

**Address of Rev. Dr. Clifton Kirkpatrick  
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2004 E.H. Johnson Award Recipient  
Durham College, Oshawa, Ontario  
June 8, 2004**

“The World is Our Parish”

Friends in Christ, it is wonderful to be here at the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. As the Clerk of a General Assembly, it is always a lot more relaxing to be at someone else's General Assembly rather than your own!

Over these last couple of days I have found the weather gorgeous, the people wonderful, and my heart filled with joy to be involved in the life of a church where the gospel is so alive. The icing on the cake is being able to be here with my daughter Elizabeth, who is in the audience today, and my grandchild, Katherine. I am delighted that they have been able to join me for this event.

My heart is filled with gratitude for the partnership in the gospel between the Presbyterian Church (USA) and The Presbyterian Church in Canada. I am especially grateful for the friendship and the wonderful gifts that I have received from Stephen Kendall and Barbara McLean, who have been partners with me in this common ministry of being clerks to a General Assembly. I am also grateful for the many years I was able to work in close partnership in our world mission efforts with The Presbyterian Church in Canada while I served as director of our Worldwide Ministries Division.

I was overwhelmed when Barbara and Walter contacted me a few months ago and informed me that I would be receiving this very significant award – the E.H. Johnson Award. Many of those that you have recognized in prior years are my heroes and heroines in the faith. I was even more humbled when I read their insightful addresses and learned of the wonderful heritage of the ministry of E.H. Johnson and all that this award represents.

I cannot help but be reminded of an experience I had a few years ago when I was visiting in Indonesia. I was there to visit with the East Java Christian Church, which is the Reformed Christian community with which our church works in that part of the world. It is a wonderful, dynamic and vital church.

One Sunday while I was there they asked if I would go and preach at one of their congregations. They told me it was a bit off the beaten track and if there was ever an understatement that was certainly it! We got in a four-wheel drive vehicle in Jakarta and headed out through the jungle. We went from paved highway to dirt road to no highway at all. We continued on and on. We finally reached the town of Sitarjo in the east end of the Island of Java. It was a town that had been established by Christians some years before to escape persecution that they had often found in that part of the country. It was a joyous and welcoming community.

I will never forget Sunday morning in that very small church in Sitarjo. I have never seen more people per square foot in a church than I saw that Sunday. They were not only in the pews, but they were also in the aisles, and they were behind the pulpit. Being something of an open air church, they were outside the church on all sides and backed into the plaza. There was a great sense of joy and excitement and dynamism in the air that day.

The pastor got up to introduce me with kind words like you have shared with me in selecting me for this award. I started to let that go to my head when I heard him say, "We are just thrilled to have Cliff Kirkpatrick with us this morning. But the reason we are glad to have him is not that he is such a famous person! Even though we are clearly off the beaten path here in Sitarjo, we have undoubtedly had more famous people over the years." Then he added insult to injury when he said, "It is certainly not because he is such a good preacher. We have undoubtedly had better sermons on a regular basis! But never in the history of the town of Sitarjo has there been a person visit that is two meters tall, and having a two meter man in the pulpit has drawn a record congregation in the whole history of the church!"

Friends, seeing all the wonderful people that you have honoured over the years with this award, I can't begin to understand exactly why I am here with you today. But like being welcomed for being two meters tall, I am grateful to God that you have invited me to receive this honour and I give thanks to God as well for the partnership that we have shared in the ministry that this represents.

### My Faith Journey in Mission

Before moving to the substance of my address, I want to share with you a bit of my own faith journey in mission, because I have been deeply touched by many of the same passions that were reflected in the life and ministry of E.H. Johnson.

I was born and nurtured in a family with deep and long roots in the Reformed tradition. With a name like Kirkpatrick, that is probably rather obvious. My ancestors on my father's side came from Presbyterian churches in Scotland and Ireland. They immigrated to North Carolina some 200 years ago and, not long after that, to Alabama. Over the years in my family there have been many elders but, as far as we know, no ministers until my own generation.

I gained a new perspective on my own sense of call to ministry and my passion for mission about a decade ago, just before my mother died. She told me that she and my father had entered into a special prayer covenant with God just before I was born. They had sought for many years to have a child, then to adopt a child, all without success. And so they entered into one of those "foxhole prayers" that I still find theologically troubling, but that nevertheless had an interesting impact on my life. They prayed to God that if God would only grant them a child they would dedicate that child to the foreign missions. As far as they were concerned that was the ultimate sacrifice that they could make.

