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**Formed for Diverse Communion:
Toward Developing An Ecumenical Formation Process
for New Members of Holy Wisdom Monastery’s Sunday Assembly**
by Rosy Kandathil

Introduction

The modern ecumenical movement began in the search for unity in mission, witness, worship and teaching among separated Christian churches. Notably, it was within Benedictine monasteries that the Roman Catholic church first began to take up the ecumenical vision.¹ As the movement broadened into the world, ecumenism has recognized a need for engagement with the larger world of inter-religious dialogue. Within this rather wide-ranging modern matrix “exists the ecumenism of the Benedictine Women of Madison, with its own origin, development, practices and future.”² As Fr. Ken Smits, O.F.M.Cap., longtime liturgist and Director of Benedictine Life Ministries for the Benedictine Women of Madison from 1999-2008 eloquently stated: “The ecumenism of the Benedictine women of Madison is a practical ecumenism, grounded in hospitality, inviting development of community, which is fostered by sharing spirit and life. It is grass roots ecumenism. It is the kind appropriate to a monastic community.”³

This paper seeks to look at the trajectory of that ecumenism. Emerging out of a Catholic Benedictine monastery and growing into what it is today, Holy Wisdom Monastery—a non-canonical ecumenical Benedictine monastery of women in Madison, WI—continues to nurture diverse communion in its related communities. Holy Wisdom calls itself a “community of

¹¹ Nancy Gower, “The Place of Ecumenical Monasticism in the Ecumenical Movement,” *One in Christ* 41, no.4 (January 2006): 42.

² Ken Smits, “The Meaning of Ecumenism: Benedictine Women of Madison” (internal memorandum, May 28, 1999), accessed at Library Archives, Holy Wisdom Monastery, Madison, WI.

³ *Ibid.*

communities” and as such, it is also home to a growing ecumenical Sunday Assembly with 175-200 persons in attendance each week. Sunday Assembly describes itself as

a unique worshipping community. Influenced by the Benedictine spirit and tradition, we welcome all to worship with us. We embrace unity around an open communion table, in fullness of equality for women and men, and we pray together in inclusive language that draws from the best of the Christian tradition. Members of Sunday Assembly seek God in prayer and worship, community building, social justice practices, ecumenical hospitality and care for the earth consistent with the vision and mission of Holy Wisdom Monastery.⁴

Over the years, this Sunday ecumenical worshipping assembly has picked up its own identity and mission. While its ecumenical orientation undoubtedly flows from the core Benedictine monastic community of women, it seems also to offer its own distinct contribution to the modern ecumenical movement. My perspective on its development is informed by my curiosity over what a practical ecumenical ecclesiology demands in this local context, no less than my interest and personal involvement. As a newly professed sister at Holy Wisdom, I have also been a member of the Sunday Assembly for 3 years. This paper proposes the first stages of a project that aims to look at an intentional ecumenical formation process for new members of Holy Wisdom’s Sunday Assembly.

A Brief History of Holy Wisdom Monastery: Ecumenism in Local Context

Since the mid-1960s the community of Benedictine women in Madison, WI have been guided by an ecumenical vision. Energized by Vatican Council II, and its call for adaptation and renewal of religious life as well as its decree on ecumenism, the Benedictine women of Madison took seriously these words: “The sacred Council exhorts all the Catholic faithful to recognize the

⁴ “Sunday Assembly,” Holy Wisdom Monastery, accessed September 23, 2016, <http://benedictinewomen.org/sunday-assembly/>.

signs of the times and take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism.”⁵ In 1965-66, monks from the Protestant community of Taizé lived at the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus and began bringing students and university campus ministers to the monastery for weekend retreats and Liturgy of the Hours. At the same time, members of the Madison Clergy Interfaith Dialogue Group started meeting on Mondays at the monastery, joining the community for midday prayer and lunch.⁶ Encouraged by the warm relationships that were developing through these regular meetings, Madison Clergy Interfaith Dialogue petitioned Bishop William Patrick O’Connor that the sisters open an ecumenical retreat and conference center. The proposal from the Executive Committee of Madison Clergy Interfaith addressed to Bishop O’Connor reveals the local spirit that accompanied this venture:

As the result of Vatican Council II, the atmosphere of Dialogue [sic] with proper study, contemplative prayer, and increasing understanding of each other, seems to indicate the need for an Ecumenical Center near this city of higher learning. The Catholic tradition of conducting retreats is unique, and seems to indicate that we Christian brethren of other communions could benefit from sharing in this experience. Our city is a cultural, theological, and ecumenical community. The help and advice of a community established in prayer and contemplation, can make a contribution to the whole Christian world...We would propose that the facilities and services of St. Benedict Priory and the Benedictine Sisters, be made available to us also for the purposes of retreats, prayer, and ecumenical studies; that would advance the cause of Christian charity and understanding and unity, as suggested by Vatican II.⁷

Agreeing to the proposal was not a light matter: it meant that this small Benedictine community of approximately 30 fully professed sisters would vote to close its girls’ preparatory

⁵ Vatican Council II, Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio* (21 November, 1964) § 4, in *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, ed. A. Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996).

