

Turning 20, Embracing Dialogue: New Way of Being Church

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ADULTHOOD: A NEW WAY OF BEING CHURCH

If we consider one century of world history as the equivalent of one year of growth in the human life-cycle, then Christianity is coming to twenty years of human age. In other words, the Church is about to celebrate her twentieth birthday, entering into young adulthood, and facing the concomitant challenges in life. She is entering a phase where she will shed some of her old ways of being in favour of new ways of being. Social and environmental factors will propel the Church to grow, to adapt and to change, as will the personal maturation directed by her inner genetic blueprint. No longer is the Church a teenage adolescent dependent primarily upon parental support and guidance, but nor has she become a full-grown adult, totally independent and self-supporting. She continues to be comfortable with patterns of behaviour, concepts and affections peculiar to her home culture but is continuously challenged by different sets of ideals, values, and thrusts of the new world culture. She continues to imagine her own home as the best and the one and only home as she is challenged by an awareness that other homes are equally good and that some may even have a better family spirit. Suffice to say, she begins to see things in a new light and perceives life and the universe from a broader perspective. She no longer relies solely on all that she learnt from her parents and other adults at home as she begins to see that others have as much to teach as her own primary caretakers. She tries to break away from the reins of parental control while fearing to tread the future without their protection. As she goes about in search of a job, a

life-vocation and a life-partner to make a new home, she cannot but experience this conflict between the old and the new, the past and the present, the known and the unknown.

In short, she is in a period of transition, a transition from the stability of home-life to the unpredictable work-force and new world. It is a time between parenthesis, a time between eras. A time where the present is bracketed off from both the past and the future. It is neither here nor there yet. The secure past of the absolute and “either-or” phase has not yet been surpassed. Neither has the future of ambiguity and “both-and” phase been arrived at yet. The known past is held on to with a loosening grip, while fear of the unknown future prevents it from taking that leap forward. It is in this context that prophets will come by way of persons who dare to address this “in-between” period with creativity, daringness and foresight. It is they who will pave the way for a “*New Way of Being Church.*” It is they who will invite the Church to face the new challenges with courage and to look upon this new crisis of identity as opportunities for growth. It is they who will help bridge the gap between the old and the new by appropriating from Scripture and Tradition to reconstruct a new way of being Church which is relevant to the developments of modern society and in harmony with the pluralistic cultures of our time.

DIALOGUE AS LIFE-OPTION

Just as every person reaching adulthood has to make fundamental decisions about her/his life-options, the emerging adult Church is also confronted with this crisis of fundamental options. For the individual this will involve decisions about career, lifestyle, friendship types, hobbies, location of work and home, life-mate and family size. Whereas, for the Church it will mean decisions about spirituality, mission thrust, administrative styles, participation of the laity, social mission, option for the poor, inculturation, attitudes towards the world, towards other Christians, and towards other religions and a host of other concerns. While all of these ought to be the concerns of the universal Church, the Church in Asia in particular has to definitely make a fundamental decision with regard her attitude towards other religions. Not only because Christians number no more than two or three percent of the population of Asia, but more so because it will be the Asian Church, if anyone at all, who will lead the way towards a more progressive attitude towards the other religions of the world. It is, as it were, the Holy Spirit specially ordaining the Church of Asia to show the universal Church what it really means to be living in harmony with the other great wisdom and religious traditions of humankind. It is a fundamental decision which

will probably include a life-option to be in constant dialogue with the great religions of the world. Implicit in this dialogue will be the continuous search for the true meaning and relevance of Christ, Christianity and the Church in a multireligious and multicultural context.

And so, as the universal Church in preparing to enter the Third Millennium has announced the year 2000 as the "Great Jubilee," a year of special joy and thanksgiving for the grace of the salvation brought by Christ, it will do us well to reflect upon this in the context of Asia. If Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today (Heb 13:8), this reflection is especially important in Asia where the majority of the population go on with life, independent of Christ. So, while the Church in Asia is more concerned with why Christianity has not made a more significant impact in its peoples, the question which the universal Church seems to be asking is regarding Christianity's attitude towards the various religions of Asia. Perhaps the question which should be asked is how Christ and Christianity can fit more appropriately into the religiously pluralistic Asian world. Or, instead of asking what Christianity can assume and adapt from other religions, isn't it more important to ask how Christianity can adapt itself to Asian religiousness in order to become more relevant? Such questions will shift the focus of attention from the Church to the context of Asia. In light of recent developments in theological thought and recent ecclesial pronouncements about Christianity, Christ, the Church, and its attitude towards other religions, such questions are not completely out of line. Even if straightforward answers are not forthcoming, it is important that the correct questions continue to be asked. On her part, the Church will have to be more dependent upon divine guidance and be open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, who blows where it wills (Jn. 3:8), and even in and through the other religions of the world. Dialogue with them will probably be the means where some of these questions will be answered.

