

## Words of Welcome by the General Secretary

### ***“THIS SPECIAL ECUMENICAL PLACE”***

By the Rev. Dr. Stephen J. Sidorak, Jr.

1:30 p.m.

September 9, 2009

Fall Meeting of the Board of Directors

General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns

The United Methodist Church

The Interchurch Center

475 Riverside Drive, New York, New York 10115

Welcome to “475”—the “God Box”—the “home office” of the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns of The United Methodist Church. It is quite an honor and really a thrill to have all of you here! We are gathered together today at a world-famous address. “475” is synonymous with the ecumenical movement itself around the *oikoumene*—unsurpassed in global recognition only by 150 route de Ferney in Geneva, Switzerland, the headquarters of the World Council of Churches. Numerous stars in the ecclesiastical and interreligious firmament have graced *this special ecumenical place* at “475” with their presence. And, now, we are graced with yours.

Because of the jam-packed nature of our agenda for this Fall Meeting, you will be working long hours every day with little time for rest each night.

Because we shortened by a day and a night the length of this meeting, there will be a “*busy-ness*” to the business we must conduct.

Because we will not meet again face to face until this same time next year, we will be racing through the agenda just to be sure we cover everything better discussed *or* debated—in person—so to speak.

Because we seek to be good stewards of both time and money, there will be an unavoidable intensity to this meeting that will test your endurance day to day and compound your fatigue night after night.

Our Ad Hoc Board Meeting Planning Task Force did its best to accommodate competing claims on our time. But the members of this group, in typical Wesleyan style, “determined to employ all your time in the work of God.” In the end, they did not yield to the temptation to “trifle away time.” (cf. *The Book of Discipline*, Paragraph 336.19a, 17)

Nevertheless, we expect that this Fall Meeting will energize you “to wake up in a city that never sleeps.” In his days as Senior Minister of The Riverside Church across the street, William Sloane Coffin often referred affectionately to New York City as “the adrenalin capitol of the world.” Hopefully, you will, forthwith, be able to embrace the salutary effects an “adrenalin rush” can have on the deliberations of a board of directors, despite the toll it can take on mind, body and spirit. Not to worry, it is not a permanent condition. It wears off after a while, usually upon departure. Still, while you are here, now and then, it would be wonderful if you would

allow yourselves to mellow out a little bit—to luxuriate in what Billy Joel described as being “in a New York state of mind.”

Now, let me offer a few words on behalf of The Interchurch Center or “TIC.”

Built to house the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., the building promptly became home to any number of other ecumenical bodies, among them the U.S. Office of the World Council of Churches. The many original denominational tenants of the building included the following instrumentalities of The Methodist Church; the Board of Missions, the Committee on Overseas Relief and the Commission on Public Relations and Information.

The Interchurch Center was made possible largely by the extraordinary largesse of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. As construction began, the building, in this Morningside Heights neighborhood of Manhattan, was immediately dubbed in newspaper headlines across the country as “the U.N. of Religion.” “475” was indicative of the new day that had dawned nationally and internationally in inter-denominational relationships.

In his history of The Interchurch Center published in 1993, United Methodist minister Edwin Sartain Gault, Jr., who served as Assistant to the President of The Interchurch Center for eighteen years, wrote of the high hopes invested in this new high rise. The building was to be “a tangible expression of the hope that this place might be a catalyst for the growing unity of the church...not merely as a symbol of Christian Unity, but as a force to be exercised in the pursuit of that goal; if necessary to drag the denominations, kicking and screaming, into the ecumenical age.” Apparently, securing the collective commitment to ecumenical endeavor of the so-called “mainline churches” required both stinging rebuke and gentle persuasion—even way back then!

A throng of over 30,000 attended the “Laying of the Cornerstone” Ceremonial on October 12, 1958. President Dwight D. Eisenhower was present to do the honors. A procession of over 500 began the event. Representatives of 37 Protestant and Orthodox churches carried colorful banners. Dignitaries from all walks of life were on hand to see—and to be seen. A titan of the New York-based publishing industry wrote from the Time-Life Building about the celebration. “The sparkle of the program equalled the brightness of the sunshine.”

In his Invocation, Methodist Bishop Herbert Welch, implored the Almighty: “We pray for the Church of Jesus Christ, in many lands and under many names. May the prayer of Thy Son, our Savior, be answered, that we Christians may be truly one—one in purpose and one in deed. May this great and significant gathering be used of Thee to further the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Thus, the theme, of this, our Fall Meeting: “That They May All Be One.”

The Rev. Dr. Ralph W. Sockman of Christ Church, Methodist in New York, during the address he delivered on the occasion of the cornerstone-laying entitled “Adventuring Allies,” observed: “If we would live and work with God, we must learn to live and work with one another.” The denizens of “475” enjoy an almost effortless collegiality in virtue of their close proximity to one another. This unique workplace affords valued and trusted co-workers in denominational, ecumenical and, nowadays, interreligious ministries, a convenient venue and precious “space” in which to “reason together” about their respective responsibilities. It is an added benefit to those of us blessed to be employed here because **already** “*We Are One in the Spirit*” in *who* we are and in *what* we do. Indeed, “we will work with each other, we will work side by side....”

In words that will sound very familiar to you and have a well nigh hymn-like quality to them, the Rev. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, Founding Pastor of The Riverside Church, closed the ecumenical festivities in prayer. "Like a city, set upon a hill, that cannot be hid is this (Interchurch) Center, whose cornerstone we have laid to to-day. We thank Thee for the Christian unity it symbolizes and for the opportunities of world-wide service which it enshrines. Grant us vision and wisdom, generosity and devotion, that in our use of the high privilege here given us we may not fail mankind (sic) or Thee."

To be sure, some of the "glory days" surrounding the early manifestations of the ecumenical movement in this country may be behind us. The initial enthusiasm for the ecumenical movement has decidedly waned since this building was built, especially in its more centralized forms. A few of the major denominational tenants have relocated their offices elsewhere in the land. Yet, there is something special, ecumenically speaking, about this place that endures to this day. I may be unable to articulate its sui generis character adequately or completely capture its significance historically, but I am fully conscious of it constantly and deeply appreciative of it professionally. Let me try to illustrate.

I recall the awe I felt the first time I entered this building back in 1980 when I was on a national speaking tour on nuclear weapons and policy for SANE and Clergy and Laity Concerned. This place was one of the critical stops on it. I remember how intimidating it was to speak out on a matter of public moment in front of so many distinguished church leaders. Somehow, I managed to communicate a message that resonated with them because it was grounded in what only later I discovered was called "ecumenical social ethics." The same sense of awe struck me every time I returned to this place. It was not as if I was feeling self-important with each subsequent visit here over the last three decades for one official ecumenical reason or another. Rather, when walking into this building, I always felt myself humbled to be a small part of the important ecumenical things that happen here. Trust me, they still do. There may yet be "glory days" ahead of us!

For all those years before I began as your General Secretary, when I repeatedly visited *this special ecumenical place*, and now every day I arrive and each night before I leave this building, I try to dedicate the work I do here and make a prayer of a passage from I Corinthians 10:31 (RSV). Remarkably, it is emblazoned on the wall over the front desk as you enter the main lobby on the Claremont Avenue/Reinhold Niebuhr Place side of the building. You cannot possibly miss it—or its meaning—for those of us who labor in this ecumenical vineyard located at 475 Riverside Drive. **"Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."**

Let it be so among us these days, I pray. Together, whatever we do, let it all be done to the glory of God. Amen.

And, once again, welcome—to *this (very) special ecumenical place*.