Dear Friends,

“O God, who makest us glad with the yearly expectation of thy coming, Grant that we, who with joy receive thy only-begotten Son as our Redeemer, may without fear behold him when he shall come to be our Judge, even thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ; who livesth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.”

With the words of this well-known and beloved prayer, the UCC-UEK Working Group sends greetings to each of you and the hope that the Advent and Christmas and Epiphany seasons and, indeed, the new year to come, may be accompanied by grace and by peace in each of your lives and in the midst of the congregations from which you confess your faith.

The Working Group is pleased to send you what has now become an annual newsletter. We hope you will find the essays and other reflections both interesting and provocative and, each in its own way, a faithful expression of “Kirchengemeinschaft” between the United Church of Christ and the Union of Evangelical Churches (UEK) within the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD).

The booklet begins with a homily by Mark Burrows, Vice Chr. of the Working Group and Professor of the History of Christianity at Andover Newton Theological School. This is followed by two essays related to the “Barmen Theological Declaration” of May, 1934 on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of this still vital expression of the Christian faith. The first of these essays is by Victoria Barnett, author of the important book “For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler,” that was published in 1992 by Oxford University Press. A good friend of “Kirchengemeinschaft,” she is one of the general editors of the complete English edition of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s works which is being published by Fortress Press. The second “Barmen” essay is one I wrote. The Working Group is grateful to “Christians for Justice Action” in the UCC which earlier
this year commissioned the two essays for their newsletter and have kindly given permission for the essays also to appear here.

“A View from Abroad” offers reflections on the recent elections in the United States by another good friend of “Full Communion” between our churches. Christine Busch has been a pastor in the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland and is currently serving as the ecumenical officer of the Church with headquarters in Dusseldorf. “In Prayer and Mutual Consultation” is a letter addressed to us all by Gerhard Koslowsky, retired pastor and ecumenical officer in the former Evangelical Church of the Union (EKU) now living in retirement in Rott, Germany. These thoughtful pieces are followed by an excerpt from a sermon by Martin Luther King, Jr., a portion of a speech given earlier this year by Bill Moyers, and excerpts from homilies by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther. The newsletter concludes with a brief summary of the two meetings of the Working Group held in April and in October of this year.

Frederick R. Trost
Editor

An Invitation to Support This Newsletter

It has been said that “Full Communion between the UCC and the UEK involves not only breaking bread at the Lord’s Table. “It is also sharing in life, work, and witness; nourishing one another in prayer, challenging one another through conversations, enriching one another with ideas.”

For more than twenty years, these newsletters have been sent as a gift to those interested and supportive of “Kirchengemeinschaft.”. Until now, the Working Group has not needed your help with the publication or mailing of these booklets. But now, we do. If 200 of you would send $10 annually, or 100 of you would send $20 each year, or 50-75 of you would send $30 or more, we could meet the expense involved in producing the newsletter.

We invite gifts of support in any amount. They can be sent to:

    Wider Church Ministries, UCC
    700 Prospect Avenue E.
    Cleveland, Ohio 44115-1100 (Please mark your check UCC-UEK newsletter)

Thank you for considering this invitation to help with this important expression of “Full Communion.” We are also grateful to the Mission House Center at Lakeland College in Wisconsin for the in-kind services it provides, without which we likely would not be able to continue publication.

The Working Group would welcome suggestions you may have with regard both to the newsletter and to other aspects of deepening “Kirchengemeinschaft” as we approach the twenty-fifth anniversary of this vital expression of the unity of the Church.

May the gift of “Full Communion remain a vital expression of faith for many years to come!

Frederick R. Trost
Veni, Redemptor gentium

Come, thou Redeemer of the earth, Come, testify thy wondrous birth: All lands admire, all times applaud: Such is the birth that fits our God.

Forth from his chamber goeth he, That royal home of purity, A giant in twofold substance one, Rejoicing now his course to run.

Thy cradle here shall glitter bright, And darkness breathe a newer light, Where endless faith shall shine serene, And twilight never intervene.

Saint Ambrose (340-397)

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“Saint-Making”

Mark S. Burrows

(This meditation was given at Colby Chapel, Andover Newton Theological School, 3 November 2004)

In the beginning, however we can imagine this, there was a world in the anguish of birthing. A groaning of the earth, and the wild chaos of the deep; the strange emergence and proliferation of life forms, including human, and the inevitable struggle between self-interest and self-sacrifice – one that scientists from the fields of cellular biology and cultural anthropology have chronicled with increasing fascination. Why should there be any act of generosity toward others? Why not the “survival of the fittest,” without regard for the weak and vulnerable? Why not pure selfishness and greed, the utterly exclusive protection of one’s self and one’s own tribe? Why not such a hell as the pattern of surviving, if not flourishing?

In the beginning, or at least in the midst of this unfolding drama, there has been a strange resistance to this pattern. In the beginning, or at least in the midst of this unfolding drama of life, there have always been saints. Saints who dared to imagine that the familiar and the certain, the secure and the traditional, were not the final word. Saints who dared to imagine that fear is often the first but never the last word. Saints who were crazy enough to hold onto hope not as the consequence of success but as a subversive witness to a larger and more generous future. Saints who were brazen enough to believe that love is its own reward, despite the suffering and sacrifice love will call for.

In the beginning, or at least on this day when we gather ourselves as a nation on the other side of a bitter campaign, God has one word for us. It is not a word of self-congratulation, or of defeat. It is not a word of blame or discouragement. It is a strange and wonderful word of comfort and command, given to people in a time of desolation. It is a word of hope given to those who had come to despair in the Lord’s favor. It is a word from the ancient prophet Isaiah, a word Paul brought to the early Christians gathered at Corinth:

At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation.

And the apostle adds, reminding this community that the text was not about a past promise or a distant God:

Behold! Now is the acceptable time! Behold! Now is the day of salvation!

