity).

One new, or newly expanded, program is our work on immigration, where we are working for what amounts to a different kind of climate change. The Council has worked on behalf of farmworkers for most of its life. Early on, these were migrant farmworkers, and they were among the most vulnerable people in our state. In more

recent years, the issue has morphed a bit as we have seen increasing numbers of immigrants living in our state, working in a variety of settings, not just in agriculture. We've also seen the development of a climate of toxic opposition to immigrants, especially undocumented ones, but not entirely. So we are endeavoring to change that climate of hostility and to move our state more towards a climate of hospitality. At least within our faith communities, we are reminding people that our scriptures call us to "welcome the stranger [or immigrant]" because we were all "strangers" at some point. We are also using our contact with churches and our credibility to get out information that counters some of the common myths about immigrants: that undocumented immigrants don't pay any taxes, that they are a financial drain on our society, that they take jobs from "real Americans," and that they take community college slots away from qualified North Carolina students (even though the immigrant students who have been in our community colleges had to pay out-of-state tuition, which means they paid more than it cost the state to educate them).

And, finally, let me say a few words about our newest program: Partners in Health and Wholeness. For decades the Council has supported universal access to basic health care. We are still doing that, and we have a very active effort, headed by a wonderful volunteer, on behalf of healthcare reform legislation in Congress. (In this regard, I invite you to join us this coming Friday as we take part in an ongoing, nationwide vigil for healthcare reform.) But the new part of our work is a program to make explicit the connection between faith and health, that God wants us to be healthy, that part of the practice of our faith is to take care of our health, and that congregations can encourage better health in their communities. This effort, through sharing health information, using parish nurses and health ambassadors, making changes in menus of church meals, adopting no-smoking policies for our facilities, creating ways for us to support one another in healthy behaviors, and other such activities, fully complements our work for universal access because it helps to reduce the demand for services from our healthcare system. (Let me explain what I mean with an example. A woman who works in our office has lost more than 100 pounds. She started losing weight because she needed knee replacement surgery and the doctor wouldn't operate until she lost some weight. But then she kept on losing weight, so that now her knees are enough better than she's not going to have the surgery. She's also taking half of the medicines she had been taking for diabetes and none of what she was taking for high blood pressure. So, in addition to feeling better and feeling better about herself, she has saved the healthcare system two knee replacements and multiple medications.) As part of Partners in Health and Wholeness, our inaugural Faith and Health Summit will be held in Raleigh on March 23. Keynote speaker will be Gary Gunderson, whom some of you may know from his days leading Southern Baptists to respond to world hunger through SEEDS magazine. Governor Perdue is also expected to take part. We'd love to see many of you there.

But what we do is about more than programs. It's really about people:

- It's about the child of low-income working parents who has healthcare insurance because of the CHIP program.
- It's about the restaurant wait staff who no longer are forced to be exposed to the harmful effects of second-hand smoke.
- It's about the farmworker who is now legally guaranteed to get a mattress to sleep on.
- It's about the minimum-wage worker who has an additional \$2,000 of income because of an increase in the minimum wage.
- It's about the gay high-school student who now has some protection against harassment at school.
- It's about the immigrant high-school graduate who should be able to work up to her full potential in higher education.

And it's about people of faith:

- People of faith learning that we are more alike than we are different.
- People of faith being empowered to bring about change in this world.

In the language of your Lenten series, we are truly about bringing people to the table and enabling them to work together for justice and for peace.