

**“JUST ONE BODY”**  
**The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger**  
**October 3, 2010**

I ask you this morning to imagine a procession of dignitaries of a World Council of Churches assembly. Because we celebrate the church in Kenya this morning, this imaginary procession is led by the African Church of the Holy Spirit, which is based in Kenya and came into existence as a result of the African Pentecostal Movement of the 1920s. Seven hundred thousand members strong in 1,260 congregations across Kenya, this denomination believes in the baptism of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, the importance of dreams and visions. Its officials are elected by local congregations and given the title “high priest.” The priests wear white turbans and red and white robes with large crosses appliquéd across the chest. They proudly carry the flag of their nation, believing that their faith melds the best of Christian and African traditions, with their lively worship, often going “off script” due to the movement of the Spirit among them. In their theology, they refer to the Christian scriptures as their supreme guide, and they embrace the Apostles and Nicene creeds.

Next we see the delegates of the Latin American Council of Churches. Formed in 1982 among various protestant, evangelical, and, most lately, Pentecostal groups stretching from Mexico to Peru and into the Caribbean, the CLAI, as it is known claims 2,000,000 members from 139 church bodies and organizations in 19 countries. The group focuses on creating opportunities for dialogue to bring about Christian unity, also working for peace and a just prosperity in its member nations. Their delegates in the procession are a colorful mix of hand-woven native fabrics and western business suits. They hold hands in the march forward as a sign of their unity.

The Asian region of the World Council of Churches stretches from Afghanistan in the west to Japan and North Korea in the east, Mongolia at the far North and Timor in the south. Of all the continental associations of the Council, here is the greatest diversity of culture and practice. Their movement in the procession is a dazzling mix of color, race, and tradition: from the patriarchs of the Orthodox church, to the evangelicals of Bangladesh, and the forty Christian denominations of Indonesia. As we know from our partner church in Japan, in parts of Asia, Christians are a minority group—less than 1%—and in some cases practice their faith secretly or in the face of subtle or open persecution. Over the past two decades, many of the Asian churches have stepped away from their euro-centric missionary roots, bringing new voices out of their cultural experience to our understanding of scripture and Christian history. And they, along with the church of the Middle East, bring with them a wealth of wisdom and experience in both inter-faith dialogue and interfaith conflict.

And finally, in my imaginary procession come the churches of Europe and North America: those most like us in denominational and theological heritage, we who come to the ecumenical table with our history, both good and ill, of missionary zeal; we, as well, who in the wake of World War II, have spearheaded the work of the World Council of Churches and other ecumenical outreach in the hope that if the Christians of the world could come together in mutual respectful dialogue and celebration, that our world would be that much closer to God’s vision of wholeness and peace.

Not all Christian denominations are represented at the great assemblies of the World Council. Most notably, the Roman Catholic church stands aloof—though it now sends visitors and observers, and in every nation and region, there are those who choose to live their faith steadfastly separate from other Christian groups. We, I think, most of us in the American Progressive churches, we don't so much deliberately hold ourselves apart from other churches as live so involved in our particular theological challenges and our own internal issues that we forget or at least rarely stop to consider that we are just one tiny piece of the church of Jesus Christ. We are twenty marchers in a procession of hundreds, and if we took time to listen and learn from other Christian voices in the world, our faith could be so deeply enriched. For example. It is ten years this year since we began our relationship with our partner church in Takarazuka, and though we meet them face to face rarely, I know how often I think of that congregation and hold them in prayer, how my thinking has been rearranged and my boundaries pushed in conversation with Rev. Tsukuda and others of the church. Think of the other conversations out there both being had and to be had with Christians across the globe. They are a part of us and we of them, even when we don't know it or pay no attention to it. So this morning, I want us just to pause for a moment and think of our Christian brothers and sisters, in Japan, in Kenya, in Indonesia, in Lebanon, in Chile, in every other corner of the earth, breaking bread, passing a common cup from hand to hand. "This is my body given for all of you," said Jesus, and so now we all are become Christ's body: eyes, ears, hands, feet, heart, bound together in holy mystery and Christ's hope that someday we might know ourselves all to be one. Thanks be to God. Amen.