PREPAREDNESS FOR DIALOGUE

While the idea of dialogue with the religions of the world is a recent phenomenon, one can attribute its impetus to certain factors, from both within and without the Church. This is likened to the epigenetic principle where individual development is contingent upon both the social-environmental factors as well as the inner genetic blueprint and programming. The nature of development is therefore a product of the external and internal forces for change. This is very much what is happening to the Church especially with the socio-cultural or environmental changes of the last two centuries and more so with her own internal maturation of the last

50 years. It is, as it were, the periods since her 18th birthday that societal changes had the greatest impact and the periods since her 19th birthday that the Church's growth spurt facilitated the praxis of dialogue.

(i) *Environment: Extra-ecclesial factors facilitating dialogue*

Because present-day Christianity is very much conditioned by the Western world, "the shift in the understanding of the structure of reality and in the understanding of truth that has taken place in Western civilization and beyond throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" has had a great impact on the Church in general and Christian theology in particular. While previously truth was understood in static, absolute, exclusivistic, monologic, and "either-or" terms, the shift has made for understandings more in dynamic, conditional, perspectival, interpretive, dialogical and in "both-and" terms. The classicist and absolutist views in metaphysics, epistemology, and the various branches of philosophy are giving way to more mutual, relational and dialogical views. The advent of historical consciousness, hermeneutics, the sociology of knowledge, developmental psychology, and other fields of study have in part been responsible for this paradigm shift. The consequence of this shift is the relativization of all forms of knowledge including religious knowledge and faith. As such, dialogue with other forms of faith and religious knowledge has become an imperative if one is sincere about the search for Truth.

Of more recent years, there has been a surge of knowledge in the world about religions. Not only do we now have access to books, information, scriptural texts, and ideas about one's own religion, we can also get those of other religion's with relative ease. Technological advances, the internet, websites, CD-Roms and others have escalated this a hundred-fold. Today, the study of world religions and comparative philosophy of religions are readily available in many schools, colleges and other educational institutions. Translations of the scriptures and holy books of many religions are on sale in numerous bookstores around the world. News reports about religious activities, documentaries on religious practices, and movie films with religious themes abound. There is therefore no escape from this realm of knowledge that other religions exist and have their own intricate symbol systems and institutions. While previously it might have been possible to imagine that only one's own religion is true and exists, the information age of today can easily dismiss that notion as illusory.

More importantly, direct contacts with peoples of other religions have become a reality for most people around the globe. While this may not be

a new phenomenon for Asian Christians, who for the most part of the last two millenniums have lived side by side with persons of other religions, it is a rather new experience for those living in the Western world. But, because the Church in Asia has, until very recently, been more a Western Church transplanted into Asia, the fact that Christians lived alongside their neighbours of other faiths for centuries did not have any bearing on universal Christian attitudes and theologies as these were mostly derived from the mother Church from the West. This recent global phenomenon of proximity with persons of other religions is brought about by a variety of factors, from immigration to higher education to tourism and transnational business cooperations. While previously it could have been possible to simply ignore “the other” whom one knew of only from a distance, today the intimate bonds and close friendships are forcing people to apprehend “the other” with greater care and interest. Significant is the fact when one begins to observe “the other” as living whole and holy lives not in spite of, but because of her/his religion. The sincere Christian in her/his search for the fullness of Truth cannot but extend this search into the other religions of the world. Dialogue, therefore, is an appropriate means to this end.