⁶ Mary Forman, “History of the Development of the Ecumenical Monastic Community at Madison, Wisconsin in Light of the History of Christian Communities: An Essay” (paper presented at the Federation of Saint Gertrude, Chapter Meeting, Mount Saint Benedict Center, Crookston, MN, June 29-July 7, 1999), Library Archives, Holy Wisdom Monastery, Madison, WI.

⁷ Ibid.

school and respond to the communicated needs of Madison's faith communities. Their ensuing decision to open the St. Benedict Center for Christian Unity in 1966 would guide them to look closely at their life together and make choices for the future to facilitate genuinely welcoming others. In 1970, Philip Kaufman, OSB from St. John's Abbey and Rev. Robert Raymond, an ordained Presbyterian, were hired to develop ecumenical outreach.⁸ To facilitate the work of praying together, in the 1970s, the community produced an inclusive language Liturgy of the Hours prayer book.⁹ Since 1966 and for nearly 40 years, the St. Benedict Center for Christian Unity sponsored retreats and programs by noted scholars on prayer, liturgy, scripture and spirituality to foster wider ecumenical and interfaith learning. The Madison monastery's doors were gradually opening to all who would "come and see" (John 1:39).

Over time, genuine relationships grew between the sisters and local leaders of Protestant and Anglican communities so that some began to collaborate closely on programs. During the summers of 1972-1988, the sisters hosted the Lutheran Summer Institute for Mission, a 5-week training program for missionary families. Over nearly two decades, the Roman Catholic Benedictine sisters lived closely, worked, shared meals and prayed with Lutheran missionary families each summer, and found themselves changed as a result. While the Center became a noted meeting place for Christians of all churches, it also sometimes

⁸ "An Ecumenical Monastic Community Sponsored by the Monastery of Saint Benedict Center: A Proposal" (memorandum presented to Ecumenical Board, September 7, 1995), accessed at Library Archives, Holy Wisdom Monastery, Madison, WI.

⁹ Richard H. Bell, "The Journey Toward Holy Wisdom with the Benedictine Women of Madison: A Narrative History of its Ecumenical Board" (draft manuscript, November 2007), accessed at Library Archives, Holy Wisdom Monastery, Madison, WI.

stretched to include an interfaith dimension. In 1979, the Center hosted a visit from the Dalai Lama of Tibet that included a retreat for Buddhist monks and a time for interfaith dialogue.¹⁰

To this day, the sisters talk with great warmth and openness about the friendships that the community developed over this time with people of various Christian traditions and then also with those of various faiths. Friendship is an oft-repeated theme in the realm of inter-religious and ecumenical dialogue, and its impact among the Benedictine Women of Madison should not be discounted. Ecumenical and interfaith friendships influenced the monastic community in profound ways, breaking them open to consider creative new ways of living the Gospel's imperatives together. It was friendship that enticed the monastic community to take risks for the sake of relationship, while still holding onto the Gospel core of their common life. "Praying with people is subversive," said Prioress Mary David Walgenbach. "It gives you new ideas."¹¹ Some of these new ideas included the (1) **Community of Benedict**, an ecumenical non-resident praying community of mixed vocation (celibate, single, married, clergy and laypeople of various denominations) dedicated to exploring faith and spirituality guided by the Rule of Benedict (1980-2013); (2) **Bingen Community**, a residential praying community composed of the monastic sisters, singles, married and children (1986-1992); (3) an **Oblate** program that invites men and women of any faith tradition or spirituality to engage a year-long process of Benedictine spiritual formation before making a promise to the monastic community through a personal rule of life (1998-present); and (4) **Sunday Assembly**, a weekly ecumenical eucharistic worship which provides an open communion and a rotating roster of presiders

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Robert McClory, "Ecumenical monastery in Wisconsin charts new way," *National Catholic Reporter*, August 17, 2007, accessed June 23, 2016, <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Ecumenical+monastery+in+Wisconsin+charts+a+new+way.-a0168284160>.

ordained in various Christian traditions (ambiguous start, 2005?-present). Each of these ecumenical communities were deliberate ventures to embrace Christians of diverse traditions through the experience of shared prayer, life, witness and mission.

As part of their commitment to ecumenism, the monastic community began seriously investigating the possibility of “being a Benedictine community open to Christian women where all are equal and all support each other in our quest for God.”¹² In 1990 the sisters launched an internal visioning and feedback process, enlisting a dozen monastic consultants, to critically “examine their future, their place in society, and how they as a community would continue to seek God.”¹³ After 2 years of prayer and consultation, in 1992, the sisters assembled an “Ecumenical Board” tasked with advising the community on how they could transition from a Benedictine monastery of Roman Catholic women to becoming a non-canonical ecumenical Benedictine monastery of women.¹⁴ In August 1992, the sisters presented their vision to the Conference of American Benedictine Prioresses in Greensboro, NC:

We will become an ecumenical monastery of publicly professed Christian women, following the Rule of Benedict and fulfilling the mission of the Sisters of Saint Benedict, Madison Wisconsin by continuing the Benedictine charism of prayer and worship, community and hospitality in an ecumenical environment; by developing and sustaining mutual relationships with monastics in Africa; by being open to opportunities as they arise.¹⁵

¹² Mary David Walgenbach, *The Journey of a Lifetime: Benedictine Life Foundation Newsletter*, (Madison, WI: Sisters of Saint Benedict of Madison, WI, Inc., February 1999), 1, accessed at Library Archives, Holy Wisdom Monastery, Madison, WI.