He had not just been part of a losing campaign. His candidate for imperial governor had not been defeated by a rival. He had not been humbled by a majority voting in another direction. And he had apparently never figured that the way of Christians would be one of privilege, power, and pride.
No, Paul tells us of his life:

...as servants of God, we commend ourselves...
through great endurance, in affliction, hardships, calamities,
beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger;

As servants, bearing witness to the gospel path – which was a calling on an often difficult road. And how does Paul suggest we bear witness? By political strategies, and action plans? Perhaps, although he remains silent about methods. What he is clear about is purpose:

...by purity, knowledge, forbearance, kindness,
the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech,
and the power of God...

And he concludes with an assurance: “Our mouth is open to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide... Widen your hearts, also!”

Widen your hearts.

You see, Paul did not imagine that saints on this earth would be docile, quiet, or retiring. He did not retreat into fear, or regret; he did not indulge in self-satisfied anger, or blame. Widen your hearts.

No, he stood up in the way of Jesus, and all the prophets. He spoke out and called his community and ours to such witness – that of the widening of our hearts. He knew that the saints’ path meant that many would deride him as an impostor, and even criminal, but he also insisted: Widen your hearts. He refused to stand idly by while the poor were ignored, despised, and disempowered, suggesting another path: Widen your hearts! He knew that the powers of the state might well be corrupt, and the local majority greedy and violent. But he kept a higher standard for the calling of the saints: the widening of our hearts.

There is really nothing else to do today, except to hear Paul’s word – echoing the ancient prophet Isaiah’s word – for us:

At the acceptable time I have listened to you,
and helped you on the day of salvation.
Behold! Now is the acceptable time!
Behold! Now is the day of salvation!

Today, the only question that matters is whether we are a people of this gospel. A people of this faith. A people of this hope. A people who know that God makes saints at the margins, in the byways, among the vulnerable who know that the widening of our hearts is the way of life.
Today, the only question that matters, the only decision that counts, is whether we are willing to give our lives to the gospel that calls us to follow Jesus in breaking with every tradition that gets in the way of healing; to oppose every law that obstructs justice for the disenfranchised and vulnerable; to open wide our mouths, and widen our hearts, to live into this “day of salvation” – not only for ourselves, but for the stranger who is among us, and the enemy we are called to love. Now. Here. Today.

It is hard and finally redemptive work, this widening of our hearts! It is the opening of joy in our lives, the triumph of faith over fear.

And we can only imagine doing this because we worship the God who widened Her heart among us. Because our God calls us here to a feast at the places of our deepest hunger. Because our God reminds us that the word of promise is truer than the lure of success. Because our God encourages us to see that She is still about the work of making saints among us, even us! To become saints as those who believe and live the good news that sorrow may be among us in the night but joy dawns with the morning; that the poor and the enemy, the feared and the despised, are still among us holding the treasure of God’s image; that love is stronger than death, and divine justice more tenacious than any human election.

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The Barmen Confession of Faith, 70 years later

by Victoria Barnett

Anniversaries are always useful occasions, not only to remember the past, but also to reflect on the connection between the past and the present. This year is the 70th anniversary of the Barmen Confession of Faith, the document that stands even today as a symbol of the Confessing Church's struggle against Nazism.

The Barmen Confession of Faith, written by a committee chaired by Karl Barth, emerged from the first national synod of the Confessing Church in May 1934. Those who were present at Barmen had the sense, even in that moment, that something had happened that was not only historically significant, but theologically profound. In an interview some years ago, Hans Thimme, who attended Barmen as a young vicar (and later became president of the Westphalian regional church) told me that as the synod unanimously approved the Barmen Confession, many of those attending wept and the group spontaneously began to sing "Now thank we all our God." Barmen, he recalled, "was the high point of my life, because with that, we had actually -- and this was the decisive thing about Barmen -- determined the church's identity."

Thimme's recollection goes to the heart of Barmen's significance. The Barmen Confession, and the German church struggle in general, was arguably the most significant theological and ecclesiastical event in Germany -- perhaps in Europe -- since the Reformation. How often does the church -- do we -- have the opportunity to reflect and establish the identity of Christ's church in the world?
Thus, Barmen's significance does not only derive from its historical context, dramatic as that was. The Barmen synod convened less than 18 months after Adolf Hitler became chancellor of the new German Reich. In May 1934, the Nazi nightmare was well underway. The first series of Nazi racial laws had been instigated, political enemies and social "undesirables" were imprisoned in local concentration camps. Germans clubs, schools, and other institutions were becoming extensions of the Nazi Party.

The Nazi regime had its allies in the German Evangelical Church: not only the German Christians, the group that wanted to create an "aryanized" Reich Church along Nazi principles, but many church leaders and pastors in the "middle" who embraced the new nationalism and sought some kind of compromise with the new regime that would allow the church "to be the church," as the slogan went at the time.

The real significance of Barmen in the midst of this was its theological claim, which Karl Barth explicated brilliantly in six theses, that the time had come for the German Evangelical Church to declare a status confessionis. Thus, the Barmen Confession was not simply a church statement on issues of the day, but a declaration of confessional principles that were so fundamental to the Christian faith and scriptures that they were binding for all Protestants in Germany. Those six principles were 1) that the church's only authority was Christ and the knowledge of Christ through the Bible, 2) its only revelation was in the Holy Scriptures, 3) that no political party or ideology had authority over the church's witness, 4) that the church's task in the world was to give order and meaning to human life, 5) that while the state was a legitimate worldly authority its authority did not extend to all aspects of human life, and, finally, 6) that where the state exceeded its authority the church was called by God to oppose it.

Within the historical context of Nazi Germany, those six points could be interpreted (and were indeed viewed as such by the Nazi regime) as a six-point challenge to the totalitarian dictatorship, culminating in a clear call to resistance. As I've written elsewhere, not all those who convened and approved this Confession at Barmen drew that conclusion; in fact, the unanimity of the Confessing Church at Barmen was short-lived. The church representatives gathered there went on in different directions: some moved toward resistance; most of them, however, became quite cautious about opposing the state. The history of Barmen holds the seeds of human tragedy as well as hope.