The volatile socio-political climate in numerous countries throughout the world is also one of the major factors leading religions to the praxis of dialogue. Considering that not a few wars and conflicts have been waged in the name of God and religion, religionists are thus duty-bound to address the issue of interreligious conflicts, intercommunal wars and religious fanaticism. The alternative would be to leave these religio-socio-political issues in the hands of politicians and communal leaders, many of whom, unfortunately, have agendas which are less than noble. Thus if religionists do not take seriously this mandate for dialogue, the alternative would probably be none other than death. Another equally important reason for religions to be in dialogue with one another is that of the suffering of humanity and the ecology. Human rights abuses, massive poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, social injustices, drug addiction, prostitution, slavery, ecological destruction, indiscriminate deforestation, global warming, environmental pollution, acid rains, and a host of other humanly caused curses provide the agenda for dialogue. The magnanimity of these eco-human suffering suggests that dialogue is imperative as no religion can possibly do it alone in this battle against global suffering.

(ii) *Genetic Blueprint: Intra-ecclesial factors facilitating dialogue*

If we have to look for the innate structures or the inner programming within the Christian tradition which produced the necessary disposition for

the Church to engage in the praxis of dialogue, we will have to begin with none other than the scriptural texts. The most basic motive for dialogue is that God is the “One who creates, upholds, and lovingly wills to redeem all that is” (Gen 1:1; 2Tim 4:6). Moreover, being created in the image and likeness and filled with the Spirit of God (Gen 1:26; 2:7), human beings, whether Christian or not, have a special uniqueness and status in God’s plans. “Human beings, that is to say, are uniquely potentiated as bearers of the meaning and truth of God”.

In the New Testament, God’s plan for the cosmos, as revealed through Jesus Christ, is the reconciliation of all of creation to Godself (Eph 1:9-10; Cor 1:26-27). “There is no one outside this universal salvific will of God for as St. Paul says, ‘ Our God Saviour,.... desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth ’ (1Tim 2:3-4).” “To bring this plan to fulfilment, God has been active in the world through the Word and the Spirit from the beginning of times. The Word, through whom all things were made, has been always guiding and illumining humans so that they might not walk in darkness (Jn 1:1-9).” When the Word became flesh, God’s plan for the reconciliation of all of humanity was realized as the Word “has in a certain way united himself to each man” (GS 22). Thus, “it was our entire human nature that he assumed” (AG 3) and “His redemptive death too, was for the whole of humankind” (GS 22). Hence, in and through him, God has “reconciled us to himself and to one another” (GS 22).

While there is no doubt enough genetic endowment within Scriptures for the Church to reckon that dialogue with the other religions of the world is essential to discover the fullness of God’s plans, it was not until the last fifty years that this came to be. This was a result of several factors. For one, Origen’s rigid interpretation of Cyprian’s affirmation of “*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*” (no salvation outside the Church) which dominated most of Christian history was officially condemned by the Church’s pastoral magisterium in the year 1949. But a more significant event was the Second Vatican Council, summoned by Pope John XXIII for the purpose of *aggiornamento* or renewal. The Council, meant to update the Church, opened its windows to allow fresh air into the stuffy rooms of the Church. “The Council fathers accepted the challenge, and constantly spoke of the ‘ signs of the times ’ as an expression of the will of God (UR 4; AA 14; GS 4, 11; PO 9).

Specifically, in the area of “dialogue,” it was Pope Paul VI (John XXI-II’s successor) who brought it to the fore in his very first encyclical *Ecclesial suam*, published in 1964. It was in *Ecclesial suam* that the term “dialogue” is found for the first time in any Church encyclicals ever. This is by no means