¹³ Joanne Kollasch, “History of the Development of the Ecumenical Community,” (Madison, WI: Sisters of Saint Benedict of Madison, WI, Inc., March 1998), accessed at Library Archives, Holy Wisdom Monastery, Madison, WI. The consulting group included Benedictine sisters from almost all the US federations, contemplative and missionary Benedictines; a Franciscan sister, a Trappist, a Presbyterian minister, and talented professional laypeople – all of whom shared friendship with members of the community and had a special area of expertise to bring to the process.

¹⁴ Kathryn Huber, “The Foundation of Two Ecumenical Benedictine Monasteries in the United States,” *Alliance for International Monasticism* No. 100 (2011): 59-62.

¹⁵ Joanne Kollasch, “History of the Development of the Ecumenical Community,” (Madison, WI: Sisters of Saint Benedict of Madison, WI Inc., March 1998), accessed at Library Archives, Holy Wisdom Monastery, Madison, WI.

To see their vision through, an Ecumenical Board was established from February 14, 1994 – December 2007 that would be composed of a

group of people whose depth of knowledge, diverse experience and wisdom will guide the creation, growth and formation of an ecumenical monastic community...The Board's study, dialogue and innovations in ecumenism will benefit the world and the development of the ecumenical monastic community at Saint Benedict Center, Madison, WI.¹⁶

The Board would meet three times a year in its advisory capacity, leaving the sisters free to make ultimate decisions for themselves. To show the diversity and unique expertise of this group, it is worth including a roster of names (along with their years of service to the Board):

Joanne Kollasch, OSB, member of Benedictine Women of Madison (1994-2007); Mary David Walgenbach, OSB, member of Benedictine Women of Madison (1994-2007); Richard H. Bell, Presbyterian, Professor of Philosophy and author, Wooster College (1994-2007); Rev. Linwood Urban, Episcopal priest, professor emeritus Swarthmore College and author (1994-2007); Robert Bright, UW Family Living Program (1994-1996); Donald Corcoran, OSB, co-founder of St. Paul's Priory in Windsor, NY (1994-1996); Fr. Jude Wiesenbeck, Director of the Office of Ecumenism, Archdiocese of Louisville, KY (1994-1996); Kathleen S. Hurty, Ph.D., Lutheran, General Director of Ecumenical Networks of the National Council of Churches, USA; Executive Director of Church Women United (1996-2006); Mary Forman, OSB (1997-1999); Fr. George Tavard, AA, renowned author, theologian and professor (1997-2007); Rev. Barbara Battin, Presbyterian minister and author (1997-2007); Rev. Paula Lawrence Wehmiller, Episcopal priest (1995-2005); Rev. Fred Trost, United Church of Christ (2001-2007); Dan Ward, OSB, Executive Director, Legal Resource Center for Religious, Silver Spring, MD (2001-2007).

In September 1995, the Ecumenical Board produced a proposal for what an ecumenical monastic community of Benedictine women might look like and how it could develop at St.

¹⁶ Mary David Walgenbach, "Council Charter for the Ecumenical Board" (internal memorandum, April 15, 1997) accessed at Library Archives, Holy Wisdom Monastery, Madison, WI.

Benedict Center.¹⁷ In an introductory section of that document, the Board articulated the rationale for this move:

(1) an ecumenical monastic community is a natural organic growth out of the many ecumenical and interfaith dialogues, programs and experiences of ecumenical communities at Saint Benedict Center; (2) the core members of the ecumenical monastic community should be professed celibate women from various Christian traditions; (3) the Monastery of Saint Benedict Center will eventually die, but in the process of dying the members desire to give birth to a new monastery; (4) a Benedictine monastery of women can more easily sponsor an ecumenical community because they do not have the clerical encumbrances and can bridge the barriers of church polity; (5) the members of the Monastery of Saint Benedict Center believe that sponsoring an ecumenical community is an important witness to a divided church.¹⁸

The language is clear-eyed, future-oriented and starkly paschal. It is resolute about the impending death of a “mothering” Roman Catholic Benedictine community, yet “in the process of dying the members desire to give birth to a new monastery” arising out of the ecumenical life and relationships which the St. Benedict Center for Christian Unity had made possible. It also offers a unique perspective on the creative potential of women at this time in the Roman Catholic church. In this case, a community of monastic Roman Catholic laywomen would use their freedom from “clerical encumbrances” generatively: to bridge and bear physical witness to Christian unity in a way that others bound more closely to the institution could not (or would not).

