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The Politics of Ecumenical Disunity: The Troubled Marriage of Church World Service and the National Council of Churches

Jill K. Gill

The fifty-year marriage between Church World Service (CWS) and the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. (NCC) did not survive. In 2000, when they divorced to create separate 501(c)(3) organizations, CWS pleaded irreconcilable differences. The fact that two of America's most prominent mainline ecumenical organizations, committed to Christian unity, were unable to maintain a healthy organizational marriage bears examination. Many people became aware of their troubles in the late 1990s when their financial arguments caught the attention of religious news services and periodicals such as *The Christian Century*. Few are aware, however, that the issues that caused their separation can be traced back nearly forty years when fault lines appeared amid their approaches to the Vietnam War. This essay will examine those fault lines and trace how their politicization transformed them into insurmountable rifts. The story reveals how profoundly American political culture affects religious life and work.

Few also know that the recent split between the NCC and its relief and development arm is only the most recent example of a global trend. Councils of churches and their service organizations have been divorcing at record rates in recent years, and Australia's may be the next to do so.¹ The World Council of Churches (WCC) is quick to warn observers that councils of churches in different countries are unique, and one must resist the temptation to extrapolate the problems faced by one onto others. Yet, a series of case studies on these divorces could be beneficial to those seeking to diagnose this particular global aspect of ecumenical disunity as ecumenical organizations everywhere struggle to adapt themselves to a new era. This essay serves as one piece of that puzzle. As John McCullough, executive director of CWS, asserts, what happens in American ecumenical circles

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has important ramifications within the movement internationally, for even in its transitional state, American ecumenism serves as the “super-power” within the global ecumenical family.² Conciliar ecumenical organizations around the world are facing major financial challenges that are inspiring a redefinition of their identities and core functions. Even the survival of the World Council of Churches is in jeopardy. The eyes of these organizations are on CWS and the NCC, for the outcome of their efforts to redefine themselves and their relationship will affect the future of ecumenism both within and beyond America’s borders.

Due to the fact that media stories about the NCC’s and CWS’s troubles have focused on recent financial matters, many people assume that their divorce was precipitated primarily by these. The causes are, however, much more complex. An examination of their rocky relationship within a broader historical context reveals that financial stress points have long been rooted in constituent and structural differences that became especially problematic during politically polarized eras. (By “constituencies,” I refer to the subgroups or populations that these two organizations most desired to please and from which they drew funds.) Throughout its history, CWS has maintained close friendly ties with white middle-class suburbanites spanning the theological spectrum and with the U.S. government; both provided it with direct funds necessary for its relief work around the world. Maintaining their goodwill has netted CWS considerable resources for its mission but has also required it to be cautious in protecting and packaging its image in ways inoffensive to these constituents. Since the mid-1960s, the NCC’s constituent focus shifted more strongly toward being an advocate for marginalized oppressed persons within the socio-political sphere. This focus put it at odds frequently with both government and moderate-to-conservative white parishioners who tended to support CWS. The NCC’s sense of constituency also included the leaders of its member denominations who advocated for social justice, even when their laity did not, and who funneled denominational monies to the council with the expectation that it “speak truth to power.”³ The NCC’s hierarchical funding structure that draws money from heads of churches, not the more conservative grassroots, insulates it from the feelings of parishioners. This gives it freedom to be prophetic (i.e., adversarial) on controversial issues, but it may have also deafened it to valid criticism and alternative voices. Place these basic constituent and structural differences into the politically charged environments of the Vietnam War and Reagan eras, as well as into the context of declining mainline wealth, and one can witness the tug-of-war for image control, financial survival, and credibility

that frayed the ties binding CWS and the NCC; these finally snapped during the budget crises of the 1990s.

Both organizations were rooted in a liberal ecumenical tradition that believed that the body of Christ should be able to transcend theological differences and worldly self-interests to unite for the service of humankind. Their story reminds us, however, that religious organizations cannot easily transcend the political culture of their times nor the self interests of their constituents if they wish to survive as organizations. Awareness of this reality is playing a role in the current experimental reshaping of national ecumenical organizations in the United States.

The revealing saga of the CWS/NCC relationship unfolded in five stages. During the honeymoon period, both shared a sense of constituency. The honeymoon ended during the volatile Vietnam era when all of the fissures appeared that eventually fractured the marriage. In the 1970s and 1980s, amid a conservative backlash against 1960s trends, we see politics aggravate these fissures by fueling survivalist struggles over image, money and organizational control. In the 1990s, four situations, including financial chaos, became the catalysts for a phased divorce beginning in 2000. Today, with separation still in process, we see both organizations reconceptualizing themselves as part of an experimental, more multicentered ecumenical world that is clearly different from the models of ecumenism popularized at their births.

The Honeymoon Period (1950–1965)

CWS and the NCC shared a sense of constituency before the mid-1960s. Church World Service has been one of America's most successful and ecumenically popular missions organizations. Founded in 1946 to meet the relief needs of European and Asian refugees after World War II, the *New York Times* dubbed CWS "the largest private agency distributing foreign relief."⁴ In 1950, during a cultural period that emphasized unity and conformity on many fronts, and in a wave of bureaucracy-building, it joined the NCC as its overseas relief arm.⁵ The council's massive "umbrella" bureaucracy reflected the prevailing ecumenical ideal of that era; it consolidated a nation's denominational resources within a single network to avoid project duplication, empower the church's voice, and facilitate oneness in Christ. In the 1950s and early 1960s, both the NCC and CWS maintained cooperative, mutually useful relationships with the U.S. government and saw the mainline, suburban, white middle class as their core constituency.

From the beginning of its existence, Church World Service worked hand in hand with the State Department in distributing relief and resettling refugees around the world. Likewise, the Federal Council of Churches, the NCC's predecessor, worked with the government during both world wars to advocate labor legislation and in the creation of the United Nations. The NCC continued this cooperation in giving general support to the cold war, Kennedy's test ban treaty, and civil rights legislation.⁶ Recognizing that the council's member denominations gave it access to roughly forty million Americans, top government officials attentively wooed council support. The NCC was proud of its influential place and inside connections within the establishment.

With regard to foreign governments, CWS had an operational policy of political neutrality—basically of keeping politics out of its work when distributing charity. Its top priority was to get food and supplies to the needy regardless of political or religious affiliations, and it was willing to work with all sorts of governments—the oppressive, the corrupt, and the free—to do so. Criticizing governments or refusing their aid impeded life-saving relief work. However, some noticed that there was one sort of government with which CWS rarely worked: that was any the U.S. government felt stood on the wrong side of the cold war. To CWS in the early 1960s, this choice was not viewed as overtly “political” per se, just practical. After all, a generous amount of relief supplies came from the U.S. government and with certain strings attached. Significant support also came from patriotic church people who felt either that America's cold war efforts were grounded in Christian, freedom-loving values, or who simply felt that churches should focus on charity and leave political matters to the experts. Since these two constituencies were critical to its work, CWS was sensitive to them. The NCC had been as well.

But the Vietnam War, and rise of a revolutionary third world, changed perceptions within the NCC, and particularly within its increasingly influential social justice wing. In the nine years between 1965 and 1974, the National Council of Churches awakened to what it considered to be its complicity in Western imperialism.⁷ It opened its ears to the voices of the third world on foreign policy, and it embraced for itself a bold prophetic role that would stand against America's globalism and civil religion when these threatened peace with justice. The NCC's shift in constituent priority to those fighting oppression and inequality, and to building ecumenical bridges with such people in the third world, affected the future directions of both the NCC and CWS, as well as fueled the image, identity, and financial concerns that eventually drove them apart.

Fractures Appear: The Vietnam Era (1965–1975)

In the summer of 1965, when the NCC was still celebrating its victorious partnership with government in the passage of civil rights legislation, it suddenly found itself sharply criticized in ecumenical journals for its passive accommodation of the government's Vietnam policy. In a joint editorial, the *Christian Century* and *Christianity and Crisis* lambasted the council's lack of ecumenical leadership and prophetic backbone in facing the Vietnam War after having been so effective on civil rights.⁸ Two weeks later, a team of Japanese Christians visited the council to share its concerns about the skewed and dangerous anticommunist, anti-China foundation of fear that undergirded American foreign policy in Asia. The Japanese Peace Mission, as they were called, made it clear to council leaders that Americans did not understand the Asian mind on issues surrounding the war. Nor did they understand the facts of the conflict because their fear and presuppositions about Asia blinded them to alternative viewpoints.⁹ So too did their allegiance to a nationalistic expression of Christianity.

American Protestant leaders were not used to listening to Asian Christians on issues of U.S. foreign policy or faith. Even for liberals with social justice orientations, this was a relatively new experience. But the complexities of the Vietnam War daunted, confused, and concerned America's top church leaders. Therefore, in seeking to develop a Christian witness on the war, the National Council of Churches solicited Asian opinions and insights on American foreign policy as well as on the church's role in relation to it. Asians were invited to minister to and enlighten their American brethren. By doing so, they helped to transform not only the council's understanding of U.S. Vietnam policy but also its understanding of itself in relation to government and to third world Christians overseas.

Through the Japanese Peace Mission and the council's contacts with another Asian body called the East Asia Christian Conference,¹⁰ it became clear that this perceived lack of understanding Asian perspectives was fueling tensions not only between the United States and non-Western nations but also between American Christians and those in third world countries. For church leaders who had marched recently with Martin Luther King, Jr., and who were witnessing the growing dominance of third world voices in the World Council of Churches, this charge of American ignorance of nonwhite perspectives, and hence of deeper truths, struck a chord. Therefore, as the council prepared to respond to the challenge of ecumenical leadership on Vietnam, it made a priority of gathering information not only from its friends in the U.S. State Department but also from various Asian sources.¹¹

The council was committed to making an independent prophetic witness on Vietnam. Therefore, it empowered its international affairs experts to study the issue and make recommendations for policy and action. By drawing from a variety of non-Western, particularly Asian sources, including the impressions of American visitors to Vietnam, two things became apparent. First, dissonance did exist between President Johnson's stated objectives in Vietnam and America's militaristic actions there, something that the NCC emphasized in its growing protests of U.S. policy.¹² Second, there seemed to be a suspicious credibility gap within the broader council itself as it struggled to face issues raised by the war. The inconsistency appeared between the stated intent of its International Affairs Commission to make a prophetic "God before nation" Christian witness on Vietnam and the nationalistic biases implied in the traditional overseas relief work of Church World Service. This also illuminated anew the old factions within Protestant Christianity between those that emphasized a social gospel based in transformative social justice and those that emphasized apolitical service (i.e., charity and relief) in Christian expression.

