

Bill Thompson, Choice, and Balance: An After-remembrance Reflection
Christian T. Iosso

November 28, 2006

This brief essay is both a report on a service of remembrance for William Phelps Thompson and a reflection on lessons from his service to the church (spanning 1966-1983) in today's very different context. [Included among the positions he held was Stated Clerk of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA).]

Whatever one's opinion of Bill Thompson's leadership style, the basis for his choices and recommendations to the General Assembly was always clear. For those who prefer leaders to have little authority, Thompson would always disappoint. For those who want a leader who can speak extemporaneously with masterful command of material and audience, the "Stately Clerk" was your man. He would focus on the key issue—and also make sure that all the t's were crossed and i's dotted. As one who helped do staff work for him on certain subjects, it was very apparent that decision-making was not arbitrary. Deliberation was the rule, good preparation a requirement, and the appeal was always to principle. There was little self-indulgence and not much "touchy-feely"—that part of the 1960s I think Bill missed entirely—and many people did not see more than his official persona at General Assembly meetings.

The persons who spoke at the service of remembrance at the Presbyterian Center in Louisville, Kentucky, on Tuesday, November 28, 2006, knew far more than Bill Thompson's public work persona. Juanita Granady, long-time assistant and then assistant stated clerk, read a letter she had written at the time of Thompson's death on April 27th. It revealed a man who nurtured his staff, served as a mentor and teacher and friend, and continued that friendship with an annual Christmas letter decorated with youngest daughter's and, later, granddaughter's artwork. Granady's letter is a truly gracious testimony to a man she worked with as closely as anyone. Her testimony was the stronger for her service in the office of Jim Andrews, the former Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) and then of the reunited Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Granady's account also reflects a strong partnership across racial, regional, and gender differences through a period when the church was helping the whole culture move forward on racial justice and human rights. (A portion of her letter follows this essay.)

Both Andrews and Thompson had supported reunion of the PCUS and the UPCUSA (and the union presbytery movement that helped bring it about), and both ran for Stated Clerk in the reunited church. In large part due to Thompson's then opposition to the ordination of homosexual persons, Thompson lost key support among former UPCUSA members and, subsequently, lost that election to Andrews. Thompson's later confession that he had been wrong about "gay ordination"—though respecting what he took to be the will of the General Assembly—was among the most notable of a number of significant changes in his life and thought.

In addition to Granady, those speaking in the service of remembrance included Barbara Roche, Bruce Tjaden, Clifton Kirkpatrick, Victor Makari, Joyce Tucker, Jon Chapman and Curtis Kearns.

Some of the speakers remembered Thompson's ability to recall how decisions were made. He did not spend time on trivialities, but would remember and review in his own mind key positions taken and points made in debate. Barbara Roche, former editor of *Concern* and *Horizons* magazines, remembered Thompson's long conversations with Mary Pardee, a longtime leader in Presbyterian Women and the Ecumenical Development Cooperative Society (a Third World cooperative development bank now called Oikoucredit). Tjaden, a psychotherapist and pastor who served with Thompson on the executive committee of the General Assembly Mission Council of the former UPCUSA, remembered Thompson's informal (though still dedicated!) work style and taste for soup.

Cliff Kirkpatrick, the current Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, and Joyce Tucker, one-time associate stated clerk in the PCUS, both encountered Thompson for the first time when they were students at Yale Divinity School. As part of their polity class, they went to the 1966 General Assembly of the PCUS, where they watched Thompson defeat the candidate of a unanimous Stated Clerk search committee. He had been Moderator of the 1965 assembly and was nominated from the floor, and already in his remarks identified a scriptural theme from Ephesians 4:1-3, especially verse three. Kirkpatrick termed it providential that he had had so long an acquaintance with Thompson; Tucker spoke warmly of her service with Thompson on a small pre-reunion task force that worked to make uniform the Book of Discipline. Tucker also remembered that any pantheon of polity experts and clerks would include Marianne Wolfe of Pittsburgh, who had also often worked with Thompson.

Jon Chapman, currently the PC(USA) coordinator for the Europe office, Ecumenical councils, and advocacy, remembered working with Thompson while on the staff of the Synod of the Northeast. He remembered Bill Thompson's strong commitment to human rights and racial justice, including situations in the U.S. and in South Africa. He remembered Thompson calming him and speaking of Jesus' love of all people right after a bomb was found (and defused) that was addressed to Thompson himself in his New York office.