Yet the most important aspect of Barmen -- and the source of much of the subsequent polarization within German Protestantism -- was this notion of status confessionis. Barmen was indeed a "here I stand; I can do no other" moment. There really aren't many such moments in history, and they invariably bring with them great division and conflict. From our historical vantage-point, of course, we can embrace the status confessionis declared at Barmen -- and still appreciate why such confessional declarations must be made only after deep scriptural and theological reflection.

This is because Barmen, like the story of the Confessing Church and the examples of Confessing Christians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, have been embraced in the meantime by a very wide spectrum of Christians with an equally wide spectrum of political convictions that they hold to be the necessary outcome of their faith. The Confessing Church has been cited as a model by such disparate modern Christians as radical anti-abortionists who advocate the murder of doctors, civil rights leaders in the 1960s, groups opposing the war in Iraq, and evangelical Christians who see themselves engaged in a culture war.
One should, therefore, approach the *status confessionis* with caution. It is an inherently divisive step; it splits churches. And yet the post-Barmen history of the German churches also teaches us that the churches have a great deal to lose -- one might say their very souls -- by retreat, by caution, and by silence in the face of evil. For in the wake of Barmen, most German church leaders, even many in the Confessing Church, sought to keep their churches together and preserve their institutions under Nazism. They refused to speak out against the persecution of the Jews. They protested only when specific issues relevant to the churches were at stake. Even during the euthanasia program (where some church leaders did speak out) there were church leaders who advocated quiet, behind the scenes diplomacy rather than public outrage and protest. Despite the examples of a courageous few, the German Evangelical Church emerged in 1945 largely tainted by its silences and compromises under Nazism.

In trying to avoid a *status confessionis*, then, this more conciliatory approach kills debate and neutralizes radical voices within the church -- and prevents Christian churches from ever taking a stand. One of the lessons of the Holocaust for Christian churches is that, where important things are at stake, voices must be raised and stands must be taken.

Christian churches, of course, can and do speak out even without declaring a *status confessionis*. The significance of the *status confessionis* -- of declaring that some stand is intrinsic to church doctrine and Christian faith, an inescapable conclusion of Christian teachings -- is (as Thimme recalled with respect to Barmen) that it is a declaration of the church's identity: of who we are as Christians in this world, of where the heart of our witness must lie.

At Barmen, this theological discovery of the church's identity in that historical moment was made by placing the obligations of the Gospel in counterpart to the demands being made by German political leadership. That is, Karl Barth and others clearly understood how the Nazi *Führerprinzip* of absolute loyalty, in all aspects of life, to Adolf Hitler was explicitly contradicted by the concept of *Solus Christus* -- that Christ alone is the head of the church.

So a good starting point for what we believe -- for a *status confessionis* -- is the examination of what we confront in the world that not only cannot be justified biblically, but that we are called as Christians to witness against. The remarkable thing, when we return to scripture, is how it resonates in our age: Jesus' command in Matthew 25 to welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, and visit the prisoner; or the profound radicalism of the Sermon on the Mount.

The value of arguing, discussing, reflecting and praying for discernment of where we have crossed the line into the territory of the *status confessionis* is that we are compelled, like Christians in Germany during the 1930s, to decide what we really believe, who we really are as a church. In doing so, we must always be mindful of the distinction between the *status confessionis* and the invocation of God's name to support whatever cause we may be involved in. God's name gets invoked a great deal these days. The political culture in the United States is far more overtly religious than in most other parts of the world. An extensive survey done in 2003 by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, done in conjunction with the Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life, gives numerous striking examples of the widespread acceptance in our country for what could be called a public witness of the church: 52% of the population, for example, thinks the churches should speak out on political matters.
Yet the significance of Barmen was not so much that the church "spoke out" -- viewed in retrospect, we can think of many things that should have been said at Barmen but were not. Barmen was not explicit in that sense. What happened at Barmen was that this group of Christians, at a crucial moment in history, clarified what they believed and who they were to be as a church. That it subsequently took them in different directions may testify not to the weakness of Barmen, but to the weakness of the human beings in every age. Yet there were other Christians who took the Barmen Confession and gave their lives for the principle that Christ is Lord over our lives and that we are called to witness to this, again and again.

In Grateful Reply to Victoria Barnett

by Frederick R. Trost

In response to Victoria Barnett’s important and insightful essay on “The Barmen Confession of Faith, 70 years later,” I cite a little known but critical encounter between Karl Barth and Professor Karl Fezer of Tubingen. It was January, 1934. At the time, rumors were flying that Barth would soon be removed from his teaching position at Bonn University because of his refusal to offer the “Hitler salute” at the beginning of his lectures, as “recommended” by the government. (Rather, Barth began his lectures with prayer. Barth’s colleagues, Ernst Fuchs, Karl Ludwig Schmidt and Fritz Lieb had already been dismissed from the Bonn theological faculty.) According to the account of

Eberhard Busch, on January 23, Barth attended a meeting in Berlin of church leaders and was asked to respond to a memorandum that had been composed by Fezer, who was sympathetic to the claims of the so-called “German Christians.” After reading the memorandum, he turned to Fezer and said: “We have different beliefs, different spirits and a different God.” The theologian, Friedrich Gogarten, among others, shouted amidst the resulting chaos, “Can Barth be serious?” Friends appealed to Barth to show restraint “out of Christian love.” When calm was restored, Karl Barth re-stated his opposition to Fezer’s exposition of the philosophy of the “German Christians.” It is said that Hans Meiser, the Lutheran bishop of Bavaria, who was present, sighed that this fracture (reflected in the views of Barth) would be the end of the Evangelical Church in Germany. Meiser, as many others, sought a compromise; a softer, more accommodating approach towards what Barth insisted was idolatry.

