

## If you are not leaders, you are not clergy. Clergy lead their communities

William McComish

February 5, 2020

World Clergy Leadership Conference General Assembly in South Korea



I think we should be quite clear: if you are not leaders, you are not clergy. Clergy have a role of leading their communities. Now this role has many forms. There is the form of the priest, who is some kind of intermediary between the people and God. There is the minister of religion, like a Presbyterian, like myself, who is more of a teacher, like a rabbi, like an imam. That is a different role but the two are complementary. The two are recognized in different versions of the Christian Church. But everywhere, in Christian churches and other forms of clergy in other religions, the clergy are the leaders of the community. And the leadership is recognized by communities. Even in modern Europe, where religious institutions are no longer as highly regarded as they used to be fifty years ago, people are still religious, and people still have an enormous respect for the ordained ministry. So, leadership, what kind of leadership, what kind of world?

I spent a long time thinking about this a few years ago, when I did lecture tour in South Korea. I lectured to theological students in Hanil, in Honam, in Busan and in many other places. It was at that point that as an ordained Presbyterian minister, I began to question my own identity. What is the role of a minister of religion? I eventually decided that it is something like the star that Mercedes uses as a symbol for its vehicles, a star that shines in three different directions. Our first direction is our personal faith, the second direction is community, which you serve and to which somehow you also owe allegiance and the third direction is to the outside world. If one of these directions is missing, you are not really fulfilling your role as clergy. You are certainly not fulfilling your role as a leader. You must have a personal faith. You must have a relationship to a particular community. You must have a relationship to the outside world, with a message and an identity. You must have a capacity to offer values to the wider community. These three elements are essential.

### Comfort versus responsibility

In the early days, the Christian churches did not have an ordained clergy. It developed when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Many of the terms that we still use, like bishop, like deacon, like priest, were levels of the secular administration of the Roman Empire. In the beginning, they weren't religious titles at all. But the clergy as the leaders... Let us think about the world we are in. No later than this morning, the current general secretary of the United Nations expressed his concern at the state of the world and his fear for the immediate future with the development of wars, with the fear of nuclear war.

That is the world we are living in and we as clergy have become, perhaps, too comfortable. We live in comfortable circumstances. We have a regular salary. The community respects us. We have a role to play, but this is not enough, for we are in a world with injustice and cruelty and down-right evil and violence.

How can we live comfortably in a world with fifteen million refugees? How can we live comfortably when there are wars every day and people being killed every day? How intensely have we prayed for peace in Syria and in Yemen? How intensely have we prayed for peace between the United States and Iran? I hope that we have prayed intensely for the unification of Korea, but with all due respect for a country which I love and which I know extremely well, Korea is one very big problem. But it is unfortunately not the only international problem in the world today.

### **Leadership and charity**

So what is our leadership? Our leadership is in a world in which (as I said) there is much evil. But our leadership, our leadership as clergy must be outgoing to the larger world, to other religious groups, especially to religious groups like the Yezidi or the Rohingya that are persecuted, violated and pushed into being refugees. Our leadership should be a matter of proclaiming charity and not just talking about it. Not so long ago I was at a meeting in London and we talked about Christian charity. It was very good, and everyone agreed, and we said lots of lovely things. And of courses, then you went out and you saw people sleeping in the street. We didn't actually do anything about that. But if charity is not practical, it is not charity, just as we are not clergy if we are not leaders of communities and of opinion.

### **Pity the refugees**

And we must proclaim tolerance. But there are things of which we should not be tolerant. We should not be tolerant of injustice or corruption. We must proclaim justice and not just as a kind of wonderful concept in the sky. Justice for refugees is an important matter for me personally because in the eighteenth century, my family was massacred in Scotland. The women and the children were forced out into the snow to die. And it was one person that arrived in Ireland as a refugee. So I believe that refugees are not criminals. And when Viktor Orbán [prime minister of Hungary], whom I met in Geneva Cathedral, erects a wall against refugees and says he is defending Christian civilization, I question his judgment, because Jesus was a refugee, and in the Bible we are specifically instructed to welcome the stranger as we welcome the fatherless, the widow and the orphan.

