

**Local Impact, Global Reach: Challenges for Church Communications and Religious Journalism Today**  
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**For Such a Time as This: The Glocal Potential for Ecumenism in a Time of Rapid Change**  
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It is an honor to be here with you today, and to have received this invitation. As you heard in my introduction, I come to you today as someone who has studied our rapidly changing multi-religious landscape, and led institutional change in the largest Christian ecumenical institution in the US. Given that, I would like to focus on what I see as the potential for a renewal and revival of the ecumenical movement in this time of rapid change.

At the end of last year, I completed a two-year term as president of the National Council of Churches. I was thirty-four when my presidency began in 2012, the youngest woman and first Lutheran to ever serve. It was a turbulent time in the Council – fraught with changes in executive leadership, an ongoing financial crisis, and questions about the viability of a heavy institution in an era of “networking” and “convening.” The NCC had become a pressure cooker for the internal challenges facing many of its 37 member communions. My election was driven by the hope that what was needed was the leadership of one who had come of age in our rapidly changing landscape.

It was 2012, and the reality had set in that as Evangelical, Pentecostal, and ethnic churches were reporting steady growth, the mainline Protestant denominations were in rapid decline. Financial challenges accelerated by the 2008 financial crisis were amplified by the emergence of new church-dividing issues – human sexuality chief amongst them – taking a toll on membership, and in some cases, leading to splinter and igniting ecumenical tensions. Globalization and the digital revolution were pushing the boundaries on institutional life, offering the promise of more “nimble” organizations, whatever that means! At the same time, the stunningly effective use of social media in global change movements (think Arab Spring) – was raising the churches’ expectations of their potential to have a local impact *and* a global reach, and quite frankly to attract and retain younger folks. Almost overnight, a century of unprecedented change had reached a fever pitch.

Just two years prior, in 2010, churches around the world gathered in international events to commemorate the centennial of the World Missionary Conference, which by most accounts marked the launch of the modern ecumenical movement. For the occasion, Todd Johnson and Kenneth Ross co-edited *The Atlas of Global Christianity*, a beautiful reference book filled with mesmerizing charts, graphs, and research about the radical demographic changes of the last century. At a glance, we can see how the locus of Christianity shifted from Europe and North America to Africa, Asia, and Latin America, giving rise to new cultural forms and practices and bringing Christianity into increased contact with the world’s religions. In the second half of that century, global migration patterns and changes to US immigration policies put the United States on the fast-track to a new religious reality, reflecting the spectrum of the world’s religions and the diversity of global Christianity. Facilitated by modern travel, globalization, and new technologies, in a relatively short period of time, the local had become global, and the global had

become local. Our new reality is a “glocal” one -- meaning that our impact and reach are more closely tied than ever before.

In my years at the Pluralism Project, I focused my research on the rise of the interfaith movement in the US. In the years since 9/11, as Islamophobia reared its ugly head, the desire to reach out to Muslims and to better understand Islam offered new possibilities for education and collaboration across faith lines in general and important opportunities for Christian-Muslim dialogue in particular, ranging from the grassroots to the global. The increased awareness and acceptance of interfaith marriages and families and the growth of what is referred to as “multiple religious belonging” – when one person self-identifies with more than one religious tradition or practice – are just beginning to be explored. (Just last week, the Pluralism Project released a case study on the phenomenon of Jew-Bus, or Jewish-Buddhist encounters.) The upshot of my decade long research was that campuses, communities, and cities – our local contexts – had fast become loci for interreligious engagement, with women, youth and laypeople often leading the way. These local laboratories are linked to other local laboratories worldwide through a global movement for inter-religious understanding, engagement, and collaboration for social change.

Yet today, even though we are a vibrant multi-religious society, the majority of people in the US still self-identify as Christian. We are witnessing the end of an era, though. The 2012 Pew Forum study, “The Rise of the Nones,” revealed the most dramatic impact on church life in the US to date with its central finding that fully one-fifth of the US public – and a third of adults under the age of thirty – are religiously unaffiliated. Within a relatively short period of time, likely a single generation, Christianity will no longer be the majority religion in the US. Why? Not because of immigration or conversion to other religions or denominations, as is often purported, but due to a culture-wide, across the board, waning interest in institutional religion itself.