They raised me in a Christian family with a deep sense of passion for mission, but until a decade ago never mentioned that they had made that promise to God. Looking back on it, I am sure part of why I have been so committed to world mission is that mission was part of the nurture, the upbringing, that my parents brought to me in response to their own covenant with God. In so many ways our whole doctrine of predestination in the Reformed tradition doesn't make a whole lot of sense in the present, but if you look back on your life, it certainly does.

As a teenager, I had a "conversion experience" (or maybe more accurately, a strong experience of the Holy Spirit affirming my lifelong Christian calling) in a deeply evangelical Presbyterian Church in Memphis, Tennessee. I learned from that experience that God had a special claim on my life. That church challenged me to be willing and open to the call of God, to be in ministry or to be a missionary.

A few years later, when I went off to college and had already been approved as a candidate for ministry in Memphis Presbytery, that earlier faith was shattered. When I was back home in the summer, I found

the elders of that Presbyterian Church in Memphis locking arms outside the entrance to the sanctuary to block African Americans from entering the sanctuary. That was a deeply troubling experience for me. I was – and still am – convinced that the gospel was for all people. It was incomprehensible to me that we could block the door of the church to people of other races.

Out of that experience of disillusionment with my evangelical faith, I came to a second “conversion experience”, at the hands of the ecumenical movement, through the leadership of a student YMCA at Davidson College, where I was a student. I found a fresh sense of hope in the ecumenical movement’s vision of the unity of the church for the unity of humankind. I was able to read with new eyes that passage in Luke 4 when Jesus announced his ministry in terms of the release for the captives and liberty for the oppressed. It set me in a fresh direction in ministry that led me to Yale Divinity School and then to a decade of ecumenical ministry in councils of churches and urban ecumenical ministries in the state of Texas.

My third “conversion experience” came in the context of my involvement in the world mission of the church. In 1981 I was invited by what was then the Southern Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian Church, US, to become the director of the Division of International Mission. In that responsibility I encountered in a life-changing way the reality of Christians in nations all around the world. In one hopeless situation after another, I found the hope of the gospel so alive in people who seemed to me to have no good reason to believe in the goodness of God, but whose faith in God and hope in the gospel was remarkable. It was truly an experience for me of meeting Jesus Christ again with renewed power.

I will never forget visiting places like Zaire (now the Congo), Bangladesh, and Guatemala and finding people in hopeless situations who had an amazing depth of faith, hope and love because of Jesus Christ. I learned among these global partners that my upbringing in an evangelical church and my involvement in the ecumenical movement were not two alternate ways of being Christian, but rather two sides of the same coin. The world church is renewing, life giving, hope giving to me.

A few years ago I was called to become our denomination’s Stated Clerk. In many ways the focus of my ministry moved from the world to our own church and its issues. However, if your ecclesiology is like mine, that the church is a missionary society, the two cannot help but go together. I have tried, as I have sought to work for the unity and the well-being of the Presbyterian Church (USA) to be clear that its unity and well being is connected with the unity and well-being of the church ecumenical and indeed of all the people of God.

I came through all of these experiences to values that are also the values that I read about as being at the heart of the ministry of Ted Johnson:

- being rooted and grounded in the core values of the Reformed tradition,
- being inspired by an evangelical passion,
- being committed to the unity of the church for the unity of humankind,
- being committed to transforming the world by the power of God’s love.

When I read of my counterpart, Finlay McDonald, the Principal Clerk of the Church of Scotland, commenting on your 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration a year ago, I felt he was speaking for me when he said that he was “immensely poorer for never knowing Ted Johnson but enriched by learning about him.” The same is true for me and I thank you for this award for among other reasons, allowing me that privilege.

## The Cutting Edge of Mission

I want to suggest that the cutting edge of mission in our time, especially for churches in North America, is to reclaim John Wesley's vision that "the world is our parish." Wesley came by it naturally because Christianity is a world embracing religion.