Victor Makari, currently the PC(USA) coordinator for the Middle East office, remembered being an associate pastor to the congregation where the Thompsons were members in Wayne, Pennsylvania, prior to the shift to 475 Riverside Drive in New York City. Thompson would manage to get to session meetings regularly, despite a travel schedule that began to increase steadily. Victor also remembered his wife Mary very warmly; she had chaired the Christian Education committee.

In summing up Bill Thompson's impact, Curtis Kearns noted that, as a seminarian, he had been highly impressed by the Clerk's leadership in the assembly. More important than that public presence for him, however, were Thompson's respect for everyone, his

enormous competence with his subject matter, and his love of the church—whose impact he wanted to make stronger in the world.

In terms of lessons for today, we know that the structure of our reunited denomination—and all denominations—is much different from previous ones. Cultural location has changed, demographics have changed, and expectations of central authorities of all kinds have changed. Not all of these changes have been losses, but to look back at Thompson's role is to look back at a time of what Edwin Friedman might call leadership by differentiation within a functional denominational family system. There may be more anxiety and negativity in a denominational system today and more temptation not to make waves (though sailing is more fun when you tack hard to the wind and see some spray!).

A first characteristic of Thompson's leadership was perhaps most due to his legal career. He was not as conflict-avoidant as most ministers. Many thought he would be more restrained in activity as well as style than the previous Stated Clerk, Eugene Carson Blake. Thompson came in, as *Time* magazine phrased it, as a "Layman Leader," and was expected to help the voices of lay members of the church be heard more strongly, "decently and in order," of course. He seemed to embody that Presbyterian motto, but claimed the full office of elder and resisted splitting the views of ministers and members.

Thompson did appear to follow Eugene Carson Blake's priorities on church unity, reunion, ecumenism, and church and state issues, but did so because these were General Assembly concerns. He was also elected at a time when the former boards of National Missions, Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations (COEMAR) and others were headed by strong leaders, prior to the reorganization of 1971-73 that brought the boards together under the General Assembly Mission Council. Thompson's legal background led to more engagement with Amicus Curiae briefs on behalf of religious liberty. As a layperson, he was perhaps ecumenical with fewer theological inhibitions. As a former assistant prosecutor at the Tokyo War Crimes trials, he was dedicated to human rights, including full equality for women.

On the social responsibility of corporations in which the church held stock, Thompson spoke at corporate annual meetings on topics where the General Assembly had given clear guidance—South Africa, environmental justice, and so forth. He understood the accountability that the Presbyterian Foundation and Board of Pensions had to the General Assembly and did not divinize fiduciary responsibility, as he knew the law concerning program-related and ecclesiastical investments and trusts. He also spoke to the United Nations on Nuclear Disarmament, partly on behalf of the National and World Councils of Churches, in which he was strongly active.

On the concerns above and many others, Thompson always based his voice on the voice of the General Assembly. He believed the Holy Spirit was present in the church's work of deliberation by the assembly. The Clerk would help the process be fair and well informed, and if the resulting positions were tilted toward justice, maybe that is God's inclination. Balanced and careful in deliberation (we would use discernment today),

Thompson might have said that “fair” is not always “balanced” or “on the fence.” His leadership was based on the very Reformed understanding that the church seeks God’s will in order to be guided by it in action. Thompson would represent a position clearly and fairly, but taking a stand is not seeking balance—which means letting the church be framed by the choices of others. People in the church and society knew where he believed the church stood, despite some opposition. In a church that respects individual and corporate conscience, some disagreement is inevitable on how we hear and obey God. There were groups opposed to the Confession of 1967, for example, and opposed to ordaining women, though these groups were not as polarized, routinized, and professionalized as various affinity groups are today.