As others have noted, monastic communities have historically been hospitable places for innovation. Monastics have always existed in a liminal space somewhat independent of the

¹⁷ “An Ecumenical Monastic Community Sponsored by the Monastery of Saint Benedict Center: A Proposal” (memorandum presented to Ecumenical Board, September 7, 1995), accessed at Library Archives, Holy Wisdom Monastery, Madison, WI.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 3.

institutional Church.¹⁹ That relative independence has provided them with space to experiment and follow the Spirit's leading as the community discerns it, sometimes in the prophetic margin just beyond the traditional bounds of institutional churches. For this reason, monasticism has offered particularly "fertile terrain for the development of the vision for unity...for it encompasses better than any other form of Christian life both persevering prayer and concrete ecumenical life together."²⁰ In a special way, Pope Paul VI recognized this role and entrusted the ecumenical movement to the monastic orders. As Paul VI described it, monastics form a unique bridge between Catholicism, Protestantism and Orthodoxy: predating the East-West schisms and the Protestant reformation, monastics are heirs and witnesses to the time of one, undivided church.²¹ In a lecture entitled "Monastic Virtues and Ecumenical Hopes" delivered in Rome on March 12, 2012, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams, echoed that sentiment. Highlighting the role of monastic life as a catalyst for Christian unity, Archbishop Rowan Williams praised its emphasis on the centrality of the Word of God in community and solitude. "If we want to speak about the ecumenical significance of monasticism, this, I believe is the heart of the matter: the monastery shows a Church that is unified simply in the divine Word, spoken and heard."²² The Benedictine charisms of common

¹⁹ See Robert Mickens, "Monasticism 'offers model for ecumenism,'" *The Tablet*, Mar 17, 2012; Nancy Gower, "The Place of Ecumenical Monasticism in the Ecumenical Movement," *One in Christ* 41, no.1 (Jan 2006): 42-76; Mary Forman, "History of the Development of the Ecumenical Monastic Community at Madison, Wisconsin in Light of the History of Christian Communities: An Essay" (paper presented at the Federation of Saint Gertrude, Chapter Meeting, Mount Saint Benedict Center, Crookston, MN, June 29-July 7, 1999), accessed at Library Archives, Holy Wisdom Monastery, Madison, WI.

²⁰ Nancy Gower, "The Place of Ecumenical Monasticism in the Ecumenical Movement," *One in Christ* 41, no. 1 (Jan 2006): 72.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Quoted in Robert Mickens, "Monasticism 'offers model for ecumenism,'" *The Tablet*, March 17, 2012.

prayer, hospitality and openness to change in the Rule and tradition lend themselves particularly to ecumenical dialogue.

Early on, the ecumenical vision of the Benedictine women of Madison included a firm commitment to egalitarian relationships: Catholic and non-Catholic members would be *equal in all respects*. However, under Roman Catholic Canon law, this was impossible. Under Canon law, only members of the Roman Catholic church could make full profession, vote in Chapter and be elected to leadership. Advised by canon and civil legal counsel as to their alternatives, it slowly became clear to the sisters and the Board that the only way to ensure this outcome was to create a new civil 501(c)(3) corporation in the State of Wisconsin and petition for affiliated status with the Federation of Saint Gertrude.²³ This matter caused substantial tension among members of the Board. In a letter between Board members Linwood Urban and Richard Bell, dated Sept 1, 2007, Prof. Urban reflected: “The move to incorporate separately the Benedictine Women of Madison was not seen by some as a move toward unity, but as potentially divisive, as opening a gap between the Community and the Roman Catholic Church.”²⁴ He went on to report “considerable stress and strain” and that “two members of the Board resigned because they could not support this move.”²⁵ It took almost two years (1996-1998) before the Board

²³ From the beginning, the Benedictine women of Madison did not want to venture out into ecumenical waters alone. The first people they reached out to for help and support were other Benedictines. The Federation of Saint Gertrude is an alliance of 16 women’s Benedictine monasteries around the US and Canada that provide accountability, oversight and support to each member monastery so that each remains faithful to the Rule of Benedict and a healthy expression of corporate monastic life. The Sisters of Saint Benedict, and later Holy Wisdom Monastery, are affiliated members in good standing of this Federation. It is one of 3 such Federations in the United States that help govern and connect all women’s Benedictine monasteries to one another.

²⁴ Linwood Urban, letter to Richard Bell, September 1, 2007, as reported by Richard Bell in “The Journey Toward Holy Wisdom with the Benedictine Women of Madison: A Narrative History of its Ecumenical Board” (draft manuscript, November 2007), accessed at Library Archives, Holy Wisdom Monastery, Madison, WI.

²⁵ Ibid.

and the monastic community could find clarity and cohesion on the nature of the new corporation.²⁶

Aside from the concrete matter of how to accomplish a transformation into an ecumenical non-canonical Benedictine monastery, the Board also realized a need for “further guided reflection on topics in ecumenism related to community life, like common baptism, a variety of perspectives on the Holy Eucharistic feast, discernment of life choices for women, formation in community, the life in already established ecumenical communities around the globe, and sharing our own ecumenical journeys with fellow Board members.”²⁷ To that end, the tri-annual meetings included a two-hour learning session called “Ecumenical Dialogue” and “Meditations on the Rule of Benedict” which involved bringing well-known theologians and leaders to present on specific topics followed by discussion. Notable speakers and topics included: George Tavard, AA, “My Ecumenical Journey” (Fall 1997); Patrick Henry, “What Does It Mean to All Benedictines to Have an Ecumenical Community Here?” (Fall 1999); Gordon Lathrop, “Baptism and Eucharist in an Ecumenical Monastic Community” (Fall 2000); Nathan Mitchell, “Liturgical Rituals” (Fall 2002); Joan Chittister, OSB (Fall 2003); Maxwell Johnson, “Baptism Calls Christians Together” (Fall 2004); Margaret O’Gara, “Ecumenism” (Winter 2004); Don Saliers, “Eucharist” (Winter 2005); Michael Kinnamon, “Hopes and Discouragements in Ecumenism Today” (Fall 2006); Abbot Primate Notker Wolf, “Reflections on Ecumenism Around the World” (Spring 2007). Transcripts from these talks and the discussions that followed evidence a high level of awareness of worldwide ecumenical trends and scholarship, as well as a

