

Ecumenism in Amazonia: the WCC and Ecumenism in the 21st Century
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There was only a thin silver streak that separated the blackness of the sky from the blackness of the Amazonian jungle. That streak was the first hint of dawn. We were on a little fishing barco that was anchored in the middle of the Amazon River just off the shore of the Ilha dos Papagayos. This little island is situated just a mile downstream of Belem, Brazil, in the mouth of the Amazon River. Not much more than a square mile in area, it is home to a dozen or so Amazonian River People and thousands of little Papagayos that come there to roost. Every evening, the little green and yellow parrots return from all over the Amazonian jungle to this island to take their nightly rest. And for those who are willing to come to the fishing docks of Belem at 3:30 in the morning and convince a local fisherman to ferry a group of camera toting ecotourists out to the island in the pitch blackness of pre-dawn, this stillness awaits. It is a wonderful stillness empty of color and sound except for the river lapping against the boat every once in a while.

But once that silver streak begins to turn a pale shade of blue, and the Amazon begins to reflect the dawn, one bird – a single bird called “the priest” – lets out a startling call. That call announces the dawn, and within seconds thousands of Papagayos are chirping and squawking, as they take flight. Thousands of birds circle the island in a vortex of feathers that blots out that light blue stripe of dawn for a half hour or so before they finally fly off in pairs. Two by two back to the Amazonian forest. Every morning, the Papagayos perform this morning ritual, proclaiming light out of darkness, the jungle groaning to life every morning. Listening to this Matins of Creation reminded me of the larger struggle going on in the whole region of the Amazon. Aluminum industries that threatened rivers and the indigenous populations, urbanization that threatened the River way of life for women and children, and the denuding of biodiversity in order to monocrop the Acai for profit. This is the reality for Amazonia, and this is precisely why the World Council of Churches chose Belem to convene the meeting of the Continuation Committee on Ecumenism in the 21st Century last January.

That group of camera toting eco-tourists that sleepily sailed that little barco to the middle of the Amazon in the predawn hours was made up of Church leaders and Ecumenical Officers from the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Armenian and Antiochean Orthodox Churches, PCUSA, Methodist Church of Nigeria, World Alliance of Reformed Church, CEC, WSCF, Iona Community, Church World Service and several more, along with six young theologians who had submitted essays on the future of ecumenism in the 21st Century. I am one of the six, women and men under the age of 35 from India, Kenya, China, Indonesia, and the US who wrote about our ecumenical calling and vision. Our essays were published in the July, 2008 edition of *The Ecumenical Review*, and the World Council of Churches had invited us to join the Continuation Committee at this stage as they develop statements on the contemporary challenges that we face, and how the ecumenical vision, Jesus’ prayer for Christian unity, can respond and grow in light of our new global realities.

This is the reason that Belem was chosen for the conference. Amazonia is a region that is vulnerable, and teetering between economic, social, environmental and agricultural abundance or destruction. Through the life and ministry of the Lutheran Parish of Belem who hosted us for worship and fora, and the Focolare community of Mariopolis Gloria where we lived, we were able to witness the ecumenical ministry that was speaking a word of Peace in the face of chaos that threatens the urban and natural environs of Amazonia. There in this place, we experienced their ministry to women and children who are marginalized by urbanization and forced from River life to the city slums. We were able to see the burning and mining of Amazonian jungle,

the damming of rivers and destruction of forests, and see the Churches working together to give voice to the voiceless through music and dancing that gave voice to the indigenous people and the natural world whose groans are not often heard over the grinding and smelting of transnational aluminum plants.

Here, in this place, leaders of the ecumenical movement did not just think and write about the contemporary challenges to the oikoumene, the whole inhabited earth, which would have been enough according to their WCC charter. But more than that, we had a shared experience of the contemporary challenges that our economy (oikonomia), ecology (oikologia) present to the whole inhabited world (oikoumene). There in Belem, the leaders of the ecumenical movement did not just pray and theologize about the ecumenical vision, which would have been enough. But more than that, the household of God (oikos) reaches out to take the hand of a poor child named Igor and dozens of others to educate them in the face of illiteracy, tills the earth through local ecumenical cooperatives that are able to bring fruit and give the earth rest and renewal in the face of exploitation, and forms communities of young people who dance to music of Amazonia in the face of modernization.

Perhaps this is what made this meeting of the WCC's Continuation Committee so alive, and the document that we produced so powerful. In the end, I did not just present my paper to an ecumenical conference hosted by the World Council of Churches. No, there at the mouth of the Amazon representatives from churches and diakonal organizations shared in an ecumenical experience. The majority of our days were spent in deep listening to the oikoumene – listening to the witness of the natural world, to interfaith children of God, and to our brothers and sisters in the Christian household who are seeking peace through unity. Just as the Magi before us, here in Belem (which is Portuguese for Bethlehem), we gathered from the ends of the earth, offered our diverse gifts, and witnessed the Word of God alive, active, incarnate in this part of the world. Out of that shared experience, we were able to articulate another ecumenical vision of hope.

The World Council of Churches will continue to convene this Continuation Committee every year for the next few years, in order to faithfully discern the future of Ecumenism in the 21st Century. I am thankful to have been invited to share my vision that grows out of my ecumenical experience of serving as a Pastor in the ELCA in the York City and Pennsylvania Council of Churches, and now through ELCA Global Mission at the International Church of Copenhagen and the Danish National Council of Churches. But most of all, I am thankful to the WCC that these ecumenical experiences are happening, and our participation is sought.

Regardless of what forms or structures ecumenism takes on in this century, one thing is for sure. Christ's prayer is being answered. Ecumenism is alive. The ecumenical movement is breathing in the experience of the oikoumene that anticipates that silver streak of hope that can separate the darkness. And like "the priest" bird on the Ihla dos Papagayos, ecumenism breathes out a clarion call, the Word of peace that is awakening the whole inhabited earth to join in God's continuing act of creating life and peace.