- It is a faith founded on the pre-suppositions that God created the whole world and pronounced it good.
- It is a movement whose call is understood in terms of the call of Abraham and Sara to be a blessing to all the nations.
- It is a community of moral discourse centered in the prophets who reminded the Israelites and who remind us that justice and righteousness are at the heart of what God calls us to be about.
- It is a faith centered in John's announcement that God so loved the world that he sent his only son. (John 3:16)
- It is a witnessing fellowship centered in Jesus Christ who gave us the Great Commission to go into all the world and to make disciples of all nations. (Matthew 28:16-20).
- It is a church, which was born at Pentecost only when people are gathered together from every language and tongue and nations.
- It is a faith community that sent the disciples out to turn the world upside down for the gospel. (Acts 17:6)

These world-embracing themes are key to the Reformed faith – and precious to churches like The Presbyterian Church in Canada and the Presbyterian Church (USA). They are what are behind the leadership we have taken over the years in world mission and the ecumenical movement and in the work for God's justice and peace in the world.

In so many ways the world that God loves is so much smaller than it ever has been. Globalization is the new reality in our time. Many have written about "McWorld" where you can order the same Big Mac in Toronto or Phoenix or New Delhi. We all know that the computer world has connected us together like never before. I recently bought a new computer in my home and needed to call a toll free number to get it installed. The person I was connected to was not in the USA or Canada but in Bangalore, India. Young people all over the world enjoy the same music, see the same movies and increasingly speak the same English language. Travel and communication are easier than they have ever been.

The conflicts, injustices and problems of the world also are no longer just regional, but those regional problems quickly become global problems. We learned that in a very painful way in the United States on September 11, 2001. Terrorism and global epidemics like HIV/AIDS are no longer confined to a region but literally threaten the future of the world. In North America, the people who are our neighbours are no longer people just like us gathered in this room, but are literally people from every corner of the world. We live in multicultural societies that will soon be demographically representative of the whole world.

At the same time our world is growing closer together, for good and for ill, I fear that our churches are not engaging the world with passion but are often turning inward. At an earlier time churches were the primary point of contact with the world. In the heyday of the missionary movement, churches were one of the main sources of connection between the people of North America and the people of the world.

Most of our churches these days don't have that same sense of connection to the world, and it is not primarily through the church that most people connect to the broader society. The primary passions in our General Assemblies are often not those of justice and mission in the world but rather our own more pedestrian problems – how to deal with declining membership in our churches, how to deal with problems related to ministers, and a continuing struggle about ordination and human sexuality.

Friends in Christ, I believe that the cutting edge for the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to reclaim the vision that John Wesley saw so well – that the world is our parish. Because that is true we are called in our time to turn the world upside down for the gospel, just as the New Testament church did in its time. I want to suggest that there are clear specific challenges to be about if we are going to be faithful in living up to that cutting edge of mission.

### World Mission Still Matters

The first challenge important to our churches is to reclaim the understanding that world mission still matters! Much attention has been placed in recent years on global campaigns for developed nations to contribute at least one per cent of their gross national product to development assistance among the poor nations of the world. We are not doing well at all on that in the United States, and I am glad that the Canadian government seems to be doing a bit better. I fear that we are not doing very well either as churches in the United States and Canada. In our own church, at least, if you look at our statistics you find that somewhere between two and three per cent of what goes in the collection plates in our churches ever reaches outside the United States.

If we truly believe that God loves the people of Rwanda, Bolivia and Vietnam every bit as much as those in the United States and Canada and that we are all given resources to be good stewards for the mission of Christ in the world, then this is an outrage. We need as a people to contribute much more generously to the global Christian community and to stop watching our global institutions of Christian unity and mission like the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the World Council of Churches atrophy because they are getting less and less support from those of us who have so much.

This is just not a financial issue, but I am afraid the same is true for the preoccupations of our local churches and presbyteries and even in our General Assemblies. I fear that it is even true in our prayer life as Christian communities. The world mission of the church has slipped off the front burner.

I had the privilege last summer of reading an interesting and sometimes disturbing book by Philip Jenkins entitled *The Next Christendom*. I recommend it to you. Jenkins draws a powerful picture of how the center of gravity as a Christian world has shifted to Africa, Asia and Latin America, and he makes it very clear that God's primary project in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a project to offer the hope of the gospel, alive and vibrant, in Africa, Asia and Latin America and to transform Christianity into a truly global faith community. It is also clear that we are called not to direct the movement but to be partners in the process of what God is doing in the world.

Seven years ago I was privileged to be at the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. It met in the Great Church in Debrecen, Hungary. I will never forget arriving at the General Council and going to registration. I looked around the room and saw very few people that looked like me. While I surely knew better, I asked the question, "Is there some kind of affirmative action program going on here?" There were so many people from Africa, Asia and Latin America as delegates at this Assembly. I was quickly and rightly informed, "No, that is certainly not the case!" The fact is that two-

thirds of the world's Reformed and Presbyterian people now live in Asia and Africa and Latin America. We are truly part of a global family, and we need to behave as partners in a global community and not simply as Christians in the United States or Canada.