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Joanne Kollasch, interview by Richard Bell, Madison, WI, Sept 6, 2007. Remarks recorded in R. Bell, “The Journey Toward Holy Wisdom with the Benedictine Women of Madison: A Narrative History of its Ecumenical Board” (draft manuscript, November 2007), accessed at Library Archives, Holy Wisdom Monastery, Madison, WI.

desire to translate the best of such learning into the local context of this small ecumenical Benedictine community.²⁸

In 1998, following the advice and direction they had received from the Board, the sisters established a non-canonical ecumenical monastic community by creating a civil corporation, Benedictine Women of Madison Inc. In 1999 the Federation of Saint Gertrude passed its resolution on affiliation with the new community. Things then flowed quickly by Benedictine standards. By May 2006, the sisters completed the transfer of assets to the new corporation and had agreed to rename the Saint Benedict Center, Holy Wisdom Monastery. Two of their elderly sisters retained their canonical status, while Sisters Mary David Walgenbach and Joanne Kollasch requested dispensation from their canonical profession in order to be able renew their profession for Holy Wisdom Monastery.²⁹ In the same year (2006), the process of canonical dissolution of the Roman Catholic monastery took place and soon afterwards the 3 sisters (2 Catholic, 1 Protestant) made monastic profession for the new ecumenical monastery.³⁰ It had taken 14 years in total, but the sisters had realized their vision. A new monastic lifeform had been birthed in the process of another dying.

²⁸ This conclusion is drawn from my experience of spending time in archives with transcripts of renowned ecumenical and Benedictine scholars who were clearly intimately familiar with the work that was being done in Madison and actively providing support and expertise to the Ecumenical Board's ongoing work. This was a practical ecumenism, and evidenced a collegiality, humility and connectedness that I simply had no idea was a part of this community's history. These scholars were putting their work at the disposal of the community and engaging in discourse with the Board that allowed them to refine and develop a vision and concrete plan for the future.

²⁹ However, all remained members of the Federation of Saint Gertrude, as attested in a letter by Mary David Walgenbach, Prioress, June 27, 2006, accessed at Library Archives, Holy Wisdom Monastery, Madison, WI.

³⁰ Kathryn Huber, "The Foundation of Two Ecumenical Benedictine Monasteries in the United States," *Alliance for International Monasticism* No. 100 (2011): 59-62.

Formation in Holy Wisdom Monastery's Sunday Assembly: A Burning Ecumenical Question

In a letter directed to priests in the diocese, dated June 26, 2006, Madison Bishop Robert Morlino offered a circumspect blessing to Holy Wisdom.

While this community fulfills our call for stronger efforts in ecumenical dialogue I must stress that this is an experimental community and will not necessarily be Roman Catholic in belief or practice...Such experimental endeavors can bear great fruit for the Church, such as the Monastery at Taize. But there are very few other success stories worldwide, and thus our prayers and good wishes are all the more important."³¹

Bishop Morlino also asked the sisters not to celebrate Catholic Mass "or a substantially similar liturgy" at the monastery, or reserve the Blessed Sacrament on the property. His concern was that activities at the monastery "would not be suitable for Catholic school religion classes, parish religious education classes for young people through completion of high school, and surely not for catechumens and candidates in RCIA programs ... lest the basics [of faith] become confused in the complexity of this ecumenical setting."³²

Of course, the Madison Bishop's stance regarding the Roman Catholic Eucharist had immediate effect on the Sunday Assembly. Although ecumenical in orientation for many years and practicing Eucharistic hospitality, the Sunday Assembly enjoyed the faculties of a Roman Catholic priest, Fr. Ken Smits, O.F.M.Cap., as presider and celebrant. But as early as 2003, internal documents show that the community had begun seriously considering its options in the foreseeable event of full ecclesiastical disapprobation.³³ Under canon law and the practice of the Roman Catholic church, the sisters of Saint Benedict were an exempt canonical community

³¹ Robert C. Morlino, letter issued from the Office of the Bishop, Diocese of Madison, June 26, 2006. Accessed at Library Archives, Holy Wisdom Monastery, Madison, WI.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ken Smits, "The Benedictine Women of Madison and the Celebration of Eucharist" (internal Study, Library Archives, Holy Wisdom Monastery, Madison, WI, Feb. 14, 2003).

with a right to their own celebration of Eucharist reflecting their monastic life and worship. In keeping with Benedictine hospitality, the community's worship (Eucharist, Liturgy of the Hours) was open to all. With the development of the ecumenical retreat and conference center and the increasingly ecumenical welcome of the Benedictine community, the Sunday Assembly had grown to include not only Roman Catholics, but Christians of other churches, families of mixed denomination and other Christians who came occasionally as friends. Eucharistic hospitality was the practiced norm. With nearly 40 years of ecumenical dialogue behind them, the monastic community had been formed by their experiences and were unshakably convinced of its necessity in the world: they could do no other. They had come to see ecumenism as a vocation and a divine mandate—but was that burden shared by the Sunday Assembly they had nurtured?

