

**A PERSONAL REFLECTION**





## Still Here at 75

my office location in The Interchurch Center (TIC) from the 3rd floor to the 6th, and it caused no disruption for my family. On June 30th I completed my tenure with the United Methodist, and the very next day started serving Church World Service. For CWS it was both beneficial to have someone who served on governance to lead during the interim, and it was cost effective at a time when no one knew for certain what the financial realities were for the organization.

On the surface it had every appearance of an easy transition. The reality is that it was fraught. The National Council of Churches, which since 1950 had been the parent organization to CWS, along with many of its Member Churches, had serious concerns and reservations the autonomy of CWS and perhaps viewed it as a threat to the fabric of ecumenism in the United States. Within CWS different staff alliances existed and each had its own idea about the leadership needed moving forward. I likely did not meet the expectations of any of them, but the consolation was that at least it was for an interim period.

The Board was comprised of mission executives from the churches who served by virtue of their portfolio. While some had a deep and abiding commitment to CWS, others had not made any real personal investment. I had been one of them. Still, there were others who, though obligated to work ecumenically, felt confident that they could accomplish more and do it better denominationally.

CWS had multiple cultures. Each "Area Desk" seemingly had its own authority and network and appeared more beholden to the NCC, while the country directors focused on development had little interest in the large staff team working on immigration and refugees (IRP). IRP was a large and comparatively financially strong unit and wielded a lot of independence from the rest of CWS. Some of the regional staff questioned why it was even a part of CWS.

There was little in common between Elkhart, Indiana and New York, or Washington, DC for that matter, places where CWS had significant presence. The CFER or fundraising staff had their own view of what it meant to work with grassroots leaders and donors. CWS seemed like a matrix where everyone seemed to be in charge. This was glaringly evident when after deciding to make a staffing change the first question asked, by staff, was by whose authority had that decision been made.

Navigating the separation of Church World Service from the NCC was a difficult and costly process. Dr. Bob Edgar, General Secretary of the NCC, was heavily invested in reconciling the two organizations, but under his leadership. From the perspective of CWS reconciliation was not at issue. CWS held no ill feelings toward the Council, it merely believed that it was in the best interest of CWS to manage its own affairs. There was no critique of any person in the employ of the Council, either past or present. For CWS the focus was squarely on getting to the future with some measure of capacity and relevance.

The financial picture alone was telling. The CWS Board sensed that the agency was financially vulnerable, but it wasn't until it took control of the books that it realized the amount of cash on hand could only cover payroll for about a month. Finally, CWS investments were not sufficient if the agency liquidated. The financial picture was grim. CWS took control of its affairs in July, and it is during the summer months when income was historically at its lowest. The challenge was massive. CWS negotiated with an Indiana bank, gaining its confidence, and eventually found the means to bridge the gap until the fall when income would once again begin to flow.

CWS benefitted from having an incredible Board of Directors representing the Churches, but more importantly the Executive Committee was likely the organization's most important attribute. The Committee had a clear vision, absolute belief in the mission of CWS, was resolute about the direction, and while open to discernment and discussion had no impediment in presenting a common front.

The realignment of staff had to be carefully orchestrated. The distinction was made as to those staff positions by portfolio that aligned with the CWS as opposed to the NCC. This was delicate work and was an awakening for many who were surprised to learn that they were no longer NCC staff, including members of the collective bargaining unit. With the separation put into effect all CWS staff were given the opportunity to remain in their current or a reconfiguration of the same portfolio. Some worked at this while others did not. "Loyalty" to CWS was a factor, and each person had to decide where theirs rested. It was only after this that several key staff changes were put into effect.

Closing the cultural divide was an urgent step towards achieving a more unified CWS. Doing this helped to define and consolidate organizational leadership. When taking control of the financial management and human resource functions it was determined that New York would not be the best location for them to be situated.

CWS then established those functions in Elkhart, Indiana. One unintended but positive advantage in doing this was bringing the culture of Elkhart into the mainstream of CWS. The New York office had a strong corporate culture centered in the TIC, while the Elkhart office, located in an industrial park, represented the grassroots - which really is more reflective of the core of CWS. The blending and balancing of these cultures as nearly co-equals were a big boost for Church World Service. This decision also served to turn the attention of CWS staff away from the NCC on the 8th floor of The Interchurch Center and began a process of forcing the collective bargaining unit to retreat from its stated position of non-compliance with and opposition to the separation from the NCC.