Karl Barth’s attack on the theological compromises made by the “German Christians” was spirited and went to the heart of the issues dividing Protestants in Germany during the earliest days of the Confessing Church. Articulate proponents of “German Christian” thought (including the brilliant Emanuel Hirsch and the highly respected Gerhard Kittel) had opened the door, Barth believed, to drowning out the Word of God with “the voice of a stranger.” They were welcoming into the life and liturgy of the Church a foreign god, politically alluring, personally consoling, shaped by human hands and thus alien to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Barth insisted that Christian love required the Church to be “completely hard and completely cold” towards any teaching that would compromise the Christian faith on the altar of an idolatry rooted in racial superiority or the vicious, yet tempting lure of a demanding, glorious patriotism, rooted in blood, soil, and… the arrogance of nation.

As Vicki Barnett points out, “The real significance of Barmen… was its theological claim… that the time had come for the German Evangelical Church to declare
a status confessionis.” The biblical teaching of the Church had so disintegrated over time that it had become a hollow shell. For several hundred years, the Church in Germany had accommodated itself to the longings and hopes of the individual, urged on by its desire in the twentieth century to be popular and acceptable to society, and thus vulnerable to the danger of “every wind that blows.” The Church had become a fraud. As Busch describes it, the German Christian cause was “false and rotten to the core.” The heart of the problem, the corruption of the Church’s teaching, according to Barth and others, was “the understanding of revelation.” The issue? Are there, in addition to God’s revelation of the divine nature and will for the world in Jesus Christ, additional sources of revelation that the Church might claim as valid for its life and the content of its faith? Human wisdom, philosophical insights, “natural religion?” At Barmen, the 138 delegates, lay and clergy, who had gathered from every part of Germany, issued a resounding… “No.” Or, to put it more accurately, the delegates confessed that “Jesus Christ, as he is testified to us in the Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God, whom we are to hear, whom we are to trust and obey in life and in death.” Every other source of revelation (including the messianic understanding of a political leader as divinely inspired and sent, or of a nation endowed with messianic attributes,) presents a distorted picture of who God is. It leads the Church into temptation; to the embrace of idolatry; bending low in worship of a plethora of false gods. In a speech several months later to a convention of Reformed Church pastors and members at the Bergkirche in Osnabruck, Barth kept up the attack, warning those gathered not to consider the scriptures and confessions of the Church as mere “ornaments,” easily set aside along with “the truth of the triune God.”

There come moments, rare moments, teaching moments, in the life of the Church, when Christians are required to acknowledge the presence of a status confessionis. Wisely, Vicky Barnett urges us to approach a status confessionis, if ever we dare risk it, with prayerful thoughtfulness and with great caution. And yet, churches have a lot to lose, she tells us, “even their very souls,” by retreating in times of crisis, backing away in times of evil incarnate, succumbing to voices that urge silence when public confession and witness to the crucified and risen Christ are required. For all its weaknesses, the Confessional Synod of Barmen summoned the Church urgently to examine the content of its preaching, to test the spirits of the time, to challenge the reality of false gods in society by rooting itself in the truth of the gospel, refusing to compromise its teaching in a vain search for welcome, popularity, acceptability, even a place of honor in society. As Article 3 of the “Barmen Declaration” states it: “We reject the false doctrine that the Church could have permission to hand over the form of its message and of its order to whatever it itself might wish or the vicissitudes of the prevailing ideological and political convictions of the day.” And Article 6: “We reject the false doctrine that with human vainglory the Church could place the Word and the work of the Lord in the service of self-chosen desires, purposes, plans.” (see UCC website)

“One of the lessons of the Holocaust for Christian churches,” Vicki Barnett reminds us, “is that, where important things are at stake, voices must be raised and stands must be taken.” A “good starting point,” she suggests, “is the examination of what we confront in the world that not only cannot be justified biblically, but that we are called as Christians to witness against… The value of arguing, discussing, reflecting and praying for discernment of where we have crossed the line into the territory of the status confessionis is that we are compelled, like Christians in Germany during the 1930s, to decide what we really believe, who we really are as a church.” This can only occur “after deep scriptural and theological reflection.” And here is the rub. Where is this needed “reflection” taking place? What shall we make of “sound teaching?” What of the Church’s current, often embarrassing and desperate attempts to preserve its own life in North America?
Are we prepared, amidst our remarkable theological diversity in the Church (and, in many cases our biblical indifference and our romance with the “spirit of the times”) to dump the various political and other ideologies that are sometimes utterly compelling to us; distorting, even determining our “message,” and to engage in a disciplined study of the Scriptures, prayerfully open to faith lived with joyful obedience? Will we listen when we are asked: “What does the Lord require of you?” “What is truth?” “Who do you say that I am?” “Can any good come out of Nazareth?” What of the “gods of metal?” What of the sometimes quiet insistence among Christians that ultimately “our only comfort in life and in death” is the missile we construct, the canopy of defense we build in the heavens, the “Star Wars” scenarios we erect and pay for through our taxes, while little children perish daily by the thousands for lack of a cup of clean water, or the sanctions we apply or the embargos we endorse or the weapons we create in infinite number? What of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s observation that “the service of the church has to be given to those who suffer violence and injustice;” that the church is summoned to take to itself “all the sufferers, all the forsaken of every party and of every status?” What does it mean to “open your mouth for the voiceless?” (Prov. 31:8) Has this anything to do with discipleship? With Christian formation? Are we prepared to challenge counterfeit expressions of Christianity or to take on the God-awful distortions and heresies that abound not only in the religious right (and most certainly there!) but also in the soft compliance of many of us in the “liberal church” to what feels comfortable to our famished souls? Will the Church, on biblical grounds, and in our congregations publicly oppose the deepening disease of nationalism, the love of power, the building of empire, the despicable beauty of “war without end,” the reality of civic religion and its crucifixion of faith, the militancy of false piety? Will we cease giving ourselves permission to engage in false teaching? Admitting our own sin, are we open to saying when “Armageddon” replaces the cross and resurrection: “We have different beliefs, different spirits and a different God?” Is there an openness among us to even discussing the possibility of a status confessionis in a time of storm, tempest and idolatry? It would require humility and a re-formation of thinking! Nothing to fool with! But difficult! Bruising! Costly! Yet not impossible given the living presence of the Holy Spirit; text, prayer, and our ecclesiastical roots in a heritage that is called to be ever reforming.