The International Affairs Commission and the Commission on Religion and Race together comprised the council's largest and loudest "liberation," "peace with justice" coalition. Both were lodged in its most socially and politically active Division of Christian Life and Mission (DCLM).¹³ As stated above, the council had enjoyed a long-standing record of partnership with big government. But throughout the 1950s and into the early 1960s, both of these commissions had grown gradually bolder in questioning government policies. They challenged the wisdom of isolating Red China and denying civil rights to black Americans. Through the example of Martin Luther King, Jr., they saw prophetic Christian leadership on behalf of justice as essential work of the church in the world.¹⁴ Due to the NCC's stands and the growing political activism of its social justice wing, the council drew considerable criticism from parishioners for its supposed revolutionary, communist-tainted sympathies.¹⁵ Its moderate stances on Red China and active civil rights work also set expectations within liberal mainline leadership circles that the council should lead its churches into joining the chorus of academics challenging America's Vietnam policy.¹⁶ In fact, council staff felt that denominational executives expected the council to move ahead of its membership on controversial issues, to absorb the initial public criticism, and thereby help create a precedent of opinion in which churches could follow once their parishioners had been educated.¹⁷

In the summer of 1965, shortly after the Japanese peace team departed, Norman Baugher, vice president of the council's DCLM,

echoed the thoughts of several staff members when he stated the following.

It seems imperative to me that the Christian Church speak as prophetically regarding the international situation generally and war specifically as it did with regard to the civil rights situation in the United States. From our discussions in meeting with the Japanese delegation, I must say that I am distressed with the strong pressures to make the church simply a supportive influence of U.S.A. foreign policy.

In his next comment, however, Baugher alerted his colleagues to the fact that a prophetic verbal witness on Vietnam would hold little weight with the rest of the world if the church's image was still tied to U.S. foreign policy and interests.

Judging from the comments of the Japanese delegation . . . [as well as] from our own contacts, . . . it must be imperative for the Christian Church of the West to have an image in Southeast Asia other than that which is represented by U.S.A. foreign policy and the presence of military personnel in that area of the world. If we cannot manifest a different image, the Christian Church is simply irrelevant to the people of that area.¹⁸

The image of Christianity in the world, and particularly in Asia, was still being identified with the imperialistic intentions of the West. This was sabotaging ecumenical relationships with the international body of Christ. If the NCC wanted to win the trust of Asians and other non-Western Christians in the pursuit of ecumenical unity, Baugher emphasized, it had to change the Church's old image of being a government lackey and partner in nation-building efforts.

The Reverend Harold Row, from the Church of the Brethren, soon validated Baugher's conclusions. He was sent to Southeast Asia under the auspices of the NCC to investigate issues raised by the Japanese visitors. Row returned not only highly critical of U.S. military policy in Vietnam but also with an emergency message for the council: the American churches' image problem in Asia was not only serious, but it also aggravated the worldwide ecumenical rift between "third world" churches generally and those affiliated with the West.

The American church's compassionate ministries in Asia are in grave danger of being grossly misinterpreted and even rejected by Asian churches because of the close tie-in with American military and foreign aid policies. There is a tragic United States prostitution of humanitarian impulses and services because of the total involvement of the U.S. government militarily, politically, and in maintaining its own gigantic relief and reconstruction

efforts in South Vietnam. . . . This is the great immorality—that we use the humanitarian motive, the compassionate heart, to make more palatable the hard-core military operation. This is the critical danger to the cause represented by the churches.¹⁹

Row added that Willem Visser 't Hooft, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, also voiced deep concern about the growing rift between Asian and American Christians and its negative repercussions for world ecumenism.²⁰ Angry ecumenical representatives from the developing world were gaining rapid influence within the WCC, and the NCC began to pay heed. The council's sense of its ecumenical constituency, as well as to whom the credibility of its image was tied, was shifting from the American white mainline population and government to politicized persons of color, both domestically and overseas. Liberal denominational executives, who channeled funds to the NCC, encouraged this shift. Dean Kelley, a longtime NCC staff associate for religious and civil liberty, said that, "as long as they [the denominations] are willing to pay the bills, we can take the heat."²¹

In early 1966, the NCC recruited Robert Bilheimer to serve as director of its International Affairs Commission. Bilheimer came ready to lead the council in a listening ministry of third world voices as well as in a prophetic stance against injustices perpetrated by American foreign policies.²² His ultimate goal was to inspire the NCC to set an ecumenical "confessing church" example on Vietnam that required it to stand apart from the state in moral witness rather than serve as a blind religious justifier of its policies.²³ Certain staff members within the council's missions wing, particularly Church World Service, were not yet similarly inclined, and for very practical reasons.

Church World Service, Inc., a nonprofit corporation, was registered with the State Department's Advisory Committee on Voluntary Foreign Aid. Since the 1950s, CWS had become a major distributor of government-supplied relief aid around the world. In fact, it played a role in drafting what eventually became Public Law 480 (1954) which made surplus food available for voluntary agencies to distribute in relief efforts overseas.²⁴ It then worked in direct partnership with the State Department's Agency for International Development (USAID) in its "Food for Freedom" program (also called "Food For Peace") which, according to CWS director James MacCracken, aimed "to utilize current United States harvests in overseas nation-building efforts."²⁵

In January 1966, with the creation of Vietnam Christian Service (VNCS), Church World Service joined the "Food for Peace" program in South Vietnam. CWS created VNCS in conjunction with

Lutheran World Relief and the Mennonite Central Committee to take advantage of shared resources and the Mennonites' established network and organization in Vietnam.²⁶ The goal of CWS in creating Vietnam Christian Service was to alleviate suffering and be a Christian presence in that war-torn land. But it also meant that, in Vietnam, Church World Service was operating (inadvertently or not) in conjunction with U.S. and South Vietnamese forces to win the hearts and minds of Vietnam's peasants.²⁷ Several internal State Department documents spanning the length of the war made mandatory a coordinated link between "Food for Peace" relief efforts in South Vietnam dispensed by voluntary agencies and the government's pacification program.²⁸ The following comment from a 1970 USAID report serves as one example. "Starting in 1965, as the US participation in the war effort in Viet Nam piled up momentum, there was U.S. Mission acceptance of the premise that Title II food [PL 480] was one of the resources to be used in the massive U.S. support of South Vietnam's counterinsurgency and pacification effort."²⁹ In spite of this church-state connection, MacCracken defended the nonpartisan stance of CWS charity, saying that it simply dispensed aid where it was needed without meddling in politics and that, in Vietnam, CWS was forced to work within limits set by the U.S. government if food was to get in.³⁰

True, but critics noted that dependence upon government for goods and transportation costs, for new program approval, and for logistics support did tie Christian charities to the goals of the state.³¹ During the war years, while the council's international affairs team was joining its voice with that of the antiwar movement, Church World Service was helping the South Vietnamese government to repatriate its refugees and feed them primarily within the pacification program.³² The U.S. government also banned PL 480 commodities from any nation that traded with North Vietnam or Cuba.³³ This clearly exposed the political intentions behind the government's program and implicated CWS in its cold war mission. Gerhard Elston, the Vietnam specialist within the NCC's International Affairs Commission, saw the "Food for Peace" relief activities as helping provide the U.S. government with public relations cover to mask the real destructiveness of U.S. policy in Vietnam.³⁴ It should be noted that, unlike Catholic Relief Services, MacCracken insisted that no CWS relief supplies be channeled as payment to South Vietnamese troops.³⁵ Nevertheless, the National Council of Churches had to face its own public credibility gap between the rising antiwar messages drafted by its social justice wing and the appearance of nation-building "hearts and minds" work being accomplished through Church World Service. This mixed message was fueling tensions between the NCC and

churches overseas, not to mention causing nonwhite persons within ecumenical circles to question the NCC's words as disingenuous.

Compounding these tensions were their different approaches to and assumptions about the role that the churches might play in postwar Vietnam. Church World Service launched a "Commission on Tomorrow's Vietnam" to plan how the churches would aid in rebuilding Vietnam after the war. It was clear to the international affairs staffers, who were asked to join the commission, that CWS shared certain government assumptions. For example, they assumed that the United States would eventually have its way in Vietnam, that North Vietnam would collapse under U.S. punishment, and that the United States and its churches would then be invited in to help pick up the pieces just as they had done in damaged nations after World War II. CWS planned to partner closely with the government in this work.³⁶ In contrast, the international affairs team raised doubts about whether the United States could achieve military victory or that the Vietnamese would automatically welcome the postwar interference of U.S. institutions in their country.³⁷ Robert Bilheimer categorized CWS's approach to postwar planning under MacCracken as "humanitarian imperialism" and added that it gave him "the cold chills."³⁸

Financial differences also aggravated competitive tension between Church World Service and the social justice wing of the National Council of Churches and would for decades.³⁹ Whereas the social justice wing was the most publicly unpopular, highly criticized branch of the council, Church World Service was a favorite of the grassroots.⁴⁰ Many a parishioner who found the social justice side of the council suspect, distasteful, and perhaps a little "pink" continued to support the council because, by the mid-1960s, overseas missions received more than 50 percent of its annual budget compared to the small fraction dedicated to social issues.⁴¹ Within the NCC structure, Church World Service enjoyed the unique privilege of being able to solicit direct funds from parishioners, which it did with great success. Its two best fundraisers, the "CROP Walk" and "One Great Hour of Sharing," still attract generous donations from individuals representing a broad spectrum of theological beliefs. Most important, fundraising tied its awareness to grassroots opinion in a way not shared by other council departments that received budgeted monies from denominational bureaucracies, not directly from the masses.⁴² Some social action people within the NCC resented these private donations, saying that donating to relief agencies like CWS simply gave local Christians an easy "out" or a conscience-salving excuse not to deal with the root causes of human suffering.⁴³ CWS attributed these criticisms to jealousy of its considerable financial resources and public goodwill.

Over the first few years of the war, the council's international affairs team helped lead the council at large firmly onto the antiwar side of the Vietnam debate while Church World Service approached war-induced problems using traditional, less critical, U.S. government supported strategies. Council leaders were aware of this confusing dichotomy, but they showed considerable public tolerance for it, probably because few other options existed for providing massively needed aid to the suffering in Vietnam and because Church World Service enjoyed such widespread grassroots support. Church World Service also came in handy as an image-booster whenever the NCC was criticized for focusing too heavily on radical political causes rather than on what many laypersons considered real church work. The council's executive staff could point to Church World Service and its generous share of the budget as proof that conservative critics overexaggerated its political activities.⁴⁴ While the NCC saw CWS as a benefit to its image, at least with the grassroots (and used it as such), CWS would experience the NCC as a detriment to its image as America's political culture grew more conservative in succeeding decades.