New York remained the headquarters for programs and related services, and Washington, DC, to a lesser corporate degree, remained the location for advocacy. CWS had so many disparate parts, each sensing a measure of control over its own affairs, therefore consideration had to be given to an overarching management philosophy. The Board was clear that it did not want to perpetuate what currently existed, and preferred stronger central leadership. This meant that establishing the Executive Director as "the" executive" mattered, but it also meant finding a methodology to achieve more universal buy-in from the staff. Team Management was being publicly espoused as good corporate practice in the for-profit world. CWS believed that not-for-profits could learn a lot from for-profits and should borrow ideas that were applicable. Team Management then became the organizing philosophy of CWS staff work world-wide, with NY as the convening and titular head.

That was the business that dominated the period of interim leadership for CWS which spanned about three months. The ten-month search for the permanent Executive intensified in September, and the search committee, which included the General Secretary of the NCC, worked with the goal of presenting a candidate in October. Though my personal interest had not changed, the Board's Chair persistently urged that I join the applicant pool. It was only as a courtesy that eventually I did. Traveling cross town from the TIC for the interview at the Church Center for the United Nations (CCUN), I arrived at the Grand Central Station too early for my appointment. Not wanting an early arrival to be misconstrued as interest, I delayed my walk to the CCUN and instead sat on a shoeshine stand just outside the station. It was then and

there that I quite surprisingly discerned God's leading and a genuine interest in the position. Later that evening, after being interviewed, the Committee expressed their interest and asked for a vision statement. In summary I offered:

“Church World Service is a global ecumenical organization of Christian persons committed to the transformation of human society and preservation of the environment as an expression of Christ's live. CWS is called no less to be a prophetic voice and an agitating presence: a sign of compassion, a bulwark for justice, human rights, dignity, and a source of knowledge contributing to the healing of nations and the building of lasting peace.”

In being recommended unanimously, the search committee reported:

“We believe that the Rev. McCullough has the vision, leadership skills and passion for God's mission to lead us ‘for such a time as this,’” confirmed the Rev. Liberato C. Bautista of the General Board of Church and Society, The United Methodist Church, the search committee's chair. “He has the highest personal qualities - integrity, warmth, collaborative style, as well as managerial experiences and skills - which will enable him to lead the organization during the implementation of its strategic plan.

“Moreover, John is an effective communicator with the skills and ability to articulate the values and role of Church World Service and Witness. As an ordained pastor he has demonstrated strong biblical and theological grounding. He is a person of faith committed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

“John understands organizational change and knows how to lead an organization through restructure,” the Rev. Bautista continued. “He is a good listener and has a reputation of being a reconciler. John has extensive knowledge of the worldwide church and the many issues and concerns impacting the service and witness of these churches around the world. He understands relief and development, as well as the role of advocacy in ‘the healing of nations and the building of lasting peace.’”

These skills were heavily drawn upon to lead CWS, but in addition to the Board as described earlier by then outstanding staff leaders emerged, and while not everyone was yet on board with the new direction, the core leadership was in place focused on moving forward, was committed to getting there together and representing the best of Church World Service. Building a professional staff, creating a strong corporate identity, and establishing CWS as a revered global brand were high on the list of work to be accomplished. Change in any organization is normative and certainly CWS was not exception. As some staff retired and others moved to different work, CWS carefully considered the skillsets most needed to meet its growing mission.

Public identity was viewed as key to creating a singular CWS universe, so work went into developing the internet as a view into CWS, debating the best name of the organization that would translate in all regions, and devising a new mark and color palette. The “mark” or logo was selected as an important symbol of inclusion of all people regardless of their circumstance. The image of the host held above an altar, symbolized CWS breaking open the bread of life and bringing sustenance to the hunger of a hurting world. The color black encompassed all the colors of the universe as one, and the yellow beckoned us in our humanity to be cognizant of the suffering around us and to respond to it.

CWS took control of its own messaging, creating a marketing and communications unit, creating new publications conveying the CWS story and giving greater voice and visibility to the many beneficiaries and partners the agency served. This was a heavy and at times tiring lift, but CWS was undaunted by the task of presenting a new face to the larger world.

Two decades of CWS leadership is difficult to summarize in a few words. There are mounds of documents, reports, minutes, publications, speeches, and sermons that paint a more wholistic picture. The CWS archives is rich with this history of ground-breaking delegations to Asia, Africa, the Middle East, the Caribbean, Latin America, the Korean Peninsula, Washington, DC, and the United Nations. CWS met with some of the most significant world leaders in Israel

and Palestine, Iraq and Syria, Viet Nam and China, Colombia and Cuba, North Korea, Liberia, and Guinea. We joined discussions with the Africa Union - Heads of State, European Union, addressed the UN, and multiple Congressional hearings. We influenced decisions taken by the President of the United States, were sought for counsel by the UN General Secretary, received high level delegations from the Presidents of several countries, and intervened in conflict helping foster peace internal to several countries and regions.