If we dare consider the present hour in the history of the Church in the United States in the context of status confessionis, or at least a state of emergency, are we prepared through our study and prayer to meet the One Karl Barth described as the “God who is really God? Not a fifth wheel on a wagon, but the wheel which drives all the rest? Not a notion, not a view, but the power of life which overcomes the powers of death? Not an adornment to the world, but a lever which is applied to the world? Not a feeling with which one toys, but a fact which one takes seriously”? As the 70th anniversary of the Barmen Declaration is observed this year, President John Thomas of the United Church of Christ and Dr. Carl Rasmussen, an attorney and UCC scholar of “Barmen” and of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, will address some of these issues. Where? At the 20th anniversary of the Craigville Colloquy (Craigville Conference Center of the Massachusetts Conference on Cape Cod), July 12-16. The occasion promises “sound teaching.” And a vital “teaching moment” in the UCC.
The thing that fascinates me most about the United States is that dogged determination to cling tightly to the American dream of freedom and justice for all humankind. The words, “I have a dream,” from Martin Luther King’s speech in 1963, remain to this very day a precise, visionary formation that captures the longing for peaceful, non-violent resistance to oppression and discrimination, a daunting longing for justice for everyone, and for a world in which all people can live together in wholeness.

This vision has a distinct Christian tone to it, since it reflects the equality and the common worth of all human beings before God. Whoever embraces this vision will be wide awake and critical wherever there is discrimination, the abuse of power, or the perversion of justice. I am grateful for the many personal friends I have in the United Church of Christ (as well as in the Presbyterian Church, USA, and in the United Methodist Church), who take their places in the tradition of the American peace movement; those who seek honest dialogue, and—as we have seen most recently in the months before the election of your president—are willing to stake out their own position in the midst of the discussion.

Long before the vote, the political scientist John Green (from the Bliss Institute) predicted that religion would be the decisive factor in the election. This is a judgment that was also shared here in Germany. Our media conveyed a growing sense of the significance and the deepening influence of the “evangelicals,” particularly the fundamentalist “free churches” in your country.

“TAZ,” a progressive, country-wide newspaper, wrote on November 5th: “The faithful Bush supporters are, according to an analysis of the voting patterns, white men, those from well-off families, and faithful church-goers. Three-quarters of all ‘evangelical’ Christians voted for the victorious president.”

Obviously, this judgment doesn’t completely fit since there is no such thing as “the” evangelical Christian who happens just to be “white.” But this offers me an chance to pose a few questions:

1. Can the historic churches of the Reformation heritage in the United States strengthen their influence in national politics?

2. Can they recast the worthiness of family, faith, tradition, patriotism and nation dynamically and progressively in the sense of Martin Luther King’s “dream”?

3. Has the contrast deepened between the urban-secular and the rural-religious dimensions in America?

4. Is it true that many people voted under the impression that the Democrats no longer represent the values of the general public? This being the case, may the presidential election have been seen as an chance to create a counter-balance to polarizing cultural issues such as same-sex marriage?
5. It is my impression that the “values questions” seem to have played a far larger role in the election than questions related to the economy, the environment, foreign policy or the politics of social welfare. Is this accurate?

6. The results of the election can be interpreted as a legitimatization of a position that conflicts and crises can be resolved by the use of unilateral force. Is this true?

“Four more years” was a slogan we heard in the election and in the victorious outcome (for the Republicans). Whoever receives the most electors, the most electoral votes, and the absolute majority of those who voted, appears definitively to have a clear mandate.

What worries many of us is that President Bush will understand his victory at the polls as a mandate to broaden the war in Iraq. The continuing escalation of the military occupation clearly has a down side, namely the potential dismantling of health and social security coverage through privatization at home. Is the victory at the polls a “blank check” for such a development?

The mission in Iraq is collapsing. It has not been possible to “democratize” this vast land according to American plans; rather chaos and violence have run amok giving rise to a deepening hatred towards the occupiers in the daily lives of the ordinary and hard-pressed Iraqi people. As this happens, resistance to the occupiers deepens. President Bush is winning new enemies daily in Iraq. There is a fatal element in this, consisting of the president being capable of interpreting such developments in terms of a special, divine calling (entrusted to him) and thus responding with a hegemonic political claim (upon Iraq).

More than once in the past few months, often in fact, I’ve heard it said that the “leading nation” understands itself as the “chosen nation.” What I long to hear is the strong voice of the Church that remembers how the Pilgrim fathers and mothers and the settlers in the colonies of New England sought to live their faith with profound respect for the creation and the environment in which they found themselves—and that this strong theme might somehow be translated and come to fruition in discipleship that makes its way between secular and fundamentalist streams in society, independently and with deep conviction. I believe that in such a time as this nothing is more crucial than a bold and clear confession of faith. That is the Reformation tradition—rooted in a living, vital Church that knows the signs of the times and is prepared to lift up its voice. Such a Church will know itself changed thereby, precisely because it is a Church present in and for the world, inspired by the knowledge that its freedom is forever grounded in the obligation to deliver the message of the free grace of God to all people in Christ’s stead… (Barmen, Article 6).

(translation from the original German text by Frederick Trost)
In Prayer and Mutual Consultation

Dear Friends in the United Church of Christ (USA),

The outcome of the elections in the USA has engendered joy and gratitude with some of you, but sadness and sorrow with many others. Here in Europe we have heard that a deep and ominous gap has emerged not only in your nation but also in the churches and denominations.