While Millennials did not cause this shift – remember one-fifth of older generations are also religiously unaffiliated! – they will likely be the generation through whom Christianity takes a minority position in the US religious landscape. As a result, Millennials are often singled out as both the problem and the solution to the churches’ decline, as if the challenge were simply one of repackaging, rebranding, or redistributing the churches’ mission to suit the tastes of a new focus group. This is understandable. But what exactly does “church” look like to a generation that resists the established norms for religious practice, beliefs, affiliation, and categorization held since the days of DeToqueville?

At face value, this question is alarming to the churches and their ecumenical bodies, who cannot see their future in a generation that tends to self-identify as “spiritual but not religious” and that prefers to financially support causes directly rather than institutions with broader missions. The supersized institutions of a bygone era have become impossible to sustain for the simple reason that the role of the churches in American public life simply isn’t what it used to be, and the up and coming generation is not going to lend its support, at least not for mere technical change. The challenge facing many of these institutions is, then, how to transform from the heavy, silo-ed structures of the past to organizational models that are fluid, flexible, integrated, and that utilize strategic partnerships – in other words, how to undergo adaptive, transformational change. For better *and* for worse, the very concept of “turf” is being challenged today.

Guarding against Pollyanna-ish optimism, I would argue that, in fact, in some cases the institutions have become a victim of their own success. The NCC, for example, can see the fruits of its labors over six plus decades in countless local and regional ecumenical initiatives and bodies, national policy changes, global change movements, and in the daily usage of the NRSV translation in the academy, the publishing

industry, and in congregations and homes. Amid all of the changes taking place in the religious landscape in 2012 as I have described them, the challenge before us as NCC boiled down to finding a way to be responsible to our legacy as churches and responsive to our ever-changing global context for Christian witness.

In many ways, throughout my NCC presidency, I felt as though I was the poster-child for the relevance of the ecumenical movement for up and coming generations. Relative to the others with whom I was leading, it didn't matter that I wasn't a Millennial – I was close enough! I felt boxed in, at times, as the token source for “the young adult perspective.” Not only was this an impossible task, but the truth was that I wanted to do more than fulfill a demographic void. I wanted to work with others in responding to the needs of the most vulnerable in our midst, on overcoming the urgent social issues of our time: dire poverty and racism, the devastation of creation, and obscene violence and war. I wanted to be, together with those around me, an effective witness to the liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ in today's increasingly complex context, tending to the scandalous division within the body of Christ and the scandalous realities of our broken world. I knew I was not alone in feeling this way.

In the hype of “The Rise of the Nones,” or as I like to think of it – “The Prodigal Sons and Daughters syndrome” what easily gets overlooked is the fact that roughly 2/3<sup>rds</sup> of young adults in the US still self-identify as Christian! While this figure is on the decline, it is nothing to sneeze at! The churches would do well to embrace an abundance mind-set, to more fully engage with those young adults already in their midst in an inter-generational dialogue about where and how God is calling the church into the future.

Soon after my election, I began to feel that this heavy burden -- that I would somehow represent a new generation of ecumenists -- was impossible to bear. I put out a call for submissions to young adult Christians for their visions for the future of the church. I wanted, in dialogue with my peers, to shape a conversation – rather than to provide leadership from a singular, definitive point of view. I had been mentored in the school of collaborative leadership, and without my peers in leadership positions with me, I had to find a way to get them there. In less than three months, I received fifty submissions on a range of topics including unity, mission, creation, the economy and cultures of greed, Christian identity and interfaith relations, overcoming violence and living in peace, overcoming poverty, overcoming racism, overcoming sexism and gender justice. Throughout my presidency, I used these visions to inspire, shape, and engage in dialogue about the future – of the churches, of the NCC, and of the ecumenical movement in the US. These visions, in turn, inspired and shaped me in profound ways, even when I did not agree with them – perhaps even more then.