CWS served as counsel to the General Secretariate of the World Council of Churches, the All Africa Conference of Churches, the Caribbean Council of Churches, the Latin American Council of Churches, as well as the Indonesian and Myanmar Councils of Churches. It hosted dialogue convening leading women from North and South Korea on reconciliation between the two nations.

We relished the work of global diplomacy and peace making. Working closely with the Liberia Council of Churches helped end decades of war and bring stability to the Mano River region in West Africa, and with the Middle East Council of Churches to be an effective interlocutor pushing the issue of justice in a region that has constantly had to deal with despair. The voice of CWS was expansive, and the range of issues addressed reflected an agency deeply committed to achieving real transformation and change.

The Africa Initiative helped breathe new life into ecumenism across the continent, engaged leadership from more than thirty national councils, developed programs protecting the education of children, expanding the capacity of farmers with drought resistant strategies, elevated eminent persons in conflict resolution, and enabled the greater leadership of women. In addition to RSC Africa and being the lead organization processing persons for resettlement in the United States, CWS took a strong stand in supporting the rights of LGBTQIA+ persons.

In Eastern Europe CWS supported the repatriation of people to Bosnia and Herzegovina and then parlayed that effort into expanding development efforts to Serbia, Moldova, Transdnistria and Georgia. Central to this has been the commitment CWS brought to ending the nightmare of poverty for the Roma, the most discriminated people in the region.

There were challenges about the financial integrity of CWS, but close examination proved the integrity of this agency to be true. Difficult choices often had to be made, but when needed CWS was decisive and moved forward. We managed to keep the CROP Hunger Walks, now over 50 years young, going with the amazing support of an amazing cadre of volunteers, and the unrelenting support of donors, expanded government contracts, opened new opportunities for major and planned-giving, and provided massive amounts of material resources when major disasters like the Tsunami in Banda Aceh during a civil war, Hurricane Katrina in the US Gulf South, an earthquake in Haiti, and a relentless stretch of natural disasters in Pakistan. The blankets, kits and tools programs have continued to provide relevant and timely interventions.

CWS stayed true to its mission when politics and public sentiment about the plight of refugees waned, and aggressive forces organized to try and close borders, making it almost impossible for people to find respite from chaos and confusion. We argued not only for fair play, but for justice to be on the side of people fleeing circumstances placing themselves and families at risk and offering hope, welcome, and opportunity to do the hard work of starting all over again in new places to call home.

As the priorities of ecumenism and denominationalism changed CWS worked hard to adapt and remain connected, but in ways consistent with our mission. CWS was determined to remain an integral part of the ecumenical family, but at the same time dealt with the necessity of putting itself in the best possible position to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable whether by circumstance of disaster, displacement, poverty, hunger, or violation of their basic human rights. True to form, CWS believed that one of the most distinguishing factors from most other NGO's is its characterization of being faith-based.

CWS endured the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York, the Iraq War (Operation IRAQI FREEDOM), and twenty years of war in Afghanistan. The global war on terror impacted the safety of CWS staff, temporarily closed offices and sheltered staff on numerous occasions, causing CWS to implement security strategies, and limiting international travel as safety precautions.

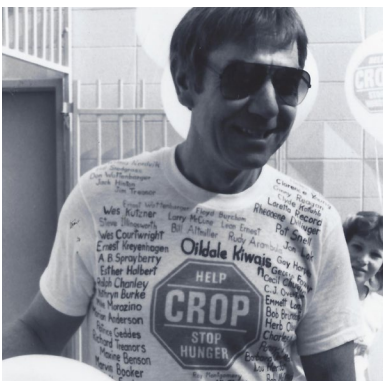
A great deal of work went into keeping CWS maturing and evolving, to becoming more of a global organization and less of a US-based organization in mission to the larger world. Commitment to partnership studies, utilizing new tools for program evaluation, updating the financial systems for tracking donors, and modernizing CWS for a 21st century reality were all tools used to posit CWS for the exciting future that stretches before it. Carefully working with governance, CWS was transformed from being a large representative organization to one which is sleek and nimble and ready to meet the fast-paced challenges of a new global context. The staffing became fully accountable to the executive, and the change in title of leadership to “President and CEO” reflected the conversion of CWS as a true corporate entity.

During the last full year of my tenure, it became necessary to take medical leave. The senior staff proved the success of these many efforts and how well the changes had been engrained into the mindset and operational philosophy of CWS. In addition to the uncertainty associated with the medical leave, the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, and massive demonstrations around the world against racism and police violence the staff team provided outstanding leadership.

It has been a remarkable journey, and now as we celebrate the 75th years of Help and Hope...

**CWS is still here and is ready to Inspire the Future.**

*The Rev. John L. McCullough*  
President & CEO 2000-2022



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