Many friends here join me in my concern about this potentially dangerous situation. We are not entitled to give advice on how to deal with such a crucial challenge. You will certainly explore this yourselves in prayer and mutual consultation (mutua consolatio fratrum).

I am sure you will not satisfy yourselves with the phrase “It does not matter who is president; the essential thing is that God is governing and that Jesus Christ is Lord.” Surely, you will not abide such a passive attitude but rather look for ways to heal the harm and to bridge the gap that may have arisen, wherever that is. I want to let you know that we accompany you in your efforts with our prayers. You are also in our thoughts. Please allow me here to express a few additional reflections.

First of all, I pray that you can avoid the danger of which Jews and Samaritans became victims at the time when Jesus lived among them. You recall how they were linked by the same origin but that they were deeply divided by a mutual hatred and contempt. They understood the word and the purposes of God in different ways. Jesus, being a Jew himself, resisted this poisoned spirit and attempted to open those hardened hearts. In the famous parable in Luke 10, he contrasted the Good Samaritan with the cold and stiff-necked Jewish authorities. You recall how he rebuked his own disciples (Luke 9: 51f) when they wanted fire to rain down from above on a Samaritan village where they had been refused food and lodging. And Jesus purposely included Samaria when he promised his spirit to the disciples in order to make them his witnesses to the whole world (Acts 1:6f).

We know that as Christians approach one another mutual love is decisive. We know, moreover, that “there is no fear in love” (1 John 4:18). This is for us, of course, a huge challenge and I have asked myself: “Is it possible to really love a government for which I have not voted and which I regard a danger to peace and justice?” Since the election of November 2, I have heard expressions of apprehension and fear. I confess that I sense some of this myself. Yet,... “there is no fear in love.” And it belongs to the nature of this love to share one’s fears with those who think differently. It is part of this love to draw the government’s attention in a decent and civil way to potential dangers and threats. It seems to me that this will be, first of all, the task of those Christians who have conveyed responsibility to the president and the government for another four years. But those Christians disappointed by the results of the election, must not stand aside in resignation, resentfully expressing their anger. Even in dealing with the powers of this world, those of us who are Christians have to make recognizable Christ’s spirit of love, even as opposition is shown in resisting the powerful in favor of the weak. Those in power should be encouraged permanently to act more from love than from fear.

Therefore, I hope that the constructive elements of future United States policy such as development aid and the protection of the environment may become more predominant; more visible in the eyes of the world, than the defensive or aggressive military actions of your government.
I hope that those of us who are Christians are successful first, in finding peaceful fellowship (koinonia) among ourselves. But beyond this, I hope that out of our fellowship we can credibly approach our politicians, encouraging them to stimulate, assist and strengthen the community between nations and peoples. I hope for a strengthening of the authority of the United Nations, for common efforts to maintain the balance in God’s creation for an authentic interceding on behalf of the basic rights of all humankind. I hope for a policy that encourages the weak and protects the disadvantaged. I pray and hope that we Christians in Europe and you in the United States may become witnesses for God’s steadfast love and faithfulness to all people. I trust that the standards of Jesus Christ will prove stronger than those things human beings call “moral values.” I am confident that God’s grace and mercy can bring us together where we tend to drift apart. I believe that Jesus will let confidence grow where there still may be fear.

Just this morning, I came across some words of William S. Coffin: “Church is where there is such a climate of acceptance that each of us can be his or her unique self. Church is where we learn to be free, strong, and mature by sharing with one another our continued bondage, weakness, and immaturity.” May we all be blessed by that freedom which is God’s gift to us in the One who has come that we might have life.

In Christ’s love, your,

Gerhard Koslowsky,
Rott, Germany
November 15, 2004

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**Peace on Earth**

[From a sermon proclaimed by Martin Luther King, Jr., at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, on Christmas Eve, 1967]

This Christmas season finds us a rather bewildered human race. We have neither peace within nor peace without. Everywhere paralyzing fears harrow people by day and haunt them by night. Our world is sick with war; everywhere we turn we see its ominous possibilities. And yet, my friends, the Christmas hope for peace and good will toward all (people) can no longer be dismissed as a kind of pious dream of some utopian. If we don’t have good will toward (the people) of this world, we will destroy ourselves by the misuse of our own instruments and our own power. Wisdom born of experience should tell us that war is obsolete. There may have been a time when war served as a negative good by preventing the spread and growth of an evil force, but the very destructive power of modern weapons of warfare eliminates even the possibility that war may any longer serve as a negative good. And so, if we assume that life is worth living, if we assume that (human)kind has a right to survive, then we must find an alternative to war—and so let us… explore the conditions for peace. Let us… think anew on the meaning of that Christmas hope” “Peace on earth, good will toward men.” (sic) And as we explore these conditions, I would like to suggest that (humanity) really go all out to study the meaning of nonviolence, its philosophy and its strategy.
We have experimented with the meaning of nonviolence in our struggle for racial justice in the United States, but now the time has come for (men and women) to experiment with nonviolence in all areas of human conflict, and that means nonviolence on an international scale.

Now let me suggest first that if we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation; and this means we must develop a world perspective. No individual can live alone; no nation can live alone, and as long as we try, the more we are going to have war in this world. Now the judgment of God is upon us, and we must either learn to live together as brothers (and sisters) or we are all going to perish together as fools…

It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly… We aren’t going to have peace on earth until we recognize this basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality… If there is to be peace on earth… we must finally believe in the ultimate morality of the universe, and believe that all reality hinges on moral foundations. Something must remind us of this as we once again stand in the Christmas season and think of the Easter season simultaneously, for the two somehow go together… I have a dream that one day men and women will rise up and come to see that they are made to live together as brothers and sisters… I still have a dream today that one day war will come to an end, that men and women will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, that nations will no longer rise up against nations, neither will they study war any more… It will be a glorious day, the morning stars will sing together, and the sons and daughters of God will shout for joy.