But speaking for others is not, ultimately, the best way to nurture dialogue and engagement on a broader scale. So, I set out to knit together what I had received into a compilation that could be used for intergenerational study. Let me underscore that: INTERGENERATIONAL study. For, you see, the future of the church is not uniquely lodged with any one generation – but with all of us who are followers of Christ together. My successor in the NCC, The Rev. A. Roy Medley, general secretary of the American Baptist Churches in the USA, shared this vision with me. I am so deeply grateful that Judson Press took on the project, and it was published last month under the title, *For Such a Time as This: Young Adults on the Future of the Church*.

The twelve of us who contributed to this project were selected with the intention of balancing themes, but also male and female voices, representing a range of church traditions and perspectives. The collection, as it stands, remains unfinished; though the voices are diverse, there are many Christian traditions not represented. Further, the fact that the project is limited to the US presents its own

shortcomings. The hope is that those who use this book will see themselves as participating in the project, expanding and enhancing the limited, though rich, visions offered.

The collection is organized into two sections. The first, “Reenvisioning Christian Identity and Relationships,” offers new perspectives on what it means to be Christian today—including how we relate to other Christians and people of other traditions. Shantha Alonso Ready explores how interracial and interethnic identities provide a window into understanding today’s multicultural church. R. C. Miessler shares what it means to be spiritual *and* religious, to engage with a variety of Christian traditions from an Orthodox perspective. Jaisy Joseph uncovers the unique challenges of second-generation immigrant Christians and looks anew at Jesus Christ as a model for hope. Jennifer Lancaster presents the new reality of global Christianities in the United States and the unique opportunities facing Protestant churches in relationship to and with immigrant congregations. Paul David Brown suggests the potential of the local context for uniting Christians in faith and service to the world. Awet Andemicael makes a biblically grounded case for Christian participation in interfaith dialogue in today’s multireligious world.

The second section, “Renewing Hope for the Church’s Witness Today and into the Future,” invites the reader to look through different lenses to see new possibilities for Christian witness in a rapidly changing context. Ian Mevorach challenges the churches to address the intersection between the climate crisis and racism, or eco-racism. Erinn Staley offers hope for the churches’ full inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities and all those who are excluded. Jennifer Leath calls for ministries that tend to the whole person, including sexual identity, from the particular context of the black church traditions. Alison VanBuskirk Philip offers two compelling women-led models for listening in Christian community that lead to personal, communal, and global transformation. Zachary Ugolnik urges the churches in the digital era to cultivate face-to-face rituals and experiences for women and men to be overwhelmed by divine beauty.

As those who had come of age – who had been formed as church leaders – in this new and emerging context, the twelve of us felt we had something to offer. We did not feel caught in the same tensions as our elders, between nostalgia for the past and anxiety about the future. Instead, we could offer our leadership, based on our fluency with rapid change, “for such a time as this.” But what, ultimately, would our contribution be?

In the early stages of this project, I’ll confess that I hoped to find patterns of shared experience and insight. I wanted to identify a clear, concise, and compelling vision that younger Christians could offer about what form, shape, and direction the future of the church should take. As I began to delve deeper into what we were saying and sharing with each other, I discovered that, in fact, our visions defied summary. They offered truth in divergent forms, analyzing the institutional, theological, social, and spiritual challenges of the churches today from different perspectives and offering provocative ideas for moving forward together. In other words, what I found was a panoply of visions that were markedly different, and meaningfully so.

In hindsight it became clear that the very goal of casting a single vision for the future was a fallacy, a symptom of the anxious culture in which I had been called to lead. The churches don’t need a uniform vision, and neither does the world, for that matter. Our God-given unity is in our diversity; only a multiplicity of visions offers hope. Though I wasn’t able to discern a single vision, a crystallized nugget of hope, I was able to distill what I would call shared yearnings for the future of the church. These

yearnings give shape to the trajectory of our forward motion. They help us to begin to respond to the question “Where do we go from here?”