Over the years, the monastic community had developed its own pattern for Sunday Eucharist, one which cleaved to classical monastic and ecumenical lines. Although it retained the classic outline of Introductory Rite-Liturgy of the Word-Liturgy of Eucharist-Closing Rite, it was consciously ecumenical in orientation. For instance, overt Roman Catholic elements had been eliminated or tempered, while the common lectionary with inclusive language and hymns from various Christian traditions had been incorporated. "The result is a liturgy influenced by the Benedictine ethos, more in the Roman Catholic tradition than any other Christian church, but strongly validated mainly by the monastic community and those who gather with them."³⁴ As Sunday Assembly evolved more explicitly into an ecumenical worshipping assembly certain questions needed to be addressed: could the tradition of Sunday Eucharist be maintained as a

³⁴ Ibid.

feature of monastic life? Who should preside, and how should that be determined? Is some kind of authorization or recognition needed, and if so, from whom? Could the monastic community validate its own celebration within the Christian tradition? Would continuing the Sunday Eucharist harm the relationship to the churches in any way?

By December 2005, the Sunday Assembly had wrestled for themselves with these questions as well as the potential consequences. At a planning meeting, the Assembly articulated a remarkable series of ecumenical directional statements and assumptions for moving forward.

We will (1) continue our current Benedictine liturgical practices of inclusive language, people, table, and lay preachers; (2) assume responsibility for our own Eucharist, including choosing our own presiders, increasing lay involvement and articulating and communicating our identity and mission; (3) network with other Christian communities for support and sharing. *We assume that* (1) Sunday Assembly will walk together and worship with the Benedictine Women of Madison, a Christian, ecumenical, Benedictine community of celibate women; (2) we will be a welcoming, ecumenical, hospitable, inclusive, Eucharistic community in our behavior and in our language; (3) that we will honor the process of the sisters and be respectful of all faith traditions in order to preserve a spiritual relationship with them; (4) we will make decisions as a community open to the Spirit, arrived at by consensus and based on Gospel and Benedictine values...(7) we shall retain our denominational identity, as we may choose, and support each other through anticipate ecclesiastical consequences; (8) we will continue our commitment to social justice and outreach to the broader community.³⁵

The statement above represents a discernible shift for the Sunday Assembly. The Sunday Assembly had previously derived its identity almost exclusively from its monastic host; authority flowed from the core community of Benedictine sisters. But in its statement, Sunday Assembly seems intent also upon evolving into an intentional ecumenical community with its own sense of ownership and acceptance of ecclesiastical consequences for their stance.

³⁵ "Benedictine Women of Madison Sunday Assembly: Planning Statements" (internal presentation to Sunday Assembly, Dec 11, 2005), accessed at Library Archives, Holy Wisdom Monastery, Madison, WI.

Although clearly in relationship with the monastic Benedictine Women of Madison, Sunday Assembly speaks its own “we” and “our” into life.

A decade later, in her April 2015 PhD dissertation entitled “Breaking and Sharing: Participant Agency and the Eucharistic Liturgy at Holy Wisdom Monastery,” Colleen Hartung, a member of Holy Wisdom’s Sunday Assembly, undertook a demographic survey.³⁶ The results of her survey highlight certain trends that bear further analysis in the context of Sunday Assembly’s ecumenical orientation and formation. How does Sunday Assembly understand itself? What had a decade of explicitly ecumenical worship according to the directional and assumptive statements it had articulated in 2005 yielded over the years? In the course of 3 consecutive Sundays (February-March 2014), 185 persons participated in Dr. Hartung’s survey: 125 women and 60 men, with an average age of 59. Her survey showed certain broad patterns: Sunday Assembly participants are primarily middle-class, highly educated and overwhelmingly white-Caucasian, yet diverse in age, residence, denominational perspective and sexual orientation.³⁷ In her survey, Dr. Hartung also posed several questions with ecumenical significance that I wish to highlight for the purpose of this discussion.

(1) What is the denomination and/or faith tradition of your family of origin? The vast majority, 130 persons or 70% of survey respondents answered “Roman Catholic/Catholic”; 2 persons or 1% responded as “Ecumenical.”

(2) To the question: how would you describe your *current* denomination and/or faith tradition? Only 62 persons or 33% of survey participants identified as some version

³⁶ Colleen D. Hartung, “Breaking and Sharing: Participant Agency and the Eucharistic Liturgy at Holy Wisdom Monastery” (PhD diss., Chicago Theological Seminary, 2015), accessed at Library Archives, Holy Wisdom Monastery, Madison, WI.

³⁷Ibid., 33-34, 258-273.

of “Catholic,” while 53 persons or 28% of participants responded as “Ecumenical”.

Another 29 persons or 15% of participants responded as merely “Christian”; and 3 persons or 1% identified as “spiritual.”