insignificant, as it implies the Church acknowledges it has something to learn from the outside world as well. No one who believes s/he has the full possession of Truth would ever think of engaging in dialogue. "Dialogue is demanded nowadays," (ES 78) writes Paul VI. "The dialogue of salvation was opened spontaneously on the initiative of God: He loved us first" (ES 74). Paul VI then goes on a little further to proclaim that "Dialogue is, then, a method of accomplishing the apostolic mission" (ES 99). With respect to other religions, Paul VI states unambiguously that "We recognize and respect the moral and spiritual values of various non-Christian religions, and we desire to join with them in promoting and defending common ideals of religious liberty, human brotherhood, good culture, social welfare and civil order" (ES 112). Subsequent documents of Vatican II contain even more explicit statements vis-a-vis other religions of the world. Specifically, *Nostra aetate* (NA), *Lumen gentium* (LG), *Gaudium et spes* (GS), *Dignitatis humanae* (DH), and *Ad gentes* (AG) make direct references to them. For example, there is mention of the need to recognize within religions "elements of truth and grace" (AG 9), "treasures which the bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the earth" (AG 11), "a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men" (NA 2) and recognition of the work of the Holy Spirit (GS 11; AG 4) and the presence of "Seeds of the Word" (LG 17; AG 11). The Council also promotes an attitude of profound respect toward the religions of the world (AG 10) and specifically names and describes the values in each of the major religions (NA 2). It encourages dialogue and collaboration (NA 2) with these religions for it is through dialogue that Christians can "receive the inspiration of the Spirit and follow them ardently" (GS 92).

This new wind of change which happened at the universal Church level began to see its fruits at the local and regional episcopal conferences. Specifically, in Asia, as a follow-up from Vatican II, the bishops at the first Asian Bishops' Meeting in Manila in 1970 expressed that "we are more than ever convinced that dialogue with our fellow Asians whose commitment to other faiths is increasingly important." They then pledged themselves "to an open, sincere, and continuing dialogue with our brothers and sisters of other great religions of Asia, that we may learn from one another how to enrich ourselves spiritually and how to work more effectively together on our common task of total human development."

Since Vatican II numerous other documents and statements affirming dialogue have been pronounced. But here, a look at the present Pope's attitude might also shed more light on the importance and urgency of dialogue with the other religions of the world. In a delivery on 5 February 1986, Pope John Paul II reminded, "By dialogue we let God be present in

our midst, for as we open ourselves to one another, we open ourselves to God.” Then, on 28 April 1987, John Paul II proclaimed, “Interreligious dialogue is a work desired by God and is an integral element of the Church’s evangelizing mission.” When in Indonesia in 1989, he urged, “Respectful dialogue with others also enables us to be enriched by their insights, challenged by their questions, and impelled to deepen our knowledge of the truth. Far from stifling dialogue or rendering it superfluous, a commitment to the truth of one’s religious tradition by its very nature makes dialogue with others both necessary and fruitful.”

THE PROCESS OF DIALOGUE

We have thus far been discussing the importance of dialogue and the various factors, intrinsic and extrinsic to the Church, that have prepared the way for it. But what actually is entailed in the Church’s dialogue with the other religious traditions? What does it really mean to be engaged in the praxis of dialogue? What is the process like? What are some of the conditions imposed on those entering into dialogue? And what might be the price of dialogue?

In attempting to answer some of the above questions, Leonard Swidler’s “Dialogue Decalogue” or “Ground Rules for Interreligious Dialogue” will be used unsparingly. To begin with, dialogue is a “conversation between two or more persons with differing views, the primary purpose of which is for each participant to learn from the other so that both can change and grow.” John Paul II has it in his 1990 papal encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*, that dialogue is “a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment” (RM 55). Hence, dialogue is about mutual learning, changing and growing. This happens precisely because there are real differences between the other’s religion and mine. These differences are the “stuff” or ingredients for learning. Upon learning the new “stuff” one would have changed as a result of new insights gained and grown as a result of new attitudes formed especially with regard the “other” and her/his religion. But, in no way is it suggested that we may force or induce the other to learn, change or to grow. It is a totally voluntary process, a process which must be respected by all who come to the dialogue table. But, by the very fact that all who come to the dialogue table would have the intention of learning, changing and growing, the question of forcing change should not even arise.

Next, for learning to take place, the partners-in-dialogue have to be committed to witnessing their respective faith. The 1991 Vatican document, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, is emphatic that dialogue requires “a mutual

witness to one's beliefs and a common exploration of one's respective religious convictions" (DP 40). In other words, we do not enter into dialogue with the intention of learning only. We also need to give witness to our own beliefs. We do this not with indifference, but with full passion and conviction. Yes, we want to persuade our dialogue partners to know, understand, appreciate, and believe in what we believe. "We want our partners to see what we have seen; we want their lives to be touched and transformed as ours have been. Yes, let me use the offensive word: we want to *convert* our partners." But this conversion is not so much a "winning-over" as it is a "sharing-with." The outcome is not so much "win-lose" as it is "win-win." Just as you are able to convert me, I, too, am able to convert you. We both go away excited about our personal "success" as we also go away "converted" by the other. We are both mutually enriched and mutually transformed. We both leave the dialogue table with broadened horizons in our perceptions and understandings of "the other," and her/his religion, as well as about truth and life in general.