The first yearning is for a bold, enhanced, reformed, and enlivened church *to exist*. The fate of the churches is not sealed in demographic research. We have experienced the life-giving abundance of God’s gifts through the church and believe these gifts will always be necessary for the world to receive.

The second yearning is for the churches *to transform* the lives of everyday Christians. Many of us have been transformed in Christian communities called and sent by the gospel of Jesus Christ. We wish for all Christians—regardless of status or social location—to have this experience and for all of us to have it more fully together as the body of Christ.

The third yearning is for *imagination to take precedence* over institutionalization as we shape the future together. As young people, we believe the fullness of the churches’ calling today will be revealed through imaginative, creative, and collaborative networks rather than strictly through institutions. This is not a dismissal of the institutional expressions of the churches but rather an insistence that even structures must be reinvented for a new era, not simply when driven by the bottom line, but for the sake of mission.

Of course, these yearnings are not new or unique to younger Christians today. They have been sought after by generations of Christians for centuries, and they resonate with Christians *of all ages*. This was at once a disappointing discovery, and an A-ha! moment. What my generation, and the Millennials after us, had to offer as Christians on the future of the church had been offered over and over again by the great cloud of witnesses who came before us! This discovery, you see, became central to my hope for ecclesial and ecumenical renewal in today’s global world.

With each generation, these yearnings take on different meaning, sometimes becoming more or less central to our self-understanding, or to our understanding of what it means to be church. Looking forward to God’s future for us demands that we pursue authentic, intergenerational dialogue about what formative experiences, hopes, and even disappointments have shaped how we live out these yearnings. How do our different experiences as Christians shape how we see God’s future, and inspire what we are willing to strive for in and through the church? An exploration of these and other questions is not simply for the young, but an ongoing intergenerational process, a lifelong interchange. Our task is to walk with one another in a visioning journey that is difficult and exhausting at times but also exhilarating and deeply enriching, and thus to discover the road to a renewed future for ourselves as the community of Christ and for the sake of the world.

As I had hoped, these visions in the collection, and many others, breathed life and hope into what could otherwise have been a seemingly impossible leadership task. In my two year presidency, we undertook several highly consultative planning and implementation processes to “re-envision and restructure the NCC.” In two years’ time we refined our mission statement and developed and transitioned to a new structure -- resulting in painful decisions about how to right-size the organization, and the consolidation of operations from New York to DC, all while seeking to nurture important historic relationships and cultivate strategic new partnerships. In 22 months, I presided over the election of three general secretaries: interim GS Clare Chapman, transitional GS Peg Birk, and that of our dynamic new GS/Pres Jim Winkler. I can tell you I have been relieved of any skepticism about the churches’ ability to change!

Today the NCC is living into a new structure that is agile, integrated, and flexible – with four convening tables focusing on two priorities. (SLIDE) It would be a much longer talk to share with you how we got from point A to point B – and chances are only a few of you are interested anyway! But suffice it to say that our consultative processes revealed a few key learnings, which I think are applicable for all of us seeking to make sense of today's challenges.

1. Pay attention to what's happening in the local and regional context
2. Pay attention to what youth and young adults are doing (not only what they aren't)
3. Pay attention to the questions about what it means to be Christian in a multi-religious context

Let me start with the first. *"Pay attention to what's happening in the local and regional context."* As I said earlier, in some ways the national institutions have become the victims of their own success. Today, the ecumenical vision is being lived out at the local and regional levels, in no small part because of the leadership and witness of the NCC. Let me offer an example. In 2012, I received a job posting from a city-based council of churches for its Executive Director, at the same time as the Search Committee for the NCC was putting together its posting for a Transitional General Secretary. I was astonished to learn that the annual operating budget for this city council was nearly twice that of the National Council!