(3) To the question, are you a member of Sunday Assembly? 131 replied “yes”; 53 replied “no.”³⁸ Many reported multiple layers of Sunday belonging: 49 respondents reported they “belong to another Sunday worship community”; 22 to “Other Christian Denominations”; 11 to the “Catholic Church”; 8 to “Other”; and, 1 to “Religious Congregation.”

One burning question arises immediately for me from this data—which, in turn, branches out to others. *What does it mean that 53 people in Holy Wisdom’s Sunday Assembly identify currently as “ecumenical” in denomination or faith tradition?* How do people understand themselves as “ecumenical”?³⁹ When speaking to Dr. Hartung about her data, she immediately questioned whether respondents understood what the word “ecumenical” meant.⁴⁰ She was skeptical, and posited that people believed ecumenical could also mean interfaith. She related the potential ambiguity in the congregation to the way the Eucharist is shared in the assembly: “No one is policing the table. It is essentially open; everyone is invited.”

³⁸ To date membership in Sunday Assembly is a voluntary, self-selecting process. A few times a year, the Prioress of Holy Wisdom Monastery asks that people who desire membership with Sunday Assembly come forward, briefly introduce themselves, share a story of their experience of the worshipping community, and receive a blessing from all present.

³⁹ I also wonder about the 29 persons or 15% that identified as merely “Christian.” Should they be included with the “ecumenical” population, making for an even larger data group? How is identifying as “Christian” different from, or the same as, identifying as “ecumenical”? The data suggests a need for further investigation.

⁴⁰ The survey was write-in – not multiple-choice. Would a multiple-choice survey have changed the results? I personally think that a write-in approach to the question allows for maximal variety and curtails bias. There is no immediate reason for me to question the reliability of this data. It seems to reflect a transformation for Sunday Assembly attendees who have gone from identifying with a particular denomination to a broader identity like “ecumenical” and “Christian.”

I am curious: What *is* the trajectory for ecumenical self-identity? Are people attending Holy Wisdom’s Sunday Assembly and finding ecumenical formation simply through participation in our liturgy, eucharist or by other means (conversation, dialogue with individuals, personal exploration) as Dr. Hartung’s doctoral thesis seems to suggest? How else can we account for this phenomenon? Is this trend something leadership should celebrate or should they be concerned? Both? Do people that identify as “ecumenical” see it as a new denomination or faith tradition? Do they no longer feel a part of their “original” or baptismal church tradition? Is the Sunday Assembly’s ecumenical identity a “third thing” or is it simply an extension of denominations? Perhaps more sobering: has this assembly lost or neglected an important aspect of ecumenism, that is, a fundamental respect for the distinctive gifts of different denominations? Or, are people expressing a desire to transcend denomination when they identify as “ecumenical”? What exactly is happening here?

Project Proposal: Toward Developing an Ecumenical Formation Process for New Members of Holy Wisdom Monastery’s Sunday Assembly

It is axiomatic that the Gospel expresses an ecumenical imperative in the prayer of Jesus: “may all be one; as you Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe” (John 17:21). Christian unity is therefore not something that followers of Jesus create for themselves, but is given in Christ, by God’s will, through the Holy Spirit to be manifested so that the world may believe.⁴¹

⁴¹ See Alan C. Clark, “Ecumenical Formation: Ecumenical Reflections and Suggestions, A Study Document of the Joint Working Group of the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches” (May 20, 1993) in *Ecumenical Formation of Pastoral Workers* (Washington DC: US Catholic Conference, 1998).

All Christians today are aware of being part of this one Church of Jesus Christ; yet they personally identify with particular, concrete churches that do not wish to be mistaken for the other.⁴² Being the Church pertains to a spiritual order of things, but it is also a matter of conviction. The Church is a spiritual entity, unbound by the constraints of space and time, and thus, universal. However, the ecclesial context that shapes our awareness of being a vital part of the Church is necessarily tied to a particular, concrete organization.⁴³ The word “denomination” conveys a particularity that is closely associated with the “name” of a church: Orthodox (Coptic, Syrian, Greek, Syrian), Catholic (with subdivisions for rites), Lutheran (ELCA, Missouri Synod), Anglican, Reformed, Methodist, Baptist, Evangelical, etc. This diversity in the concrete forms of Christian churches affects the sense of a person’s belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ. By chance or fortune, children born to Christian parents are introduced into the purview of one particular church that is separated from the others.

[T]hey receive along with the grace of justification and regeneration, both their general spiritual identity as Christian believers and the particular social identity of one denomination. As to those who enter the Church as adults, they cannot avoid selecting a denomination when they choose the ecclesial locus of their baptism. Their longing for salvation and their acknowledgment of Christ unavoidably connotes an option that is divisive in regard to the very community of salvation.⁴⁴

Within the ecumenical movement, there is broad agreement that *visible unity*—an overcoming of persistent divisions in the community of salvation—is an essential characteristic of the unity we seek to live out together. At Holy Wisdom’s first anniversary celebration on May 12, 2007, the worldwide leader of Benedictines, Abbot Primate Notker Wolf, the abbot of

⁴² George H. Tavard, *The Church, Community of Salvation: An Ecumenical Ecclesiology; New Theology Series: Volume 1* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 192.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

San Anselmo Monastery in Rome and official representative of the Benedictine order at the Vatican was in attendance. Abbot Notker Wolf suggested that ventures like Holy Wisdom could build something beyond formal corporate unity, "a deeper unity than a juridical one--a unity not so much in the head as in the heart and in life."⁴⁵ Ecumenical monasticism "is an expression of unity in diversity," he said. "In learning to live together and work together and respect each others' differences, perhaps we can overcome our problems."⁴⁶ We see something of what Abbot Notker Wolf describes in the present life of the Sunday Assembly: a unity not so much in the intellectual-cognitive realm of theological consensus and agreement, as in the socio-communal heart and life of the liturgically celebrating community.