In spite of the council's public tolerance, social justice personnel pressed service leaders to change their presuppositions and methods in dealing with Vietnam, and they experienced slow, measured success. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a concerted decline in Church World Service's use of surplus government foodstuffs overseas and an increased effort to source more supplies from church donations, even though these were less plentiful and more costly.⁴⁵ During that same period, one can note a change in Church World Service's planned approach for rebuilding Vietnam reflected in its postwar rebuilding program (Commission on Tomorrow's Vietnam). It gradually evolved from being a typical World War II-styled, American-driven program to one that was willing to let indigenous groups direct rebuilding efforts.⁴⁶

Several other factors within the NCC, VNCS, and the nation at large may have influenced these developments in CWS. In 1965, CWS became a department within the NCC's Division of Overseas Missions (DOM). According to former CWS Associate Director, Robert Stenning, the DOM itself was split. Some favored a missions focus that included an immediate emphasis on "development" (i.e., analyzing the root causes of problems, making systemic changes, and doing political advocacy). Others favored a "relief" approach that fed people first, no questions asked, and let development efforts emerge slowly out of the feeding programs after the crises of need had subsided.⁴⁷ As a result of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War, the NCC's sense of religious mission became more oriented toward social action.

This inspired DOM leaders to move in that direction by the early 1970s. So too did the rising number of DOM staff members who entered the NCC with Latin American missions experience as liberation theology was budding there. A similar split was emerging among VNCS fieldworkers. By 1967, growing resentment at the U.S. government's use of voluntary agencies to further its military objectives had sparked protest among some young service-minded volunteers in Vietnam. Even though VNCS leaders quelled the upstarts and smoothed relations with the government, the issue grew more divisive as the war continued to sour.⁴⁸ Contributing as well to Church World Service's decision to reduce government aid may have been several events that fueled the general suspicion of government operations. These included the credibility gap revealed by the Tet Offensive, media exposure of rampant corruption within the South Vietnamese government, and the uncovering of secret CIA funding of certain student and religious organizations.

As the NCC became more driven by social justice issues, MacCracken budged under pressure but not by conviction. He was not interested in reforming CWS's traditional philosophy or methods.⁴⁹ MacCracken had bundled his many years of relief work routinely with America's cold war objectives. Before coming to CWS, he had managed the Tolstoy Foundation, which combined humanitarianism and anticommunism. Then, in his first major assignment with Church World Service, he had organized "Flights for Freedom," which shuttled Cubans out of Castro's country in the early 1960s entirely on the U.S. government's dollar.⁵⁰ During the Vietnam War, MacCracken resisted spreading the prophetic impulse to CWS. He maintained that CWS should stick with its relief focus and not sabotage its effectiveness by becoming overtly political in ways that bit the hands that fed it.⁵¹ Supporters argued articulately that there was no other effective way to distribute life-saving relief in such a politically polarized world.⁵²

Nevertheless, by time the United States began withdrawal from Vietnam, the NCC had embraced an independent role for itself that mandated the outright protest of governmental policies that exploited persons' human rights. In 1973, even CWS approved a strategic council document that would make "matters of 'justice and liberation'" a consideration when providing relief.⁵³ With regard to Asia, the social justice and missions wings agreed: "There is a need for sensitive, generous and respectful American response to the efforts of the East Asian peoples to secure liberation in the determination of their own life-style and justice in their economic and social development. This human need," they confirmed, "overarches all others."⁵⁴

These statements would articulate the united objective of the council's departments henceforth, even though the strategies of Church World Service remained the subject of fierce debate.⁵⁵ While the 1973 document was drafted under MacCracken's leadership, it was not applied with his blessing. In fact, in 1974, amid great controversy, MacCracken was forced to resign his position for not implementing that strategy in the manner desired by his superiors.⁵⁶ His dismissal sparked anger within the ranks of CWS and became a proof point for conservative Christians who claimed that the council had been taken over by Marxist-loving revolutionaries. The controversy worsened when, shortly thereafter, the *Christian Century* published a slanted but thought-provoking article entitled "The Politics of Charity," which detailed how the cooperative ties between Church World Service and the government did indeed bind that church agency to the government's questionable policies in Vietnam and elsewhere.⁵⁷ Partnering with government to secure the free world, in a way that largely assumed the goodness and superiority of American policies, had been sharply rejected by leaders in the NCC. Pressures to make a separate "confessing church" witness on the Vietnam War and the council's new focus on heeding the voices of the oppressed, even over the voices of their own government and parishioners, had compelled the council to face its own credibility gap between its words and deeds and set the entire council on a human rights course.

MacCracken was replaced by Paul McCleary, a United Methodist with Latin American missions experience. With him came enforcement of blending justice advocacy with relief aid. CWS even opened an office on development policy in Washington, D.C., to educate government officials about food and hunger issues.⁵⁸ Development and global education became part of CWS's mandate. Therefore, by 1974, the NCC's social action wing had established hegemony in terms of integrating a social justice focus into the life of the entire council. Also, by the Vietnam War's end, both the council's social justice and missions wings were listening to "third world" voices in ways that they had not before the war, recognizing their aspirations for themselves as preeminent over what the American government or church may prescribe. The NCC hoped that its new sensitivity to such voices would build the council's credibility with nonwhite peoples as well as fulfill its prophetic directive to advance peace with justice. As Edward Fiske of the *New York Times* noted, council "leaders who once spent much of their time worrying about the loss of financial support from conservatives on the right are now more worried about losing touch with minorities on the left," and they were willing to risk a smaller budget to reach out to them.⁵⁹

Conservative Politics Aggravate Organizational Differences (mid-1970s–1990)

One might assume that CWS's forced assimilation solved the NCC's image and credibility problems with CWS, as well as healed the breach between them. This was not the case, for a shifting political climate began to imperil the NCC in ways that would exacerbate its financial, image-based, and constituency tensions with CWS. When MacCracken left office, the NCC's social justice wing, the DCLM, was nearly defunct. It had alienated many of its grassroots and governmental allies with what they viewed as its elitist, meddling, self-righteous, overly politicized, unrepresentative postures on and methods of addressing Vietnam, civil rights, and related issues.⁶⁰ As a conservative tide swept over America in the late 1960s, denomination heads who fed council coffers had their own purse strings tightened.⁶¹ As a result, many of the NCC's member denominations began retrenching.⁶² By 1974, the council clearly stood on the wrong side of the conservative backlash sweeping American life even as it attempted to stand on the right side of world revolutions.⁶³ In this sense, it sacrificed positive relations with its own parishioners and government to nurture them with peoples in the international ecumenical community. It is important to remember that the NCC perceived being prophetic on social justice issues as its mandate and duty deriving from the expectations of denominational leaders affiliated with the NCC—those who helped set NCC policy and facilitated its financial survival. However, the result was an out-of-touch, elitist, radical image, a massive loss of funds, and severe staff and program cuts.

By 1974, the DCLM had been severely downsized, retooled, and renamed the Division of Church and Society. In order to make it more palatable to the grassroots, it reemphasized evangelism and launched a ministry of listening to laity.⁶⁴ A conflict-weary and no longer silent majority of American people, who felt abandoned and ignored by their church bureaucrats, wanted their own voices made central again.⁶⁵ This was part and parcel of the silent majority's broader resentment of northeastern, liberal, elite bureaucracies that apparently listened to the screaming radicals rather than to them. The gutting and financial losses of the DCLM was something from which MacCracken, and CWS's denominational board of overseers, had wanted to save CWS by maintaining its more nonconfrontational popular ways.⁶⁶ Primarily because it had the unique ability to raise its own grassroots funds and because its reputation as a relief agency played well in the pews, CWS survived the cuts of the 1970s in relatively good shape. Due to this, it also remained tied and sensitive to the laity in ways that other NCC departments did not.

Nevertheless, the council's negative radical image, as enforced by its heightened focus on social justice, liberation, and political advocacy, continued to threaten the council's financial health in the conservative Reagan years, and this had negative ramifications for CWS as well. The NCC had an adversarial relationship with the Reagan White House, particularly on foreign policy. Reagan also wooed leaders of the New Christian Right while snubbing those of the liberal mainline. However, Reagan was popular with mainline Protestant voters, especially early in his administration.⁶⁷

In January 1983, the NCC received a double-barreled attack from the conservative periodical *Reader's Digest* (circulation 17.9 million) and CBS's hit television show "60 Minutes" (22.9 million households).⁶⁸ In an article entitled "Do You Know Where Your Church Offerings Go?" and a TV spot called "The Gospel According to Whom?" the NCC was accused of funneling church offering plate donations to Marxist causes and revolutionaries.⁶⁹ They painted the NCC as antagonistic toward capitalism and biased in its selective condemnation of human rights violations.⁷⁰ *Reader's Digest* mourned the fact that MacCracken, who "refused to re-orient the agency [CWS] from its traditional mission of helping the poor and hungry . . . was summarily fired" and that "now CWS also engages in political advocacy, contributing churchgoer funds to programs designed to further strategic goals of governments with which CWS leaders sympathize." The stories said that "money from hunger appeals . . . is funding political activists." Quoting an informant, *Reader's Digest* wrote, "People just can't believe that their church, the church they've loved all their lives, can be financing all these Marxist-Leninist projects." Another informant accused the NCC of having "substituted revolution for religion."

The two stories captured national media attention. *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and the nation's major newspapers carried articles on them and the NCC's rebuttal. Several journalists noticed that *Reader's Digest* and "60 Minutes" based their charges on information gathered largely from one neo-conservative group highly critical of the NCC, the Institute on Religion and Democracy.⁷¹ They also noted that the amount of money going to political causes from the NCC was incredibly small (as mandated by its 501(c)(3) non-profit tax status) and that 70 percent of the NCC budget, which went to CWS, was designated for service work and spent as earmarked.⁷² But they recognized how the NCC's image of political liberalism put it out of favor with many local Christians and hence threatened the organization's financial health.⁷³ *Newsweek* wrote, "In its effort to be a voice for the voiceless, the NCC failed to listen to the

complaints of its own white, middle-class supporters . . . concerns to which conservative Christians so effectively speak." It also described the NCC as "less a tyrant than an ecclesiastical Gulliver, a lumbering target for any Lilliputian group that dares to challenge its liberal political bent." Several articles faulted the NCC for its "romantic naiveté in relating to revolutions in developing countries"⁷⁴ and of perhaps reacting to the injustices exposed during the 1960s by swinging too far, too blindly, in the appease-all-activists direction.