That global re-engagement might very well serve as a source of renewal for all of us as it has been in my life and ministry. There undoubtedly will need to be new patterns and paradigms for this mission. Forms of missionary colonialism certainly do not need to be repeated, but we do need a genuine partnership in global mission with the global church. I have been encouraged with some of these new paradigms in our own churches. We now have over 100 of our presbyteries that have an active partnership with a presbytery in another part of the world.

I was privileged to be at the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Reformed Church in Cuba in January. While I was there, representatives of ten of our presbyteries were meeting with representatives from the presbyteries of Cuba. I was deeply moved to hear what that solidarity and support meant to Cubans and how it aided them in building new churches and reaching out to new communities. I was even more moved to hear the representatives from our own presbyteries tell how that partnership had changed their lives and how they found among Cubans, even in their difficult circumstances, a powerful Christian faith that had been renewing to their congregations in the United States. It had led many in our PCUSA presbyteries to a new relationship with Jesus Christ, to prayer covenants with Cuban partners that have been spiritually renewing, and to greater boldness in being prophetic leaders for social change in relationship to the United States and its relation to the world, especially to Cuba.

Whatever the patterns, there is no time in which world mission should be a higher priority than today. I am convinced that the logic of the gospel – the logic of giving our life away in order to find it in its fullness – is a logic that empowers us as Presbyterians to be much more deeply involved in world mission than we have been before.

### The World at our Doorstep

The second challenge that is presented by this cutting edge call to make the world our parish is a challenge to see that the world is on our doorstep and that we are called to be a Pentecost Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in North America. By 2050 it is estimated statistically that there will be no racial ethnic majority group in the United States. I imagine from what I heard that the date in which there is no majority group in Canada could come even sooner. Will that also be true with our Presbyterian Churches? I am afraid not, unless we take dramatic action now to become truly multicultural churches.

It is a huge opportunity. Many of those coming from around the world are the fruits of our missionary enterprise. Thousands, if not millions, are coming from Sudan, Brazil, Ghana, Taiwan and Korea. In order for our new neighbours to become the center and the focus of the life of our own churches, we must become different churches – a truly Pentecostal Church for our time. We must truly be welcoming in our language, our worship, our polity, and our hospitality for the rainbow people of God who are our new neighbours.

A couple of decades ago Martin Luther King made a statement that is still prophetic today. He said, "11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week." Friends, if we are to be the faithful church in 21<sup>st</sup> century North America, that can no longer be the case. It needs to be the most multicultural hour of the week. God is calling us to reach out to change our polity, to adapt our worship,

and to be a welcoming community so that this Pentecostal world right outside of our doorsteps can be invited in to renew our churches as multicultural churches in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

There are signs of hope, at least in my church, for which I am extremely grateful. We have a growing racial ethnic membership. I have come recently from a multicultural conference in Dallas where over five hundred leaders from our two to three hundred truly multicultural churches are planning and worshipping and praying together to be a leading edge of this transformation in our churches. We have created presbyteries that function in different languages. We are supporting immigrants and refugees. We are reaching out to people of all parts of the world in our local communities. I believe we have only begun to scratch the surface of being the Pentecostal Church that God intends us to be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but the call and the vision are clear.

### Transforming our Societies for Justice

Third and finally, I think the challenge we are facing as we seek to make the world our parish is a challenge to take leadership to transform our societies and nations to be a force for global peace and justice – and not a major cause of war and injustice in the world. Our world is on a collision course with disaster. The growing gap between the rich and the poor, the clash of civilizations, global terrorism, the move to a nuclear rearmament, and growing environmental degradation should all give us cause for alarm. Those of us who are founded on the conviction that God so loved the world are called to be prophetic leaders for a world built on the values of justice, freedom, peace and the integrity of creation.

This is an especially urgent ministry for those of us in the United States of America. I believe our nation took a serious wrong turn in its global policies after September 11, 2001. Soon after that dreadful day I went to New York City to be with our presbytery there in the midst of their deep suffering. It was a powerful presbytery meeting. They focused on the passage in Romans 8 that reminds us that nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God. They talked about people in their churches who, as they put it then, had “not yet returned home.” They were concerned about and reaching out to immigrants, often-illegal immigrants, that were being overlooked by government. Most of all, there was a passion expressed that night, that somehow out of the horror of events that had been experienced in New York, the world might learn a better way: a way of peace and reconciliation, a way of multi-national cooperation, a way of working together all over the world to end injustice and the causes of war.

