

## **Christian Cacophony**

China, with over a billion people and considerable economic energy, presents itself as a challenge to Christians. Can we preach Christ's message there effectively?

The Christian message has its own power—the grace of the Holy Spirit. Thus it is already effective. People in China are coming to Christ.

Yet the sound of the preaching is discordant, cacophonous. Christians still speak a divided message.

Just as in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism or America after 9/11, habits of religious indifference can reassert themselves in China. Our choice of a divided Christian message may frustrate the work of the Spirit.

One hundred years ago, the ecumenical movement began with the recognition by missionaries that our divisions limited our effectiveness in preaching Christ. A century of conversation and dialogue has led to some outstanding results:

- Honest conversations has removed misunderstandings among Christians
- Dialogue has dismantled artificial barriers of the “they do A, so we have to do B” variety
- The Liturgical and Biblical Renewals have made all of us aware of our common roots in Scripture and the early church.
- Agreements on controverted issues such as Justification have been forged.

We are much more aware of what we have in common these days—and of disagreements still to be discussed. Our dialogue has moved us toward the “Greatest Common Denominator” of an enriched and fuller belief.

But we have yet to come to a common message for preaching. Despite the call for unity by Christ Himself [see John 17: 17-21] we are still divided.

A fuller, more robust message might make a difference in China—but also among the secularized in Europe and the United States.

In visiting the various campuses of the Consortium, I hear from faculty that members of their own congregations and even some seminarians are not that knowledgeable about their Christian faith.

People are less attached to the churches. We see this, for example, in the growing number of couples who are married outside the churches or not married at all.

Among those who attend church regularly, there is less knowledge of basic Christian teaching. In our seminaries, preachers are to take this lack of knowledge into account.

**“Presume nothing” is the watchword.**

An initial solution to this situation has been to emphasize Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran and Catholic Identity. Church officials call for this emphasis. Thus there are more courses in seminary and more continuing education opportunities.

**Almost three decades of such efforts have met with modest success.**

Some seek to solve the problem by zealously rebuilding the wall of division. These efforts attract a fervent, vocal but small minority. This “we are right and everyone else is wrong approach” does not ring true for most people.

We must patiently pray to the Spirit for a long-term solution. The building blocks are already present.

We begin by know the Scripture and our tradition in depth. Identity is important. Each Christian community has God-given gifts that must be known thoroughly and preserved.

Identity is a necessary but not sufficient condition for effective evangelization.

A further step, the one we are currently facing, is acknowledging and absorbing the gifts of our fellow Christians. This is harder. Human sinfulness, institutional self-preservation and honest differences present us from coming together.

They also hinder us from preaching the message of salvation effectively in our world.

**Patient listening for the voice of the Spirit is necessary.** The Spirit must tell us how to speak and what to say.