The NCC, as well as its supporters at the *Christian Century*, rebutted the charges made by *Reader's Digest* and "60 Minutes" and rebuked their reporting as shallowly researched and slanted.⁷⁵ Some in the NCC saw the attacks as a blessing in disguise, for they provided the council with an opportunity to address its image problems with the public. Others recognized that the charges hit the financially weak council at a vulnerable time, injuring it further.⁷⁶ The ramifications of these two articles aggravated stress points between CWS and the NCC as CWS saw its ties with the council create a credibility gap with its constituents.

In 1984, the NCC hired a new general secretary, Arie Brouwer, who had worked previously in the social justice wing of the World Council of Churches; also in 1984, CWS named a new executive director, J. Richard Butler, who had risen through CWS ranks.⁷⁷ Brouwer inherited a directive from the NCC's governing board to integrate Church World Service and other departments, in identity and finances, more tightly under centralized NCC management oversight.⁷⁸ The expressed goals were to create a more unified ecumenical organization, reduce the "turf-driven culture" of the NCC, and keep closer tabs on programs and budgets in these difficult times.⁷⁹ One of the repercussions of integration involved charging integrated offices a "common services assessment" to help finance shared NCC services that benefited each department. Because Church World Service now brought in and spent between 70 and 80 percent of the NCC's total budget, CWS complained that it was charged an excessive assessment fee—a fee that was subsidizing other NCC programs as well as "common services" that CWS could perform for itself.⁸⁰ Exacerbating the problem was the fact that, by the late 1980s, CWS had hit its own financial crisis. Contributions drawn by CWS had remained flat for several years while expenses and salaries had climbed.⁸¹

In 1987, Brouwer threatened to fire CWS director, Richard Butler, for dragging his feet in completing the integration process.⁸² Brouwer attributed CWS's reluctance to its unwillingness to share its bounty and be a team player for the good of the whole organization. He was especially angry that CWS avoided using the NCC label in its

fundraising television ads because CWS's popular service image could help the council. Of course, CWS sought image distance and fought further integration in order to preserve that popularity. CWS feared that local people, who had been loyal contributors to its relief programs, would refuse to give if they thought that their money might be fed into one of the NCC's supposedly radical red-tinted programs. Bottom line, further blending of the NCC and CWS might scare off CWS's more conservative patrons. It feared also that levying large common assessment taxes on CWS was dishonest to its donors, who had given those funds for relief only. In fact, CWS said that some denominations had begun funneling their relief dollars into other agencies to avoid the NCC's large overhead tax. CWS became more nervous when the United Methodists and the Episcopalians created their own private relief agencies.⁸³ In this politically polarized era, dominated by conservative sentiments and shrinking mainline finances, the NCC's and CWS's different constituencies, structures, and foci created contradictory needs. Whereas the NCC needed CWS's popular image and resources, CWS wanted to evade the NCC's adversarial liberal image and money demands.

A long-simmering power struggle surfaced and exploded. With a budget and staff that dwarfed the combined rest of the council, many in CWS resented being controlled and, to them, financially used by a now desperate, shrinking council. The NCC was the parent body; nevertheless, because of the size difference, one writer likened the situation to the tail (NCC) wagging the dog (CWS).⁸⁴ So, when Brouwer asked Butler to resign, Butler refused and received the "unanimous endorsement of the CWS Unit Committee," a group of denominational executives whose communions funded and shaped policy for CWS.⁸⁵ The NCC quickly created a committee to adjudicate the Brouwer-Butler dispute. Nevertheless, in June 1988, Butler suddenly quit, citing that Brouwer demeaned CWS in written communications and that his integration plan placed too much power in "too few hands."⁸⁶ Feeling that Butler had been driven out, an angry CWS committee then asked to have Brouwer's leadership ability assessed, to which Brouwer responded in a vitriolic speech.⁸⁷ Finally, in December, CWS requested a divorce from the NCC.⁸⁸ To solve the dispute with CWS, which was the only department big enough to block Council directives, another NCC committee recommended that the NCC delay further integration plans.⁸⁹ After a contentious NCC board meeting at which Brouwer failed to receive a solid vote of confidence, Brouwer himself resigned (1989), bringing the personnel aspect of the crisis to a close. With Brouwer out, and integration plans halted, CWS continued with the council. However, the politically tied, image-

based, costly points of conflict between CWS and the NCC remained unresolved and their futures troubled.⁹⁰

Between 1975 and 1987, the NCC's budget had dropped in value by 53 percent. Its staff size was also decimated; in 1968, it boasted 187 elected staffpersons and, by 1989, only 61.⁹¹ Therefore, in 1990, the NCC restructured itself again. In a move that noted the popularity and fundraising power of CWS relative to its other departments, the NCC melded some vestiges of its International Affairs Commission and development-oriented Division of Overseas Missions into Church World Service, creating a new NCC unit called "Church World Service and Witness."⁹² The new name became a point of contention because "witness" connoted politicized advocacy work that CWS did not want attached to it so prominently. So Church World Service chose to call itself "CWS/CROP" in its correspondence with supporters while the NCC used "Church World Service and Witness" in its mailings.⁹³ The restructuring put CWS in the new unit's driver's seat and recognized that CWS (while charged with embracing social justice goals) had strength because its mission was clear and its service work resonated well with a more traditionally minded public. The rest of the council was still trying, as William McKinney wrote, "to ask what God is calling post-establishment churches to be about in a culture that no longer takes us as seriously as we take ourselves." McKinney hypothesized that the NCC's brand of bureaucratic, liberal, ecumenical, activist, human-rights focused Protestantism may no longer be in vogue.⁹⁴ Some questioned whether this expression of Christianity had ever been popular beyond the bureaucratic ranks and seminaries of the mainline denominations.⁹⁵ One former council staffer-turned-critic blamed the NCC's decline on "people with suicidal tendencies on the inside," explaining that "the triumph of their slogans is much more important to them than the survival of the organization they serve."⁹⁶

The Road to Separation and Divorce (1990s–2003)

The decade of the 1990s strained relations between CWS and the NCC to the breaking point. Four situations converged to compel CWS to seek divorce. The first, and most publicized, was the NCC's massive budget deficits that climbed to nearly \$10 million and were, in part, the result of poor fiscal management.⁹⁷ CWS, which brought in the vast majority of NCC funds, resented that the NCC controlled them all. Its grassroots and denominational supporters had grown steadily more mistrustful of how church hierarchies managed donated funds, and, amid reports of financial crisis at the NCC, they

demanded separation.⁹⁸ The NCC, in its defense, contends that the head of CWS signed off on all expenditures in the 1990s and that CWS's common services assessment merely reflected its fair share of NCC overhead costs.⁹⁹

Second, NCC General Secretary Joan Brown Campbell's close personal friendship with President and Mrs. Clinton, combined with the NCC's more liberal political stands, gave the appearance that it was a partisan supporter of the Democratic Party. After twelve years of being shut out by Republican administrations, the council took advantage of renewed access to the White House under President Clinton. However, assumptions of council partisanship threatened CWS's ability to work constructively with future Republican administrations. Indeed, the NCC's sharp criticism of George W. Bush's policies, and Bush's refusal to meet with council leaders, put CWS in a difficult position. The U.S. government's value as a constituent had grown. (Government support comprised 25.3 percent of CWS's budget in 1999 and 28 percent in 2002.)¹⁰⁰ CWS had to be able to work with every presidential administration, whether Democrat or Republican.¹⁰¹ The NCC's love/hate rapport with presidents was not compatible with CWS's continuing need for outward political neutrality.

Third, in the late 1990s, after the position of CWS director had become a revolving door of short-term tenures, new CWS Director Rodney Page admitted to the heads of the NCC's member denominations that the situation with the NCC had become unworkable. His candor caught people's attention. Leaders of mission programs within member communions helped convince the denomination heads that separation was necessary.¹⁰²

Finally, in 2000, when Page retired, CWS was experiencing a resurgence of financial health. Page had expanded CWS's annual income from \$42 to \$62 million in four years by increasing government funds, foundation gifts, and grassroots donations.¹⁰³ It was supplying and utilizing 85 percent of the NCC's budget (about \$70 million out of a total \$77 million budget). Instead of making this increased funding vulnerable to what appeared to be a sinking, mismanaged NCC, CWS desired separation to protect it and the organization.

In 2000, the NCC granted CWS's wish for independence by freeing it financially from the council at large. This stopped the NCC from laying common services taxes on CWS without its mutual agreement. CWS said that it hoped financial separation from the NCC would translate into greater "trust and transparency" with donors who needed to feel confident that their money would be spent entirely on CWS projects.¹⁰⁴

The Reverend John McCullough, who took over as executive

director in 2000, spearheaded the establishment of CWS's own identity apart from that of the NCC. According to McCullough, CWS's name recognition and identity had slipped in the 1990s and was subsumed by the NCC's. Therefore, he set about recovering it by creating a distinct new logo and Web site for CWS.¹⁰⁵ Both were designed to help market and position CWS as an organization in its own right, as well as shape an image reflective of its grassroots' priorities. One notices on its Web site an intentional near-absence of references to the NCC. Sections entitled "About CWS" and "History" contain no mention of its fifty-year membership within the broader council. It states only that it is "part of the ecumenical family of the National Council of Churches" in fine print at the bottom of its home page. In contrast, the NCC promotes CWS activities and news as prominently as ever.¹⁰⁶ Its Web site and newsletter, *Eculink*, give few clues that CWS is no longer part of the NCC. The NCC's new general secretary, Robert Edgar, has dedicated an entire section of *Eculink* (circulation 80,000) to the work of CWS. This positive publicity is paid for entirely by the NCC, which no doubt still benefits from a connection with the CWS image. According to Edgar, however, CWS refuses to add *Eculink* to its own mailing list because of its desire to keep association with the NCC at arm's length. The rationale given was that ties with the NCC make it too difficult to raise funds.¹⁰⁷

One look at letters to the highly conservative *Presbyterian Layman* illustrates CWS's success at separating its image from that of the NCC. Comments such as the following are commonly found in conservative mainline circles:

Church World Service has been faithfully administering the contributions entrusted to it by various individuals, congregations, and denominations for many years, caring for the needs of those in crisis. And the Lord has abundantly blessed them with greater responsibility, as the size of their budget shows. The NCC, on the other hand, has been foolishly squandering its money on things that fail to bring Christ glory, furthering an often political agenda at the expense of the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And the Lord has removed His blessing from the NCC.