Yet there is a potential poverty in their ecumenical vision, which Michael Kinnamon in his book *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and How it has Been Impoverished by its Friends* insists must be named, and that is, "settling for a 'unity' that isn't costly, for church relationships that don't make much of a witness because they don't demand much change."⁴⁷

If the goal is tolerant cooperation rather than mutually critical growth in Christ, if theological diversity is affirmed as an end in itself rather than as a characteristic of truth-seeking community, then ecumenicity *does* do violence to the integrity of the faith and *does* contribute to the relativistic climate of our era.⁴⁸

In a transcribed conversation with the Ecumenical Board on Oct 13, 2001, the Rev. Diane Kessler (Executive Director, Massachusetts Council of Churches) raised a point in response to a

⁴⁵ Robert McClory, "Ecumenical monastery in Wisconsin charts new way," *National Catholic Reporter*, August 17, 2007, accessed June 23, 2016, <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Ecumenical+monastery+in+Wisconsin+charts+a+new+way.-a0168284160>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Michael Kinnamon, *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and How it has Been Impoverished by its Friends* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003), 6.

⁴⁸ Kinnamon, 64.

question about the difference between non-denominational or inter-denominational worship and *ecumenical* worship.

Just because there are a lot of people in the same room who come from different Christian traditions doesn't make it ecumenical automatically. It seems to me that what makes something ecumenical is *if there is a self-consciously reconciling intention about that process and if people are in some way contributing to that...*We can't, at this place in this time, given the way in which Christian churches organize themselves – it's a sign of our brokenness—we can't completely successfully transcend that reality, because part of Christian theology, there's a particularity about it and yes, we are all in the body of Christ in a particular place, in a particular community, and so we're stuck in that tension, which is both tension and celebration.⁴⁹

While I am reluctant to name what is happening in Holy Wisdom's Sunday Assembly without further research and investigation, I am cognizant of a distinction between an unconscious, tolerantly cooperative, cheap unity and a costly, truth-seeking, mutually critical "self-consciously reconciling intention" to full ecumenical unity. After more than a decade of worshipping in this local context, there seems a need to address the ecumenical formation of the Sunday Assembly in a more formal way. Initially, I would propose another survey of Sunday Assembly to look closely at the apparent trend to identify as "ecumenical" or simply "Christian." I'd like also to look at the trajectory of how people experience ecumenism at Holy Wisdom, is there confusion about what ecumenicity means? Or are people rejecting denominational identity and reaching out for broader categories of being church? Is there an opportunity now for dialogue, reflection, education and the formation of an ecumenical consciousness?⁵⁰ I'd also propose a dialogue with the rotation of Sunday Assembly presiders, ordained in various

⁴⁹ Ecumenical Board and Rev. Diane Kessler, "Issues in Ecumenism in Community" (transcribed conversation, Oct 13, 2001). Emphasis mine. Transcript available at Library Archives, Holy Wisdom Monastery, Madison, WI.

⁵⁰ Phyllis Anderson, "Formation of an Ecumenical Consciousness," *The Ecumenical Review* 57, no. 1 (January 2005): 3-11.

Christian traditions, about their experience of ecumenicity. It seems important to raise the intentionality of our ecumenism at Holy Wisdom in order to deepen appreciation and receptivity for the diverse gifts of our communion. This would mean talking more openly about differences in our background, and offering opportunities for developing another generation of ecumenical leadership. It would also mean initiating new members to the history and evolution of ecumenism at Holy Wisdom, including the particular journey of the Benedictine monastic women who continue to play a part in shaping the local context for that ecumenicity.

The project I propose would have to unfold in stages, but it highlights what I perceive to be a need in our Sunday Assembly. While there is much to celebrate in the visible unity of Sunday Assembly's ecumenical worship, there is work to be done. There are many ecumenical scholars who, after the life-giving generativity of springtime, now mourn the relative tundra of an "ecumenical winter." Many say we need a rekindling of the vision, and are dire about the consequences of neglecting that work. In December 1998, during the Eighth Assembly of the WCC at Harare, Zimbabwe, the moderator of the Council's Central Committee, Aram I of the Armenian Orthodox church stated: "unless the churches re-own the ecumenical movement, and re-articulate clearly its vision by making it relevant to the life of the people, the ecumenical movement may lose its vitality and sense of purpose."⁵¹ We have an opportunity at Holy Wisdom to raise up a new generation of ecumenical leaders and I hope to be a part of that important work.

⁵¹ Diane Kessler, ed., *Together on the Way: Official Report of the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches*. (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1999), 65.

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