And we must, as leaders, encourage dialogue. Now, this becomes more difficult with certain religious groups. And if there is a kind of new religious center of people who can pray together, who have similar values and would be happy to worship together, there are also people who feel that they don't want to have anything to do with other people. That is one of the sadnesses of my life and of our time -- that in some ways the crevasses are getting wider and deeper and we ought to admit it.

There are movements like the Universal Peace Federation and other movements for bringing people together. Thank God. But there are people who want to force humanity apart. And we must proclaim social justice. We are a religion in which there is neither slave nor free, nor woman nor man, nor black nor white. This is what we must proclaim, what we must work for.

### **Be strong of spirit**

We are in a world with rising sea levels and burning forests. For us this is not just a matter of ecology, not just a matter of good sense and worrying about the world in which my granddaughters will live; it is also a religious point. We are the stewards of God's creation and God is going to ask us what we were getting up to. As clergy this is also an aspect of our leadership. So, to represent our religion, any religion worth the name, to the outer world, we need a great deal of moral courage.

We should look to our past and see the Martin Luther Kings of this world and look at the pastors that were the opponents of Hitler -- Pastor Niemöller, Pastor Bonhoeffer -- all the people who worked against tyranny. These are our role models. If you think, Well, I'm comfortable and I'm safe and nobody is bothering me, then who are you? You are not being a leader. You are not clergy. This is our heritage and it goes back to the Old Testament. It goes back to Isaiah. It goes back to Jeremiah. It goes back to Nathan. The wonderful phrases that you get in Jeremiah and Isaiah are the basis of our whole concept of social justice. My father was an economist and one of his favorite expressions was quoting Isaiah about grinding the faces of the poor [Isaiah 3:15] because this is what the evil will do. And the phrase which I've already quoted about defending the fatherless, the orphan, the widow, the foreigner. This is our social justice.

This is religion. This is what we must lead our community to do and the social community in general. This is our prophetic role. Prophetic because we are called to be prophetic. We are not called to be spectators of the world, like people at a football game that look at it from the stands and say, Oh, he's doing very well. I approve of that. I think that is not very good. We are not observers of the world. We are participants in the world. We are called by God to be leaders of the world, leaders of public opinion, leaders for justice and for peace.

## **Pray and be active**

I think it is only fair to admit that there is much evil in the world. And I feel as I get older that in our world there are people who form public opinion and who do so in a very evil way. Although I have spent my life in French Protestant churches, I take a great interest in the English-speaking world because I was brought up in Ireland in the English-speaking world in the Presbyterian church. I am horrified by the leaders of the English-speaking world today.... I see people who are vulgar. I see people that tell lies. I see people who are sexist, and I see people who are racist.... This is the kind of attitude that I think is poisoning the minds of the world. This is our enemy and if we are leaders, this is what we are going to oppose -- not by sitting and doing nothing but by praying and being active.

A few years ago, for United Nation's Day, in 1999, when I was a dean of Geneva Cathedral, the Swiss ambassador to the United Nations asked us to do something for United Nation's Day. So I gathered some of my friends together in my office in the cathedral. What do you do when you bring a number of clergy ecclesiastics together? They write a text and I think we wrote a particularly good one. Around the table we were not just Protestants. We were Protestants and Catholics. There were Orthodox. There were Baha'i. There were old Catholics. There were Muslims. There were Jews and there were people who weren't very sure. And we wrote a text. We wrote a text for one occasion which became a text, I would say, for all time. It was called the Geneva Spiritual Appeal. And why did it become important? It became important because it wasn't a new-age text. It didn't have beautiful sentiments. It said three things that we could not accept, and it is three prophetic negatives which reside in people's hearts to this day. I will finish by reading this to you.

## **The Geneva Spiritual Appeal**

Because our personal convictions or the religions to which we owe allegiance have in common a respect for the integrity of humankind, because our personal convictions or the religions to which we owe allegiance have in common a rejection of hatred and violence, because our personal convictions or the religions to which we owe allegiance have in common the hope for a better and more just world, representing religious communities and civil society, we appeal to the leaders of this world, whatever their field of influence, to strictly adhere to the following three principles:

A refusal to invoke a religious or spiritual power to justify violence of any kind

A refusal to invoke a religious or spiritual source to justify discrimination and exclusion

A refusal to exploit or dominate others by means of strength, intellectual capacity or spiritual persuasion, wealth or social status

God bless you all. Thank you very much for listening to me.