Another writes, "I recommend that we leave the NCC and continue to support Church World Service. I really don't want us to give any money to bail out [the] NCC."¹⁰⁸ Such comments also illustrate how the laity tends to view the NCC and CWS in simplistic polarized terms of "good guy" and "bad guy."

Unbeknownst to laity is the fact that several of the NCC's official statements on recent political issues originated within the

governance ranks of CWS. These include resolutions on Israel and Palestine, Afghanistan, September 11th, and against the war in Iraq.¹⁰⁹ While the NCC has tried to leverage CWS's image to boost its own, CWS in turn has used the NCC as a means through which to make political statements without grassroots knowledge. Indeed, Executive Director McCullough admitted that the leadership within CWS today often has little disagreement with the NCC on its political stands.

The conflict derives, rather, from the NCC's hierarchical process and style of response, which is not conducive to CWS's grassroots-based structure. CWS sees the NCC as overly aggressive in its desire to make a quick prophetic response to controversial issues, a response that is generated by top NCC staff with little involvement invited of others. It also dreads the NCC's appearance of partisanship in its attacks on Republican policies. This process and apparent partisanship threatens to hurt CWS's positive relationship both with its grassroots and governmental constituencies. If CWS is ever going to join the NCC visibly in confronting hot politicized issues, McCullough says that the council's process must become more consultive and reflective of various layers within the body of Christ; its statements must also be crafted in ways that avoid implicit partisanship. He admits that CWS is a heavy, grassroots organization that cannot afford to jump too far ahead of its constituencies nor alienate the White House; it is because of these structural and financial linkages that Robert Edgar calls CWS "genetically nice." The NCC, however, sees jumping ahead of the laity and alienating the White House as sometimes part of its prophetic mission.

From the NCC's perspective, its identity, strengths, and functionality are invested in its ability to react quickly and prophetically to political crises and then rally support behind council positions. Since the 1960s, many within the NCC have perceived this as one of its greatest (and most underappreciated) gifts to the ecumenical community.¹¹⁰ Its hierarchical structure that links its funding and survival to denominational bureaucracies rather than parishioners provides it this freedom. Becoming more reflective of laity as well as neutral with government might muffle what it perceives as its prophetic voice. Conversely, others have said that if the NCC continues to project its own voice over that of parishioners, ignoring lay criticism, it cannot and should not survive.

Its survival has indeed been raised with a question mark, especially during CWS's departure in 2000. At that time, the NCC saw its annual budget dwindled down to \$7 million and its professional staff cut to 47. Some feared it might fold. Yet, since the separation, the NCC has also experienced a welcome rebirth. Under the leadership of

a new general secretary, Robert Edgar, the NCC managed to balance its budget. In 2002, armed with a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment for new program development, monetary assistance from the United Methodist and Presbyterian churches, and tighter internal oversight, the NCC appears to have turned an important financial corner.¹¹¹

The heads of its key member denominations continue to deem the NCC's work as essential to their ecumenical missions. McCullough also recognizes the NCC's existence as a necessary part of American ecumenism. The NCC has admitted, however, that it needs to broaden its constituency in order to survive as an ecumenically effective institution in a new era.¹¹² Edgar has led the NCC into exploring the expansion of its ecumenical table to include Roman Catholics, Evangelicals, and Pentecostals.¹¹³ It is seeking ways to become more relevant to and representative of all Christians in America, even as it remains loyal to its prophetic advocacy work on behalf of social and economic justice.¹¹⁴

Conservative churches have been disinclined to join anything connected to the NCC. The council, therefore, has stepped back from the process while helping its member denominations take the lead in creating a new ecumenical organization called Christian Churches Together (CCT) that functions as "a larger table" welcoming of all churches for discussion and perhaps cooperation on a few issues of mutual concern, like poverty and the environment.¹¹⁵ This larger "but thinner" table, as Edgar describes it, includes voices from the entire spectrum of theological beliefs, and, because CCT will act only upon consensus, it is expected to be more of a dialoguing and relationship-building vehicle than one that operates action programs. (Edgar described its mission as helping Christians learn how to play in the sandbox together.) Orthodox communions that have frequently opposed council liberalism have found council membership valuable because it unites them in Christian dialogue with others.¹¹⁶

While some speculated that CCT might replace the NCC (as has happened in some other nations that have developed CCT organizations), this does not appear likely to NCC staff who still see a need for its prophetic voice and bold advocacy on social and political justice issues. The NCC fills a niche desired by many of its more socially active communions.¹¹⁷ Edgar does not feel it vital that the NCC reflect the perspectives of laity, for "none of the prophets, none of the disciples ever had a majority; none of them ever took a vote to figure out what God's will is." It does not surprise him, either, "that there would be a disconnect between prophetic lay and clergy leadership and the general population."¹¹⁸ He wants the NCC to function as a "chaplain

of world opinion” and, in some respects, as a vital, visible counterforce to the religious right’s current public dominance within America’s political culture.¹¹⁹ Even though Edgar made his political career in the Democratic Party before joining the NCC, he hopes to reach out to moderate Christians of both parties on issues of concern. The smaller, leaner NCC sees as part of its *raison d’être* its ability to act quickly and boldly on hot political issues that CWS and CCT cannot and will not touch. Therefore, it is unlikely to change its process or style of political action from the prophetic to the consultive-reflective mode that CWS desires.

A New Ecumenical Model Emerges (the present)

American mainline ecumenism is evolving from the single “umbrella” model popularized after World War II into a series of smaller, overlapping, satellite organizations, each with its own ecumenical specialty. CCT is designed to operate as a facilitator of dialogue and serve as the broadest reflection of American Christianity. CWS operates as the churches’ service and relief agency. The NCC specializes in being the religious liberal gadfly on the political scene as well as the organizer of ecumenical action on political crisis issues too controversial for the other two. There is a fourth organization called Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC) that serves to enhance interdenominational relationships by bringing communions together in mutual recognition of one another’s sacraments and clergy as well as cooperation in common mission.¹²⁰

Whether this new multicentered satellite model of American mainline ecumenism will survive and thrive is speculative. The Reverend John McCullough sees it as necessary for the time being; however, he also predicts that the separate satellites will need to move more closely together in the future. Even though the whole notion of bureaucratic national ecumenism has lost its sex appeal since the 1960s, it may be more necessary than ever. With mainline congregations aging, the need for denominations to pool resources to accomplish goals increases. At the same time, however, shrinking denominational budgets have forced both the NCC and CWS to begin seeking out new paying partners. These new partners, or constituents, will bring their own binding expectations to the ecumenical table.¹²¹

In July 2003, at the writing of this essay, the relationship between the NCC and CWS is polite but strained due largely to the fact that the divorce is not yet complete. Separation has been complex, stressful, and phased in stages. The two still share a communications department and a Washington office, along with answering to the

same general assembly. Separation and/or redefinition of working arrangements within each of these areas is expected in the future.¹²²

Internationally, ecumenical bodies have found the NCC/CWS separation confusing in terms of trying to determine which organization to go to for what ends. This is due to the fact that the NCC and CWS still struggle with some turf issues and anxieties. Whereas the NCC fears that CWS wants to become "the council" in relationships with international bodies, CWS fears that the NCC is still trying to usurp its authority by speaking for it overseas.¹²³ Exacerbating this confusion is the fact that Edgar and McCullough have tended to travel abroad independently of one another to meet with other ecumenical organizations.¹²⁴ The impact of the separation and new satellite model upon the health and vibrancy of global ecumenism has yet to be revealed. The World Council of Churches continues to urge other nations' councils to "develop their links with the USA . . . recognizing the reality that what the US does affects the rest of the world."¹²⁵

As the NCC and CWS work to shape their separate identities, they both realize that new models of ecumenism are needed in the twenty-first century; their separation is providing them with an opportunity to try new things. Both Edgar and McCullough are excited about the future possibilities for their retooled organizations, and each establishment seems healthier than it was in 2000. Recent studies by Nancy Ammerman and others illustrate that religious institutions find strength and lay support by maintaining distinct identities. Yet, this is difficult for some ecumenists to swallow. Those rooted in the conciliar tradition historically have longed for Christians to dissolve the barriers that separate them, transcend cultural loyalties, put aside self-interest, and function as a unified body of Christ. This vision had inspired the creation of the World and National Councils of Churches. Without this, some fear that real ecumenism is being lost.¹²⁶ However, as the NCC/CWS story reveals, ecumenical organizations have become trapped within the political culture wars of the last forty years through the priorities and beliefs of their constituents who provide funds, credibility, and mandates to them. In order to function effectively and preserve an established organizational identity, the "right arm" (CWS) and "left arm" (NCC) of American mainline ecumenism cannot easily rise above this reality and compromise in ways deemed offensive to those constituents.¹²⁷ Their structures also serve to dictate what they can do as well as how they are perceived.

In spite of a mutual devotion to Christian unity, conflict plagued the NCC/CWS relationship throughout most of its fifty-year marriage. The fissures that appeared in the 1960s became the fault

lines that precipitated their divorce. Ecumenical cooperation between distinct religious organizations, able to maintain their own unique identities, finances, and constituencies, ultimately may prove more fruitful for all. It may also provide the flexibility to allow religious organizations to ride through America's polarizing political periods with the least amount of stress upon their relationships or institutional health.

Notes

I wish to thank Nancy T. Ammerman, Shelton Woods, and Sarah Vilankulu for their helpful comments on drafts of this essay, as well as current and former staff members of the NCC and CWS for speaking candidly with me about this sensitive subject.

1. "Item 7 Report on WCC Central Committee and world meeting of general secretaries of NCCs," August 31, 2002, Communications Department Files, National Council of Churches, New York, N.Y.

2. John McCullough, personal interview by author, New York, N.Y., July 27, 2003. The World Council of Churches concurs. See "Item 7 Report on WCC Central Committee."

3. Many activist Christians adopted this well-known Quaker phrase during the 1960s to encourage people to voice their religious consciences to those who wielded worldly power. Many denominational bureaucrats grew more liberal in the 1960s, some earning the label "new breed" clergy.

4. *New York Times*, 1946, in Ronald Stenning, *Church World Service: Fifty Years of Help and Hope* (New York: Friendship Press, 1996), 3. Stenning writes, "In 1946, CWS provided 80 percent of all relief goods shipped from U.S. voluntary agencies to Europe and Asia."

5. At this time, CWS was nearing financial crisis since postwar funds from denominations were running out. It continued as a department within the NCC, but it retained its independent ability to solicit funds directly from the grassroots. Throughout its history, it would be the council's largest department, by far, eventually dwarfing the rest of the council. Its size and function allowed it to preserve not only its own funding sources but also its own organizational culture. Therefore, I can speak of the "NCC" (referring to the rest of the NCC) and "CWS" as unique entities even though they were part of the same broad "council." See Stenning, *Church World Service*, 9–14.