At the same time, other local and regional institutions are facing viability questions, for a variety of reasons; five state councils of churches will close this year alone – and there's something equally important going on there, too. Even others are shifting from strictly ecumenical to interfaith bodies, with certain losses and gains along the way. My point is that today's ecumenical and inter-religious relations have a life of their own, uniquely grounded in local communities and connected to global movements. As the local has become global, and the global has become local, we can no longer think about voices that speak to and for the whole – the very same conclusion I reached in my book project. Instead, in its restructure, the NCC sought to see its role in a new way – as bearing witness to unity in Christ by *weaving a compelling national narrative of the movement in all of its complex expressions and diverse contexts*. I see this same challenge for you as communicators and journalists – as weavers of complex, contextual narratives.

Now the second: *"Pay attention to what youth and young adults are doing (not just what they aren't)."* If the churches continue to act like there isn't a person under 35 in sight, this will become a self-fulfilling prophesy. There are plenty of young adult Christians in our midst (okay, so maybe I'm a youngish adult at this point!) Acknowledge this, maybe celebrate it – not for its own sake, because that is patronizing – but for the contributions that young people are making as part of the whole community.

Take it upon yourself to be a bridge builder. If you're older than 35, find a young adult in your office, your congregation, or local context, and invite him or her to have a conversation about your individual and shared yearnings and hopes for the future of the church. And if you're younger than 35, find someone older than you and do the same. It doesn't have to be a rocket science strategy, it simply starts with relationships. Encourage one another to see yourselves as part of something important, and challenge each other to make even bolder contributions. Invite others to join you when the time is right. Think about the impact on your local community and the global reach of what you do to enact those visions, and who strategic partners might be. Reach out to them. Be creative. Don't have a token young adult sit on every last mind-numbing committee, there I said it! Remember, we are part of a movement.

The one thing I insisted upon in the new structure of the NCC was the formation of an Intergenerational Think Tank. Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, when the call went out for nominations, the only

individuals named by the churches were young adults. Don't get me wrong – this was a great problem to have. But we had to go back to the churches to ask more specifically for a younger person *and* an older person, (which we politely call “seasoned”) to be named in a pair, in order that mutual mentoring might take root in the institution and undergird its strategic visioning and engagements. What you do to lift up young adult voices, as well to provide opportunities for intergenerational engagement, will enrich our hope for the future, and make our impact and reach that much more significant.

Finally, *“Pay attention to the questions about what it means to be Christian (insert denominational identifier, as needed) in a multi-religious context.”* I would go so far to say that this is one of the top five greatest challenges facing the churches today. In fact, when we surveyed current and potential stakeholders in the NCC reenvisioning process, this was far and away the number one concern that respondents thought the Council needed to address. To begin to meet this need, many of the denominations have begun to expand their ecumenical work to include inter-religious as well. But in most cases, inter-religious relations are limited to an “Abrahamic” approach. Our reality in the US is much more diverse than this, as we know, and we need to begin to think about new dialogue and collaboration partners, about expanding the table. For example, the ELCA is in the early stages of thinking with other ecumenical partners about dialogue with Sikhs in the US.

At the local level, there is both a thirst for, and an aversion to inter-religious relations, depending on who you ask. As for the aversion, there is the assumption that religious pluralism is the fast-track to religious relativism. In my twenty years' experience with inter-religious engagement, I can confidently say that this risk is not real. Instead, by engaging with religious “others,” we become better equipped to more fully articulate our own beliefs and practices, strengthening rather than compromising our identity and faith. The thirst comes into play because there are important questions – both theological and practical in nature – that Christians are faced with daily. Unless we seek to provide a space for articulating those questions, and thinking about them together -- in ecumenical settings when possible -- they will be answered by extremists who will define Christianity over and against our neighbors, rather than in relationship with them. Your work in this regard is challenging, but so crucial.

Times of rapid change by nature defy a single, unified narrative. How much richer, then, might we be if we sought to discern through each other's voices where God is calling us together? This has become far more for me than a project, or an institutional leadership challenge, but a spiritual discipline. Thank you, as church communicators and religious journalists, for your work to take up the challenge of weaving a complex narrative that has both local impact and global reach. We yearn for this. The world yearns for this. God is calling us, the likes of you and I, for such a time as this.