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And They Hi-jacked Jesus

(Bill Moyers, May, 2004)

Over the past few years, as the poor got poorer, the health care crisis worsened, wealth and media became more and more concentrated, and our political system was bought out from under us, prophetic Christianity lost its voice. The Religious Right drowned everyone else out.

And they hijacked Jesus. The very Jesus who stood in Nazareth and proclaimed, “The Lord has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor.” The very Jesus who told 5,000 hungry people that all of you will be fed, not just some of you. The very Jesus who challenged the religious orthodoxy of the day by feeding the hungry on the Sabbath, who offered kindness to the prostitute and hospitality to the outcast, who raised the status of women and treated even the tax collector like a child of God. They very Jesus who drove the money changers from the temple. This Jesus has been hijacked and turned into a guardian of privilege instead of a champion of the dispossessed. Hijacked, he was made over into a militarist, hedonist, and lobbyist, sent prowling the halls of Congress in Guccis, seeking tax breaks and loopholes for the powerful, costly new weapon systems that don’t work, and punitive public policies.
Let’s get Jesus back. The Jesus who inspired a Methodist ship-caulker named Edward Rogers to crusade across New England for an eight-hour work day. Let’s get back the Jesus who caused Frances William to rise up against the sweatshop. The Jesus who called a young priest named John Ryan to champion child labor laws, unemployment insurance, a minimum wage, and decent housing for the poor – ten years before the New Deal. The Jesus in whose name Dorothy Day challenged the church to march alongside auto workers in Michigan, fishermen and textile workers in Massachusetts, brewery workers in New York, and marble cutters in Vermont. The Jesus who led Martin Luther King to Memphis to join sanitation workers in their struggle for a decent wage.

That Jesus has been scourged by his own followers, dragged through the streets by pious crowds, and crucified on a cross of privilege. Mel Gibson missed that. He missed the resurrection – the spiritual awakening that followed the death of Jesus. He missed Pentecost.

Our times cry out for a new politics of justice. This is no partisan issue. It doesn’t matter if you’re a liberal or a conservative, Jesus is both and neither. It doesn’t matter if you’re a Democrat or Republican, Jesus is both and neither. We need a faith that takes on the corruption of both parties. We need a faith that challenges complacency of all power. If you’re a Democrat, shake them up. If you’re a Republican, shame them. Jesus drove the money changers from the temple. We must drive them from the temples of democracy. Let’s get Jesus back…

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The One Great Hope

(Excerpt from a homily of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, May, 1932)

Blessed are you outcasts and despised, you casualties of society, you men and women without work, you broken and ruined ones, you lonely and forsaken, you who endure violence and unjustly suffer, you who suffer in body and soul. Blessed are you since God’s joy will come over you and will remain eternally with you.

That is the Gospel of the dawn of the new world, the new order, that is the world of God and the order of God. The deaf hear, the blind see, the lame walk, and the gospel is preached to the poor… So seriously does he take suffering that he must immediately destroy it. The power of the demons must be broken wherever Christ is—for that reason he healed and for that reason he said to his disciples: “If you have faith, you will do greater works than I.” The kingdom of God is still in the dawning. The deeds of healing are like summer lightning, flashes out of the new world…

Blessed are you who weep since you shall laugh, you who hunger since you will be satisfied. No cynical consolation, but it is the one great hope, the new world, the joyous tidings, the merciful God!…
“Fear Not! Great Joy!”

(Martin Luther, Sermon for Christmas Day, 1531)

Thereby is shown that this King is born unto those who live in fear and trembling, and such alone belong to his Kingdom. To them shall be preached, as the angels preached unto the poor, frightened shepherds: “Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy.” And, truly, such joy is offered to all men and women, but only those can receive it who are frightened in their consciences and troubled in their hearts. These are they who belong to me and to my preaching, and to them shall I bring good tidings. Is it not a wonderful thing that this joy is nearest to those whose conscience is the most restless?

The world is happy and of good cheer when it has loaves and fishes, means and money, power and glory. But a sad and troubled heart desires nothing but peace and comfort, that it may know whether God is graciously inclined towards it. And this joy, wherein a troubled heart finds peace and rest, is so great that all the world’s happiness is nothing in comparison. Therefore should such good tidings be proclaimed to wretched consciences as the angel preaches here: Hearken to me, you of a sad and troubled heart, I bring you good tidings. He has not come down to earth and been made man that he might cast you into hell, much less was he for that end crucified and given over to death for you. But he has come that with great joy you might rejoice in him. And if you would truly define Christ and properly describe who and what he is, mark well the angel’s word, how he defined and describes him, saying that he is and is called: “Great Joy.” O blessed are those who can well understand the meaning of this word, and hold it truly in their hearts; for therein dwells strength.

A Brief Summary of the UCC-UEK Working Group Minutes

April 19-20, 2004, Chapel Hill, North Carolina
October 29-30, 2004, Indianapolis, Indiana

The Spring Meeting of the Working Group was hosted by the members of the United Church (UCC) of Chapel Hill, NC. Ten members of the Working Group were present. Guests included the Conference Minister of the Southern Conference, Stephen W. Camp and his spouse, Patricia Camp, the Praeses of the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland, Nikolaus Schneider, and the Ecumenical Officer of the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland, Christine Busch, among others. A delegation of pastors from the UEK, visiting in the Southern Conference at the time, was welcomed to the meeting.

Praeses Schneider and Pfr. Busch gave a detailed and precise presentation on the nature of “Kirchengemeinschaft” from the perspective of the new Union of Evangelical Churches (UEK) and its relationship to the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD). They also spoke about the 25th anniversary of “Kirchengemeinschaft” between the UEK (formerly EKU) and the UCC to be observed in November, 2005.
UCC Conferences with active relationships to Regional Churches in the UEK were identified with the hope that each Conference might have a representative present for the Berlin observance, along with other guests from the UCC.