6. While the NCC criticized McCarthyism, and some of its leaders doubted aspects of the containment policy, prior to the Vietnam War, the NCC declared its anticommunism and general support for U.S. cold war goals.

Even in its first statements on the Vietnam War, the NCC was careful to criticize U.S. government methods, not goals, related to the war.

7. MacCracken became executive director of Church World Service in 1965 and resigned that role in 1974.

8. Editors of the *Christian Century* and *Christianity and Crisis*, "On Foreign Policy: A Joint Appeal to the National Council of Churches," *Christian Century*, July 7, 1965, 863.

9. "Japanese Peace Mission Ends American Tour," NCC press release, August 1965, record group 6, box 27, folder 1, National Council of Churches records, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, Pa. (hereafter RG for Record Group, NCC Archives for National Council of Churches records).

10. Kyaw Than, "The Crucified in Vietnam," confidential notes, January 6, 1965, RG 6, box 21, folder 1, NCC Archives.

11. By "various Asian sources" I mean to include non-Christians as well as Christians.

12. For an example of Johnson's stated objectives, see his speech "Pattern for Peace in Southeast Asia" delivered April 7, 1965, at Johns Hopkins University. As an example of the kinds of information coming from Americans in Vietnam, see "A Letter from Vietnam" signed by "Leslie" from International Voluntary Service, July 4, 1965, RG 6, box 27, folder 1, NCC Archives. See the following NCC policy statements on Vietnam: "Policy Statement on Viet-Nam," General Board of the NCC, December 3, 1965, RG 4, box 36, folder 15, NCC Archives; General Assembly of the NCC, *An Appeal to the Churches Concerning Vietnam* (New York: Council Press, December 9, 1966); and "Imperatives of Peace and Responsibilities of Power," General Board of the NCC, February 21, 1968, NCC Archives.

13. For more on the liberal evolution of this division and the NCC as a whole, read Henry J. Pratt, *The Liberalization of American Protestantism: A Case Study in Complex Organizations* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1972).

14. Ibid. Pratt emphasized the role that King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" played in activating the NCC to a new level in the civil rights movement.

15. This was nothing new. The Federal Council of Churches was criticized for its liberalism and suspected of communist sympathies in the 1920s and early 1930s. It moderated its positions (or its positions seemed more moderate) in the 1940s. From its founding through the mid-1950s, the

NCC remained cautious and mainstream in its stances but still drew accusations of communism from conservatives. It stunned the NCC to discover in 1960 that an Air Force training manual warned of communist infiltration in the churches and mentioned the NCC by name. The manual's data came from conservative Christian publications. By the mid- to late-1950s, the NCC was liberalizing in a way that alienated staunch conservatives. See Pratt, *The Liberalization of American Protestantism*.

16. "On Foreign Policy."

17. R. H. Edwin Espy, personal interview by author, Doylestown, Pa., August 26, 1991. Robert Bilheimer worked with many denominational secretaries who wanted the NCC to be far more activist on Vietnam than he did. Robert Bilheimer, personal interview by author, St. Cloud, Minn., August 5–8, 1993, and telephone interview by author, December 14, 1991; James Hamilton and Allan Parrent, personal interviews by author, Washington, D.C., November 21, 1991; Richard Fernandez, the director of Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam, concurred that "the denominations wanted the NCC to take the heat on tough issues." See Richard Fernandez, personal interview by author, Philadelphia, Pa., October 31, 1991. Dean Kelley agreed, saying, "we take the heat, they [the denominations] pay the bills." Dean Kelley, personal interview by author, New York, N.Y., October 28, 1991.

18. Norman Baugher to Dr. R. H. Edwin Espy, July 26, 1965, RG 4, box 33, folder 14, NCC Archives. On the same day, Robert Spike of the Commission on Religion and Race sent Espy a memorandum expressing similar sentiments. See Robert Spike, memorandum to Dr. R. H. Edwin Espy, July 26, 1965, RG 4, box 33, folder 14, NCC Archives.

19. W. Harold Row, "Vietnam—A Report," September 1965, RG 4, box 33, folder 14, NCC Archives.

20. Dr. Harold Row, Special Advisory Committee on Vietnam, taped presentation, September 29, 1965, RG 6, box 27, folder 4, NCC Archives. He also says, "Any American effort in South Vietnam is dependent upon for [*sic*] the military for its transport, there is no other transport." He also mourned the fact that International Voluntary Services had become "another front line of offense for the Pentagon!" It was in danger, he said, of being "prostituted to one aim and one aim only. Whatever you read, it is the containment or defeat of international communism."

21. Kelley interview.

22. See Bilheimer's articulated approach in Robert Bilheimer, "Christian Witness in International Affairs," NCC General Assembly, December 1966, 10–17, RG 3, box 4, folder 12, NCC Archives; and Gordon L. Anderson,

"The Evolution of the Concept of Peace in the Work of the National Council of Churches," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 21 (Fall 1984): 730–54.

23. In 1934, a group of Protestant churches in Nazi Germany defied Hitler's decrees to change their theological teachings in ways that supported Nazi party actions against Jews. These churches called themselves the Confessing Church of Germany because they would confess what they deemed to be the biblical truth even in the face of state threats and persecution. They set an admired example of churches standing apart from the state in moral witness. Bilheimer wanted to inspire this spirit within the NCC.

24. Stenning, *Church World Service*, 15–16.

25. James MacCracken, memorandum on CWS and Church-State Relationship, April 11, 1967, RG 8, box 96, folder CWS: Church and State, 1967, NCC Archives. For another example of CWS's favorable disposition toward cooperating with government AID programs in Vietnam, see Hugh Farley to Hubert H. Humphrey, November 8, 1965, and its attached report, RG 5, box 17, folder 41, NCC Archives. See also discussion of this report in Doug Hostetter and Michael McIntyre, "The Politics of Charity," *Christian Century*, September 18, 1974; Robert Sullivan, "The Politics of Altruism: The American Church-State Conflict in the Food-for-Peace Program," *Journal of Church and State* 11 (Winter 1969): 47–61; Robert Sullivan, "The Politics of Altruism: An Introduction to the Food for Peace Partnership between the United States Government and Voluntary Relief Agencies," *Western Political Quarterly* 23 (1970): 762–68; and David S. Sorenson, "Food for Peace—Or Defense and Profit? The Role of P.L. 480, 1963–73," *Social Science Quarterly* 60 (June 1979): 62–71.

26. CWS had collaborated with MCC in Vietnam in 1954 as well to meet the relief needs of northern Vietnamese fleeing to the south. Stenning, *Church World Service*, 16, 38–39. See also Frank Hutchison, "Human Need in Vietnam," August 4, 1965, and "A National Council of Churches Program for Vietnam," August 12, 1965, RG 4, box 33, folder 14, NCC Archives; Frank Hutchison, memorandum to David Stowe, "Reasons for Working through MCC in Vietnam," October 14, 1965, RG 4, box 33, folder 14, NCC Archives; and David E. Leaman, "Politicized Service and Teamwork Tensions: Mennonite Central Committee in Vietnam, 1966–1969," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 71 (1997): 544–70.

27. This was not an objective goal of or motivation for CWS work in Vietnam. Nevertheless, it was a repercussive result, and one not lost on the U.S. government. Leaman, "MCC in Vietnam."

28. Dean Rusk, telegram to AmEmbassy Saigon, Classified Secret, November 4, 1965, Pol 27 Viet S, RG 59, box 2971, National Archives II, Washington, D.C. (hereafter NAII for National Archives II); USAID/Saigon, Airgram to USAID Office, Department of State, February 21, 1973, AID(US) 15-9 Viet S,

RG 59, box 588, folder 6/1/71, NAI; "Food for Peace Executive Committee Meeting," White House, January 21, 1964, AID(US) 15, RG 59, box 530, folder 3/1/66, NAI; Dean Rusk, telegram to the ambassador, AmEmbassy Saigon, May 20, 1964, AID(US) 8 Viet S, RG 59, box 593, NAI.

29. Berger, Airgram to US Aid office, Department of State, April 21, 1971, AID(US) 7-2 Viet S, RG 59, box 587, folder 1/1/70, NAI.

30. An article in *EACC News* states, "The situation is such that any operation involving the import and transport of supplies and personnel needs the active support and cooperation of the U.S. AID authorities. These facts, together with the near impossibility of working in VC controlled territory means that any such work of relief in South Vietnam can be interpreted as support of and identification with the war effort." "Saigon Reports Over 100,000 New Refugees," *EACC News*, February 15, 1968, in RG 6, box 30, folder 30, NCC Archives.

31. Hostetter and McIntyre, "The Politics of Charity." By the early 1960s, two-thirds of CWS aid came from the government's supply of surplus goods (PL 480 commodities), the transportation costs and distribution logistics of which were government supplied. See James MacCracken, memorandum on CWS and church-state relations. See also correspondence between Department of State, Agency for International Development, Food for Freedom [Peace] Division and Church World Service, RG 8, box 97, folder: Food for Peace 1967-1968 I, and F: Food for Peace II, NCC Archives. See also James M. Wall, "The Senate Debates Food," *Christian Century*, March 5, 1975.

32. Hostetter and McIntyre, "The Politics of Charity." See also US-AID/Saigon, Airgram to USAID Office State Department, "P/L 480 Title II Program Proposal FY '71," April 25, 1970, AID(US) 15-9 Viet S, RG 59, box 588, folder 1/1/70, NAI; Robert W. Miller to Boyd Lowry on Cambodian Refugee Developments, May 8, 1970, RG 8, box 97, folder: Indochina, 1970, NCC Archive; and *EACC News* 5, no. 7 (April 15, 1970), RG 8, box 97, folder: Indochina 1970, NCC Archives. For an illustration of how CWS missions personnel viewed the Viet Cong as their enemy too, since, of course, they worked with the Saigon and U.S. military, see Terry Bonnette, memorandum to Dean Hancock, April 17, 1970, RG8, box 97, folder: Indochina, 1970, NCC Archives. For another perspective of one who, while circumstantially aligned with the Saigon and U.S. military, began questioning U.S. policy, see Samuel R. Hope, "Vietnam Christian Service," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 47 (June 1969): 103-23.