On today’s war in Iraq and the lack of a peace process in Israel/Palestine, we could apply precedents from Thompson’s time on Vietnam, or Central American human rights abuses, or statements on the Middle East. In all cases, Thompson would have, by his example, encouraged the church not to be afraid to stand up to the State or foreign nations. Little known, but somewhat controversial, Thompson chaired an ecumenical national inquiry group on “War Crimes: U.S. Priorities and Military Force,” which included both Protestant and Roman Catholic foreign policy experts. Their report of May 31, 1972 (Friendship Press, New York), followed the My Lai and other Vietnam revelations of 1971 and the broader pattern of U.S. military interventions. The report spoke of a change in “America’s self-understanding” brought about by the war, and reaffirmed the framework of international law and the need for higher obedience than to national security. It is heart breaking to see so many continuities with today’s situation where the church’s witness has again been proven, tragically, to be correct.

And so, memories within memories, reaffirmation of the church’s leadership and witness emerges. In season and out of season, the church, and its stated clerks, and its councils, and its presbyteries, and its sessions, are given an assignment to fulfill. The how and the who may change; the why does not. And for a statement of why, why not that confession that so shaped the church Thompson served *:

To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as God’s reconciling community...(9.31)

The life, death, resurrection, and promised coming of Jesus Christ has set the pattern for the church’s mission...(9.32)

The institutions of the people of God change and vary as their mission requires in different times and places. The unity of the church is compatible with a wide variety of forms, but it is hidden and distorted when variant forms are allowed to harden into sectarian divisions, exclusive denominations, and rival factions. (9.34)

The Church ...orders its life as an institution with a constitution, government, officers, finances, and administrative rules. These are instruments of mission, not ends in themselves. ... A presbyterian polity recognizes the responsibility of all

members for ministry and maintains the organic relation of all congregations in the church. It seeks to protect the church from exploitation by ecclesiastical or secular power and ambition. Every church order must be open to such reformation as may be required to make it a more effective instrument of the mission of reconciliation. (9.40)

God's redeeming work in Jesus Christ embraces the whole of human life: social and cultural, economic and political, scientific and technological, individual and corporate. It includes the natural environment as exploited and despoiled by sin. It is the will of God that God's purpose for human life shall be fulfilled under the rule of Christ and all evil be banished from creation. (9.53)

These excerpts are taken from the inclusive language version of the Confession of 1967. Bill Thompson would have approved.

Christian T. Iosso is coordinator for social witness policy for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The following are portions of Juanita Granady's letter to the Thompson family, read at the service of remembrance for William Phelps Thompson on May 5, 2006, in Louisville, Kentucky. Granady, now retired, had a combined three decades of work as a staff member in the former United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She had the opportunity to work closely with Thompson.

Working directly with William Phelps Thompson was a challenging, exciting, incredible experience, which surpassed my greatest expectations. Things were always changing. The tasks were diverse and many, never boring; and, therefore never tedious. Bill Thompson had a razor sharp mind—was a remarkable leader and human being, tireless in his efforts to serve the Church, which he did with integrity, compassion and grace. He was a strong and consistent advocate for human and civil rights; and, a peacemaker. The Stated Clerk constantly spoke about, and prayed for, the peace and unity of the Church and the world. Often when fulfilling preaching engagements across the Church, his Scripture lesson was taken from Ephesians 4, and his Sermon Topic was on “The Unity of the Body”....

Even though the Stated Clerk's involvements within the organization and across denominational lines were vast; and, even though his travels at home and abroad, took him away from the office approximately 75% of the time, his energy never failed. He seemed to thrive on the work. The Clerk was gone so much that whenever he returned from an extended trip, the staff would greet him with requests to see his passport and entrance visa. I used to think to myself, “How does he do all these things? Isn't he tired?” I would even ask him those questions. His response was simply, “This is the only way I know how to do this work. I will do it as long as the Church wants me to”....

Needless to say, my work with Bill Thompson was a life-changing experience. Somewhere during the three-decade journey, I came to the realization that the “job” had become a “call”—that each day the people where I worked were doing something meaningful—that Bill Thompson was on an important mission for the Church and we, as a staff, had a major role to fulfill....

In years to come, Bill Thompson will be described as many things: a Stately Clerk, a legend, a giant, a brilliant mind, an organizational thinker, a civil and human rights advocate, a leader in the ecumenical movement who followed his predecessor, the legendary, Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, a peacemaker, a reconciler, a mediator, and so on. I am proud to say I remember Bill Thompson as all these things; but, most of all, I will remember him as **a man of God, a colleague, a teacher, and a friend.**