Professor Mark Burrows of Andover Newton Theological School spoke on “The Meaning and Implications of Kirchengemeinschaft Today” from the perspective of the UCC.

There was discussion of the World Council of Churches theme “The Decade to Overcome Violence” (The Power and the Promise of Peace) and also the importance of introducing a new generation of UCC members to the relevance and vitality of “Full Communion” between the UCC and the UEK both in terms of theology and the mission of the Church.

Attention was given to the budget of the Working Group and the necessity of attracting support from beyond the budget of the Wider Church Ministries (WCM) since these resources are continuing to decline. A particular hope is that UCC congregations that have met their OCWM goals might consider designating an annual gift in support of “Kirchengemeinschaft” through the WCM. This, in addition to designated gifts from individuals who have a particular commitment to “Full Communion” between the two Churches.

The Working Group discussed the draft of a document called “Operating Principles and Protocols” which will guide “Kirchengemeinschaft” in the UCC in the future. As part of this discussion, Mark Burrows was elected Vice Chr., Lydia Veliko Secretary, and Tobias Schlingensiepen a member of the Executive Committee, which includes the aforementioned, in addition to the chairperson and Dr. Makari, staff to the Working Group.

Initial discussion took place about recognition of the 25th anniversary year of “Full Communion” at the 2005 General Synod in Atlanta, Georgia. Attention turned as well to the theme of “Sound Teaching” in the Church and the engagement of Conferences, theological seminaries, pastoral leadership and laity in consideration of this vital subject.

Letters of appreciation were drafted to Dr. Christa Grengel, who retired in 2004 from her ministry with the EKD in Hannover where she was responsible for ecumenical relations with churches in the Middle East and to Pastor Robert Hunsicker of Pennsylvania who has faithfully served as a member of the Working Group and, in more recent time, as a consultant in “Kirchengemeinschaft.”

There was considerable discussion of the present situation in the Middle East with a focus on the Church’s witness in the Palestinian territories and the current violence in that part of the world. Gratitude was expressed for the witness of the Middle East Council of Churches. Reports from the various Conferences were part of this meeting as well.

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The Autumn Meeting of the Working Group was hosted by Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis and by members of the Indiana-Kentucky Conference UEK Working Group. Ten members of the Working Group were present and several guests, including the president of the seminary, Dr. Edward Wheeler, and the past president, Dr. Richard Dickinson. We were glad to welcome as well a member of the UCC Forum in the UEK, Wolfgang Dzieran, who gave a helpful report on the work of the Forum and current developments within the UEK.
Discussion continued about the budget available to the Working Group in light of the decreases taking place in the budget of the Wider Church Ministries of the UCC. Special appreciation was expressed to St. Paul’s UCC in Waterloo, Illinois for a large designated gift in support of “Kirchengemeinschaft.” Peter Makari spoke about the witness of Wider Church Ministries/Common Global Ministries in relation to a number of mission foci around the world, including the Middle East.

There was a lengthy discussion of the 25th anniversary of Kirchengemeinschaft to be celebrated in 2005 in Berlin and in 2006 in the UCC. It is hoped that the UCC delegation to the Berlin observance will include persons designated by UCC Conferences with active relationships to UEK Regional Churches and also one of the UCC related diaconic ministries, in addition to youth and young adults. Letters are to be sent to the respective Conferences prior to the end of 2004 inviting participation in the UCC delegation of thirty persons.

Discussion on the WCC theme “Decade to Overcome Violence” continued, with specific reference to work taking place in the Pacific Northwest Conference of the UCC and a focus on youth. Part of the discussion included “Sound Teaching” and a draft proposal prepared by Mark Burrows called “A Treasure Held in Earthen Vessels: Confessing Our Faith in the Face of Violence.” It is anticipated that plans related to this theme shall continue to be developed and implemented over the next 3-4 years. Input will be requested from the UEK so we might work together in developing these plans.

There was discussion of the future composition of the Working Group, a website, the 2004 newsletter, ecumenical and Conference reports, and the next meeting of the Working Group to be held May 5-7, 2005.
I Wonder as I Wander

I wonder as I wander, out under the sky,
How Jesus the Saviour did come for to die,
For poor o’n’ry people like you and like I,
I wonder as I wander, out under the sky.

When Mary birthed Jesus all in a cow’s stall,
Came wise men and farmers and shepherds and all,
But high from God’s heaven a star’s light did fall,
And the promise of ages it then did recall.

If Jesus had wanted for any wee thing,
A star in the sky or a bird on the wing,
Of all of God’s angels in heav’n for to sing,
He surely could have it, for he was the King.

I wonder as I wander, out under the sky,
How Jesus the Saviour did come for to die,
For poor o’n’ry people like you and like I,
I wonder as I wander, out under the sky.

(Appalachian Folk Carol)
Der Engel des Herrn


Karl Barth, Weihnacht, 1954

Jauchzet, ihr Himmel

Jauchzet, ihr Himmel frohlocket, ihr Engel in Choeren,
singt dem Herren, dem Heiland der Menschen, zu Ehren!
Sehet doch da: Gott will so freundlich und nah
zu den Verlornen sich kehren.

Jauchzet, ihr Himmel, frohlocket, ihr Enden der Erden!
Gott und der Sünder, die sollen zu Freunden nun werden.
Friede und Freud wird uns verkündigt heut;
freuet euch, Hirten und Herden!

Sehet dies Wunder, wie tief sich der Höchste hier beuget;
sehet die Liebe, die endlich als Liebe sich zeigt.
Gott wird ein Kind, trage und hebe die Sünder;
alles anbetet und schweiget.

Gerhard Tersteegen, 1731
These materials have been prepared at the Mission House Center, Lakeland College.

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