33. Dean Rusk, telegram to AmEmbassy Belgrade, AmConsul Zagreb, AmEmbassy Warsaw, "PL 480 and Food for Freedom Legislation," August 25, 1966, AID(US) 15, RG 59, box 530, folder 8/1/66, NAI; confidential

memorandum of conversation, Department of State, "Administration of Provisions of Food for Peace Act, Section 103, Paragraph D (Denial of FFP Sales to Countries Trading with Cuba and North Viet-Nam), November 1, 1996, AID(US), RG 59, box 529, NAI; "The Politics of Maize and Wheat," *Sunday Punch*, Accra, Ghana, January 9, 1966, attached to AmEmbassy Accra, airgram to Department of State, "Ghanaian Newspaper Accuses US of Using Food for Political Blackmail," January 13, 1966, AID(US) 15, RG 59, box 530, folder 1/1/66, NAI.

34. Elston interviews.

35. Ronald Stenning, telephone interview by author, February 1, 1998. Such overt blending of church and U.S. war efforts drew much critical press for Catholic Relief Services.

36. Frank Hutchison, memorandum to Mr. John Mullen, February 9, 1967, RG 6, box 26, folder 14, NCC Archives.

37. Gerhard Elston, memorandum to Kurtis Naylor and Robert Bilheimer, April 5, 1967, RG 6, box 26, folder 13, NCC Archives; Robert Bilheimer, memorandum to James MacCracken, October 21, 1969, RG 6, box 26, folder 9, NCC Archives; Howard Schomer, memorandum to James MacCracken, October 22, 1969, RG 6, box 26, folder 9, NCC Archives.

38. Bilheimer interviews.

39. David Hunter, telephone interview by author, October 16, 1992. Hunter, former associate general secretary of the NCC, described the large rift between the "social service" and "social action" people in the NCC as being partly rooted in budgetary competition. Both groups were convinced that their financial needs were paramount and, as Hunter said, they could not get excited about the other's ministry.

40. "Is Relief Enough?" *Time*, October 21, 1974, 97-98; Stenning, *Church World Service*.

41. James MacCracken, memorandum on CWS and church-state relationship; *The National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.: What It Is and What It Does* (New York: National Council of Churches, 1965). The percentage of the NCC budget generated and used by CWS would only continue to grow. As an example of one Methodist minister who wanted to continue giving to CWS but not to the rest of the NCC due to its "communist" image, see Rev. R. Odell Brown to Edwin Espy et al., October 6, 1969, RG 4, box 36, folder 13, NCC Archives.

42. John W. Abbott, "CWS's Mandate: A Look at the Other Side," *Christian Century*, September 4, 1974, 823-24; "The National Council of Churches under New Management," *Christianity Today*, July 26, 1974, 37.

43. Hunter interview.

44. As examples, see *Interpretation Manual*, April 25, 1961, 20–21, RG 4, box 36, folder 30, NCC Archives; *The National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.: What It Is and What It Does*, 1965, RG 4, box 36, folder 30, NCC Archives. See also Pratt, *The Liberalization of American Protestantism*, 256–57.

45. David Stowe, summary of church-state discussion in NCC, presented to DOM Program Board, March 3, 1967, RG 8, box 96, folder: CWS: Church and State, 1967, NCC Archives; Thomas J. Liggett to James MacCracken, February 16, 1972, RG 8, box 98, folder: Denominations, NCC Archives; MacCracken to Liggett, February 24, 1972, RG 8, box 98, folder: Denominations, NCC Archives. See MacCracken, memorandum on CWS and church-state relationship. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, CWS projects might receive two-thirds of their funding and supplies from government sources. But Stenning says that, by 1974, CWS had cut its use of PL 480 commodities to 15 percent of its budget and had it down to 10 percent by 1975. See *Church World Service*, 25 and 65. In 1989, Delloff listed government aid at 9 percent of the CWS budget. Linda-Marie Delloff, "The NCC in a New Time (II)," *Christianity and Crisis*, January 9, 1989, 466–72. CWS still accepts government help for specific relief projects.

46. See "A Report to the Consultation on Christian Concerns in Tomorrow's Vietnam," January 9, 1970, RG 6, box 26, folder 8, NCC Archives; Newt Thurber, "Mission in Vietnam—A Report to the Consultation on Christian Concerns in Tomorrow's Vietnam," March 5, 1971, RG 6, box 26, folder 7, NCC Archives. In *Church World Service*, Stenning emphasizes that CWS always had a policy that emphasized self-help and indigenous control of relief programs once indigenous groups were ready to take over. But the records indicate that time and debate took the CWS's Commission on Tomorrow's Vietnam in that direction.

47. Stenning interview. See also Stenning, *Church World Service*, 23–105. Staff members in the NCC's International Affairs Commission recalled that "old China hands" (i.e., former Christian missionaries in China before its fall to communism) within the DOM tended to side with CWS, while other DOM executives understood the IAC's "confessing church" suspicion of government entanglements.

48. Leaman, "MCC in Vietnam."

49. As one sign of this, see MacCracken's biting response to the VNCS personnel director who was beginning to criticize the war and advocate more political involvement for VNCS in *ibid.*, 563.

50. See Hostetter and McIntyre, "The Politics of Charity." See also Stenning, *Church World Service*, 32.

51. James MacCracken to Howard Kresge, August 17, 1971, RG 8, box 98, folder: A.I.D., NCC Archives. For some statistics on numbers served and amounts of food distributed over its history, see Stenning, *Church World Service*.

52. See John W. Abbott, "CWS's Mandate: A Look at the Other Side," *The Christian Century*, September 4, 1974, 823–24.

53. See Stenning, *Church World Service*, 63–64; and CWS Consultation, Stony Point, New York (June 20–21, 1973).

54. *The United States and East Asia: A Christian Context for the Development of New Relationships among Peoples*, The Program Boards of Division of Christian Life and Mission and Division of Overseas Ministries, NCC, December 1971, Robert Bilheimer personal files.

55. Peter Kihss, "Church World Service Repudiates Promotion of Revolutionary Change," *New York Times*, July 16, 1974, 71:1. See also John W. Abbott, "CWS's Mandate: A Look at the Other Side," *Christian Century*, September 4, 1974, 823–24; and "Is Relief Enough?"

56. James Wall, "Strategy Conflict at Church World Service," *Christian Century*, July 17, 1973. Specifically, Eugene Stockwell, recently appointed head of the DOM and a United Methodist with a missions background in Latin America, pressed for MacCracken's departure with the support of NCC executives.

57. Hostetter and McIntyre, "The Politics of Charity." Interestingly, Hostetter (Mennonite) worked in Vietnam for Vietnam Christian Service from 1966 to 1969. For more on Hostetter's work with VNCS, see Leaman, "MCC in Vietnam."

58. This was done in conjunction with Lutheran World Relief, which paid 40 percent of the cost; CWS paid 60 percent. See Stenning, *Church World Service*, 64–87.

59. Fiske wrote this article after the NCC's Detroit General Assembly in 1969. Edward B. Fiske, "Church Council's Parley: Several Steps Further to the Left," *New York Times*, December 8, 1969, RG 4, box 35, folder 13, NCC Archives.

60. Roy Branson, "Time to Meet the Evangelicals?" *Christian Century*, December 24, 1969, 1640–43; Nathan H. VanderWerf, *The Times Were Very Full* (New York: National Council of Churches, 1975), 93, 96–97; James M. Wall, "The Unreal World of an NCC Meeting," *Christian Century*, March 19, 1975, 275–76.

61. The social justice wing had survived the 1960s on special one-time program gifts to its civil rights and peace programs, as well as on budget

dollars designated by denominational executives who largely supported the NCC's controversial work in spite of criticism at the grassroots. These money sources dried up by the late 1960s. VanderWerf, *The Times Were Very Full*, 75, 83, 85, 93, 99.

62. *Ibid.*, 91.

63. See *ibid.*, 91–97, 107, for a summary of its positions on a variety of controversial subjects between 1972 and 1975. These include seeking a restoration of normal relations with Cuba, opposition to apartheid in South Africa, condemnation of Portuguese colonialism, support for legitimate independence movements, support for the United Farm Workers' boycotts, providing material and legal aid for the American Indian Movement during and after its siege at Wounded Knee, support for Palestinian independence and nationhood, and opposition to deportation of Haitian refugees seeking asylum.

64. *Ibid.*, 93; "NCC Unit to 'Listen,'" *Christian Century*, March 27, 1974, 334–35.

65. See Wall, "The Unreal World of an NCC Meeting."

66. CWS was overruled by its superiors in the council's Division of Overseas Missions. See also Kihss, "Church World Service Repudiates Promotion of Revolutionary Change"; John W. Abbott, "CWS's Mandate: A Look at the Other Side," *Christian Century*, September 4, 1974, 823–24; and "Is Relief Enough?"

67. See Jeff Manza and Clem Brooks, "Changing Political Fortunes of Mainline Protestants," in *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism*, ed. Robert Wuthnow and John H. Evans (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 159–78. Even though the essay's argument asserts the gradual growing liberalism of mainline voters from the 1960s to the 1990s, the voting charts provided in the article reveal a mainline dip toward conservative ideas in 1980 when Reagan was elected.

68. Richard N. Ostling, "Warring over Where Donations Go," *Time*, March 28, 1983, 58–59.

69. Rael Jean Isaac, "Do You Know Where Your Church Offerings Go?" *Reader's Digest*, January 1983, 120–25; Robert McAfee Brown, "The Gospel According to Morley Safer," *Christian Century*, March 2, 1983, 183–86; "'60 Minutes' Preview," *Christian Century*, March 9, 1983, 209–10; James M. Wall, "A Religious Mandate to Be Involved," *Christian Century*, March 9, 1983, 203; and Isaac C. Rottenberg, "Why Did the NCC Get Such Bad Press?" *Christianity Today*, May 20, 1983, 25–26.

70. For example, they said it denounced U.S. supported dictatorial regimes in Latin America, like the Somoza government in Nicaragua, but muted its criticism of communist governments like Cuba, Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Union. They accused the council of sending food relief into communist Vietnam, knowing that its repressive regime would benefit as well.

71. Marjorie Hyer, "Interfaith Conference Spurs Debate on Religious Liberty," *Los Angeles Times*, April 27, 1985, 5.

72. Ibid.; Kenneth L. Woodward with David Gates, "Ideology Under the Alms," *Newsweek*, February 7, 1983, 61–62.

73. See also Rottenberg, "Why Did the NCC Get Such Bad Press?"

74. Wall, "A Religious Mandate to Be Involved."

75. See Brown, "The Gospel According to Morley Safer"; "'60 Minutes' Preview"; Wall, "A Religious Mandate to Be Involved."