In the midst of all of the suffering, there were strands of hope that the deepest yearnings that I found in New York City Presbytery might shape a new national policy. But those hopes were soon dashed. The national response to this horror was not one of dealing with the root causes of global injustice, but rather a response of that was deeply troubling: unilateral war rather than multilateral peacemaking, abrogation of the Anti-ballistic Missile Treaty, continued refusal to support the Kyoto accords to guarantee the future of our environment, a rejection of the international criminal court, and an abrogation of human rights and civil liberties, particularly for those from Islamic traditions. It was a set of values and policies based on the dominance of the powerful rather than the power of the reconciling love of Christ.

Our nation began to move in a direction that a couple of years later led to a war in Iraq and a growing alienation of America from the rest of the world. I believe for us in the United States this has been a call to the churches to live out the gospel conviction that none of us will have security unless we all do. A patriot of the American Revolution named Benjamin Franklin once said “we will either all hang together or we will surely all hang separately.” He was right!

As churches we are called not to respond just to specific injustices but also to offer a positive vision based for our common global future based on the values of the gospel. As we read in Proverbs, “Where there is no vision, the people perish!” (Proverbs 29:18) I have been particularly helped in this by reading some of the documents about the founding of the United Nations and the role of the Federal Council of Churches in our country in this process. It is interesting that the Presbyterian who led that commission from the Federal Council, which did so much to shape many of the principles of the United Nations, was John Foster Dulles. He came to be known later for his role as a staunch anti-Communist as Secretary of State under the Eisenhower administration. However, in his early years Dulles had a passion for creating the instruments of global peace and justice. As a Presbyterian elder, he was deeply convinced that the church, unique among global institutions, might take the lead for global well-being in a highly nationalistic time in world history.

The Federal Council, under Dulles’ leadership, came up with “Six Pillars of Peace.” These “pillars” laid the foundation for much of the best in the United Nations. I think they are still very relevant and at the core of what should be a global Christian ethic for our time. They were:

- A commitment to a strong United Nations that would be a political framework for continuing collaboration.
- A commitment to a global system of economic institutions that ensure the economic well-being of the people of all nations.
- A commitment to a comprehensive system of international law to ensure global justice.
- A commitment to the liberation and empowerment of oppressed people.
- A commitment to an active program for conflict resolution and for building of a culture of peace.
- And finally a commitment for upholding, creating and enforcing a universal declaration of human rights.

With the addition of a seventh pillar, that they didn’t think of at that time – a commitment to a sustainable environment – these are the pillars on which true peace and justice can be built in our world, and they resonate clearly with the values of the gospel.

I am grateful for a strong witness for this kind of world that the Canadian churches have made in recent years. I hope you will not tire in this leadership. We need it now more than ever!

#### Conclusion

In many ways this is an age of turning inward. I believe God is calling the church to turn outward – to the world that Christ loves, to truly make the world our parish.

- With a renewed commitment to partnership with churches around the world in mission,
- With a new outreach to the people of this world who are now at our doorsteps in North America, and
- With a new passion to transform our nations to be a force for peace and justice in the world.

It is a call to find the cutting edge of mission in reclaiming for our time John Wesley’s bold affirmation that “the world is our parish.”



I am going to close by sharing with you an African proverb that was told by Sam Kobia, the new General Secretary of the World Council of Churches on the occasion of his election at the Central Committee of the World Council last August. The parable goes like this. "If you want to go fast, go alone! But if you want to go far, go together!" The point is that if the way is clear, it is fairly simple to get where you are going, and if you just need to get there in a hurry, the best way to do it is to go by yourself. But if you live in a situation that is very complex, where the goal that you are seeking takes a lot of struggle, and where the journey will be long, the only way to make it is to go together.

Friends, the world in which we live requires the nations of the world to go together. The world in which we live and the gospel that we believe requires the churches to go together to indeed be a beacon of hope for the world. Because God so loved the world, God also gives us the power as human beings to create an order in which all might live in justice and peace and security, and all might have the opportunity to hear the gospel of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Friends, we are indeed being called to make the world our parish. May God richly bless you and The Presbyterian Church in Canada as you seek to be faithful in that calling!