For learning and witnessing to take place, "[each] participant must come to the dialogue with complete honesty and sincerity." There are no half measures here. "Conversely, each participant must assume complete honesty and sincerity in the other partners." That is to say, the praxis of dialogue entails the cardinal virtues of trust and honesty, without which there will be no dialogue. If this prerequisite is ensured, even if very little is learned or very few changes occur, the fact that dialogue has facilitated honesty and trust between the partners-in-dialogue is itself a good enough reason to promote it. Like Maryknoll missionary Bob McCahill whose primary mission objective is the building of trust and friendship as he lives amongst rural poor Muslims in Bangladesh, a primary aim of dialogue is also the building of trust and friendship in an environment which is often lacking in these basic ingredients for peaceful existence.

Another condition for dialogue is that participants, besides engaging in inter-religious dialogue, must also engage in intra-religious dialogue as well. Put another way, while dialoguing with persons of other religions is important, of equal importance is the dialogue with persons from within one's own religious tradition. Thus, Christian interreligious dialoguers have also to be in constant dialogue with other Christians within their community. This is because the learning, change, and growth envisaged in dialogue is not so much in reference to the individual as it is to the community. Thus, dialogue is a "corporate" activity, and not a personal one. Besides representing one's own community, one also has the responsibility to return to share the fruits of dialogue with them.

Flowing from this, persons entering dialogue should also “be at least minimally self-critical of both themselves and their own religious or ideological tradition.” Thus, if one enters into interreligious dialogue with the belief that one’s own tradition has all the correct answers and nothing can ever be false, then one has shut out learning. For, learning is not only about “the other” or the other’s religion, but learning is also very much about oneself and one’s own religion. *Dialogue and Proclamation* puts it this way: “The way Christians understand their religion and practice may be in need of purification” (DP 32). In this respect John Paul II also acknowledges that “other religions constitute a positive challenge to the Church” (RM 56). As we learn more about “the other” and her/his religion, we also re-view ourselves and our own religion. If revision and change are called for, in all honesty one will have to revise and change. *Dialogue and Proclamation* is no less assertive as it states that dialogue is about “the will to engage together in commitment to the truth and the readiness to allow oneself to be transformed by the encounter” (DP 47). The document even goes a little further to spell out what could even happen: “In this process of conversion, the decision may be made to leave one’s previous spiritual or religious situation in order to direct oneself toward another” (DP 41). In simple terms, the search for Truth knows no bounds, even if it means converting to another religion.

THE “PRICE” OF DIALOGUE

Thus far, we have seen that there is no question about the importance of dialogue. The long-term positive effects of dialogue can easily be deduced from the various reasons and factors which encourage the praxis of dialogue. To name a few: dialogue has the potential for forging cooperation, building trust and friendships, promoting eco-human liberation, realizing God’s plan of unity for humanity, and facilitating the discovery of the fullness of Truth. But, as with anything else, there is also the negative side to the picture, namely the “price” we pay in interreligious dialogue. And very often, in view of this potential “price,” many are reluctant to venture into the praxis of dialogue. While quite a few will look upon this as “price” or negative effects of dialogue, the more courageous and optimistic views them as positive sources for growth.

Specifically, we are referring to the process of change and growth as a result of new learnings. This change and growth can occur to the extent that previously-held truths are found to be inconsistent with the new findings. Be they theological concepts, doctrinal teachings, or dogmatic truths, when they are up for questioning, nothing can stop it. No amount of magis-

terial warnings will stop one from raising these questions. It is a matter of conscience. It is part and parcel of the discovery of Truth. Felix Wilfred puts it strongly: "A critical reflection on the praxis of dialogue is bound to lead us to the conclusion that traditional theological frameworks can no more meaningfully integrate into themselves the new experiences, nor adequately respond to new questions and problems that continue to emerge."