76. Linda-Marie Delloff, "The NCC in a New Time (II)," *Christianity and Crisis*, January 9, 1989, 466–72.

77. Stenning, *Church World Service*, 99; James Wall, "'Integration' Sparks NCC Showdown," *Christian Century*, November 4, 1987, 955–56.

78. "CWS Chief Endorsed," *Christian Century*, October 28, 1987, 936–37.

79. Jean Caffey Lyles, "The National Council of Churches: Is There Life After 50?" *Christian Century*, November 10, 1999, 1086–93; Arie Brouwer, "The Real Crisis at the NCC," *Christian Century*, June 27–July 4, 1990, 641–45.

80. Wall, "'Integration' Sparks NCC Showdown"; Brouwer, "The Real Crises at the NCC"; Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, "Time for New Wine-skins?" *Christian Century*, November 10, 1999, 1076–77; Lyles, "The NCC: Is There Life After 50?"

81. Delloff, "The NCC in a New Time (II)." This article also puts some of the blame upon poor financial management and planning.

82. "CWS Chief Endorsed."

83. Brouwer, "The Real Crisis at the NCC"; Wall, "'Integration' Sparks NCC Showdown"; Delloff, "The NCC in a New Time (II)"; Jean Caffey Lyles, "NCC Officials Put Dispute on Hold," *Christian Century*, November 18, 1987, 1021–22; Stenning, *Church World Service*, 114–15.

84. Lyles, "The NCC: Is There Life After 50?"; Brouwer, "The Real Crisis at the NCC"; William Lawson and Roger Schrock, "Interpreting the Crisis at the NCC," *Christian Century*, June 27–July 4, 1990, 637–38.

85. "CWS Chief Endorsed."

86. In "Butler Resigns from CWS," *Christian Century*, June 8–15, 1988, 567; "Figure in the National Council of Churches' Power Struggle Quits," *Los Angeles Times*, May 28, 1988, 6.

87. Gustav Spohn, "NCC Leader Stuns Board," *Christianity Today*, June 16, 1989, 52. For Brouwer's perspective, see Brouwer, "The Real Crisis at the NCC."

88. Spohn, "NCC Leader Stuns Board," 52; Brouwer, "The Real Crisis at the NCC;" "CWS Seeks Independence," *Christian Century*, December 21–28, 1988, 1176. CWS had considered independence other times in the past.

89. Delloff, "The NCC in a New Time (II)"; Brouwer, "The Real Crisis at the NCC."

90. Granberg-Michaelson, "Time for New Wineskins?"; "Embattled Head of National Council of Churches Quits," *Los Angeles Times*, July 1, 1989, 7; "Council of Churches' Head to Resign Today," *Washington Post*, June 27, 1989, A6; David Klinghoffer, "National Council of Churches Eschews Reform," *Wall Street Journal*, May 15, 1989, 1; "Split Vote Over Leadership Reflects National Council of Churches' Rift," *Los Angeles Times*, May 20, 1989, 6.

91. Delloff, "The NCC in a New Time (II)"; "Split Vote Over Leadership Reflects National Council of Churches' Rift."

92. Stenning, *Church World Service*, 116–17.

93. John H. Adams, "NCC Wants to Divert Hunger Funds to Reduce Budget Shortfall," *Layman Online*, November 18, 1999 (January 30, 2003), www.layman.org; Sarah Vilankulu, personal conversation with author, New York, N.Y., July 17, 2003. Vilankulu has served in the communications department for both organizations since 1977. Another reason for calling itself CWS/CROP could likely be because the name "CROP" is well-known by laity and popular with them. Though "CROP" was originally an acronym for "Christian Rural Overseas Program," it is an acronym no longer; it is the name used to designate community interfaith hunger education and fund raising events sponsored by CWS.

94. William McKinney, "The NCC in a New Time (I), *Christianity and Crisis*, January 9, 1989, 465–66.

95. Kenneth S. Kantzer, "Liberalism's Rise and Fall," *Christianity Today*, February 18, 1983, 10–11.

96. Rottenberg, "Why Did the NCC Get Such Bad Press?"

97. The deficit figure comes from Rev. Dr. Paul Crow, Jr., who served on the NCC's governing board for about thirty years. Rev. Dr. Robert Edgar,

personal interview with author, Boise, Idaho, May 22, 2003. See also Peter J. Pizor to GAC Executive Committee [Presbyterian Church U.S.A.], February 14, 2000 (January 30, 2003), www.pforum.org/wupdates/gac2000/pizor.htm.

98. McCullough interview.

99. Rev. Edgar asserted the first point in an interview with the author. The second is found in Clifton Kirkpatrick to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), November 19, 1999 (January 30, 2003), www.pcusa.org/oga/sclerk/nccletter.htm.

100. CWS budget information is posted on its Web site: www.churchworldservice.org.

101. McCullough interview. See also Diane L. Knippers and Joan Brown Campbell, "Have American Churches Politicized Their Religious Mission?" *Insight on the News*, February 12, 1996, 26–28.

102. McCullough interview.

103. "Rev. Dr. Rodney Page Retires from CWS Director Post," *NCC News Service*, May 31, 2000 (January 30, 2003), www.nccusa.org/news/00archives.html.

104. Jean Caffey Lyles, "Dollars and Signs," *Christian Century*, June 7–14, 2000, 638–39; "\$500,000 Lilly Endowment Development Grant Caps National Council of Churches' Financial Turnaround," *NCC News Service*, August 1, 2002 (January 30, 2003), www.nccusa.org/news/02archives.html; Lyles, "The NCC: Is There Life After 50?"

105. "Church World Service Launches New Identity," *NCC News Service*, November 29, 2001 (January 30, 2003), www.nccusa.org/news/01archives.html. See also McCullough interview.

106. See the CWS Web site: www.churchworldservice.org and the NCC website: www.nccusa.org.

107. Edgar interview.

108. Loren J. Golden to the *Layman Online*, March 2, 2000; Claire Abel to the *Layman Online*, February 10, 2000 (January 30, 2003), www.layman.org.

109. McCullough interview. Conversation with Vilankulu.

110. Sarah Vilankulu said that the NCC is at its best when serving as a quick-response task force on crisis issues; it seems that that is when the churches most need and seek cooperation with the NCC.

111. "\$500,000 Lilly Endowment Grant"; Edgar interview; "National Council of Churches," Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2001, (January 30, 2003) www.pforum.org/ga213/primer/issues/ncc.htm.

112. Gustav Niebuhr, "Church Council Meets Amid Financial Crisis," *New York Times*, November 13, 1999, A13; "Council Focuses on Fiscal Woes, Staff Cuts," *Los Angeles Times*, November 13, 1999, 3.

113. "Balancing the Budget," *The Christian Century*, December 6, 2000, 1264; "New Goals at the NCC," *Christian Century*, October 18, 2000, 1029–30; "Ecumenically Challenged," *The Christian Century*, June 7–14, 2000, 637; Gustav Niebuhr, "Council of Churches Proposes Meeting with Christian Groups," *New York Times*, October 23, 2000, A14; Larry B. Stammer, "Church Councils Seek to Speak with One Voice," *Los Angeles Times*, September 5, 2000, A1. It should be noted that the NCC has always been interested in building ties with churches representing these other Christian expressions. Some in the National Association of Evangelicals have shown recent openness toward working with the NCC. See John Dart, "Ecumenical Wobbling," *The Christian Century*, December 13, 2000, 1292–94; and "NAE to Review Its Inclusive Stance," *Christian Century*, April 4, 2001, 10.

114. Niebuhr, "Council of Churches Proposes Meeting with Christian Groups"; "Thriving on Challenges," *Los Angeles Times*, November 20, 1999, B2, 1; Niebuhr, "Church Council Meets Amid Financial Crisis"; Stammer, "Church Councils Seek to Speak with One Voice."

115. Although CCT has drawn Roman Catholic, evangelical, and Pentecostal involvement, conservative churches continue to be suspicious of it because of its perceived connection to the NCC. John Dart, "New Funds Boost NCC," *Christian Century*, August 14, 2002, 12–13.

116. Edgar interview.

117. These include the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Both Edgar and Vilankulu confirmed the sensed need for continuation of the NCC's special advocacy role.

118. Edgar interview.

119. Edgar has made numerous television appearances since his hire, going toe-to-toe in interviews with Jerry Falwell and other leaders of conservative Christian organizations like the Christian Coalition and the Institute for Religion and Democracy. This helps illustrate for the public that the religious right does not speak for the whole of Christian America.

120. See the CUIC Web site at www.eden.edu/cuic/cuic.htm. Edgar interview.

121. Edgar and McCullough interviews.

122. McCullough interview and Vilankulu conversation. In an e-mail update in October 2003, Sarah Vilankulu informed me that the NCC's new

associate general secretary for international affairs and peace, Antonios Kireopoulos, and CWS's deputy director for programs, Kirsten Laursen, were asked to draft a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the two organizations; it will address the need for greater NCC/CWS communication and discuss possibilities for collaboration in areas of overlap between the two organizations.

123. Edgar and McCullough interviews. Rev. McCullough informed me in an e-mail update in October 2003 that he and Rev. Edgar are planning to co-lead a delegation to North Korea; he mentioned this to illustrate that they are continuing to redefine the NCC/CWS relationship and as evidence of their commitment to remain as part of one common ecumenical family.

124. McCullough interview.

125. "Item 7 Report on WCC Central Committee."

126. For more on debates over "real ecumenism" within the NCC, see Jill K. Gill, "The Decline of Real Ecumenism: Robert Bilheimer and the Vietnam War," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 81, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 221–42.

127. The analogy of the "right" and "left" arm was made by Robert Edgar, interview.

ABSTRACT In 2000, after fifty years together, Church World Service and the National Council of Churches separated their organizations. These two ecumenical bodies, devoted to Christian unity, decided to do so after more than thirty years of intra-organizational tension had evolved into irreconcilable differences. This essay explores the long history of their troubled relationship and illustrates how profoundly political culture affects religious life and work. It asserts that the causes of their divorce were rooted in constituent and structural differences that became especially problematic during politically polarized eras. In spite of a mutual devotion to Christian unity based upon the expectation that ecumenism requires transcendence of worldly self interests, the NCC and CWS could not easily transcend the political culture of their times nor the self interests of their constituents if they wished to survive as organizations. Awareness of this reality is now a factor in the reshaping of national ecumenical organizations in the United States, which are moving more toward a multi-centered satellite model of ecumenism. The NCC/CWS split is also part of a global trend, for councils of churches and their service wings in several nations have been divorcing in recent years. Due to the influence of American ecumenical organizations internationally, the outcome of the NCC/CWS efforts to redefine themselves and their relationship will affect the future of ecumenism both within and beyond America's borders.