In the theological realm, questions concerning Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, the theology of religions, the Kingdom of God, the concept of salvation, the understanding of mission are all significant issues which have come up over the years. One need only look at the volumes and volumes of books written on issues such as the nature of salvation, the uniqueness of Christ, the possibility of other incarnations, the relationship between the Kingdom of God and the Church, the debate on mission versus dialogue, to acknowledge that the issues are far from resolved. Even the Vatican views on the importance of dialogue, cited in the previous section, are far from conclusive. To be sure, there are as many quotes found within the very same documents, such as *Dialogue and Proclamation* and *Redemptoris Missio*, to suggest that ambiguity still resides in the Vatican with regard the notion of dialogue, evangelization, proclamation, salvation, Kingdom of God, etc.. For example, while acknowledging that dialogue is imperative and an integral aspect of evangelization, the Vatican is quick to point out that proclamation is even more important. Or, while acknowledging the possibility of salvation in other religions, the constitutive role of Christ and the Church is also asserted.

We therefore see that dialogue is not such a clear-cut option. While on the one hand the Church officially encourages it, on the other there are powerful currents which try to hold it back. It is because the "price" for some is too high that they have reservations about its import. Felix Wilfred has a chapter in his book entitled "Dialogue gasping for breath?" and in it suggests that dialogue "is getting suffocated and constricted by the narrowness of the theological ambit in which it is moving."

THE PROSPECTS OF DIALOGUE

By now, we should be convinced that while dialogue seems to be a fundamental commitment of the Church, especially with Vatican II, it is also an activity viewed with much trepidation and apprehension. It is, as it were, Vatican II being the momentous event where the Church graduated with a baccalaureate degree majoring in dialogue, but is now unsure whether dialogue is what she really wants to get into. Like any fresh graduate entering the work force, the Church will have to feel her way around before she

finally gets comfortable with the vocation of dialogue. We have to give her time as we remind ourselves that she is in the time between eras, a transition period, a time between parenthesis. Her apprehensions and fears are not totally unfounded. Dialogue is a pretty risky business. Very few dare to tread the path of dialogue.

Few as they are, they are the hope of the future. They have a qualitatively different form of Christian faith. Going by James Fowler's theory of faith development, only those who have reached at least a Stage 5 faith are those most capable of engaging in interreligious dialogue. It is a post-conventional form of faith where one has worked through the "either-or" mindset and in order to be comfortable with a "both-and" mentality. One becomes open to multidimensional, relational and organically interdependent forms of truth. Ambiguity and paradox are acceptable features in life as the Stage 5 Faith is appropriately labelled Conjunctive or Paradoxical-Consolidative Faith. Truth need no longer be singular, absolute or final. It can remain relative, tentative, pluralistic and open to Mystery. The Stage 5 person is able to let go of previous securities in order to tread the unknown and the mysterious. S/he arrived at this stage partly as a result of the "leaving-home" experience, leaving behind temporarily beliefs, practices, and traditions. S/he then is open to entering into new "homes," to listen to new forms of beliefs, experience new forms of practices and invest in new forms of traditions. S/he will be enriched and transformed by these new learnings, and go away with a broader perspective of God, religion, and life in general. The Stage 5 person is the best hope for the future of dialogue. The present few who are engaging in dialogue are paving the way for others to follow. They are the prophets pointing the way to the future.

While Fowler's empirical research concludes that only a very small percentage of adults are currently at Stage 5 Faith, process philosophy, which subscribes to an evolutionary process of the cosmos, predicts that more and more people will evolve to that stage with time. That is to say, in time to come, Stage 5 Faith will be common to humanity as interreligious dialogue will become common activity. With more and more people engaged in the praxis of dialogue, Christianity will then take on new forms. No longer will she live in isolation, for then she will be interacting healthily with the other religions of the world. No longer will she need to consider herself superior, as then she will acknowledge that she is one among many, albeit unique in her own way. No longer will she remain a Western Church with its forms and contents, for then she would have become a genuinely world Church. Put another way, the Catholic Church would then become truly a catholic Church. That moment will be the new *Kairos*. It will be a

moment of true transformation, a moment of true maturity, a moment of true growth. Christianity would have come of age. At 21, having reached full adulthood, with dialogue as a way of life, she would have become truly a *New Way of Being Church*.