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## **Living Together in the Household of God:**

*Becoming a Household of Love, Faith, and Hope*

Hope S. Antone<sup>1</sup>

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In this time of so much conflict, violence and suffering, our church's 8<sup>th</sup> Quadrennial General Assembly theme beautifully captures the vision of many people all over the world. The vision of "Living Together in the Household of God" is not only the vision of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines. It is the vision of all who believe that everyone's survival depends on our ability to live together as members of "one global family" – or to use a more religious language, "the household of God".

### **The first part of our theme is "living together". What does living together mean?**

First, *living together is not mere co-existence*. In my experience of living in Hong Kong, people can co-exist by living close together in an apartment block without even knowing one another. Although we lived in one apartment block in a small neighborhood, I did not know any Chinese and the Chinese in the neighborhood either did not know English or simply had no time to be friendly with me, a Filipina. The apartment block kept us physically close but we did not take time to know each other. We simply co-existed but we were not even acquainted with each other. Perhaps my first smiling acquaintance was the family opposite to our apartment – the wife's eyes would sometimes meet mine as her kitchen was directly facing our living room. Co-existence may sound peaceful but it is not meaningful enough. Living in mere co-existence is therefore not a good enough example.

Second, *living together is the opposite of living against others*. In the biblical story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37), this way of living was exemplified by those who attacked and robbed the man who was travelling to Jericho. In our own context are many illustrations of living against others. There are many people who are robbed of their human dignity and their right to fullness of life. Gender injustice that is prevalent in our patriarchal societies, the rich and ruling class oppressing the poor and powerless, or certain races or religious communities discriminating against others, or when human beings abuse nature for profit or out of ignorance... these are some examples of living against others.

Third, *living together definitely does not mean living away from people*. In the Good Samaritan story the priest and Levite exemplified this attitude very clearly. Both saw the helpless man

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<sup>1</sup> Hope S. Antone is executive secretary for the Faith, Mission and Unity program area of the Christian Conference of Asia. This Biblico-Theological Reflection was presented at the 8<sup>th</sup> Quadrennial General Assembly of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines in Digos, Davao del Sur, Philippines on 24-29 May 2006.

who was beaten and left for dead. Yet, both walked away on the other side. Today, walking on the other side is a common stance especially in the face of risky engagements such as working for peace with justice. There are many reasons why people would rather walk on the other side – it is much safer for one’s sake; it may make one unpopular or put one’s religion, ethnic or social status at stake. In the case of the priest and Levite of the Good Samaritan story, their religious traditions, teachings and rituals kept them from helping someone in need. Jesus strongly criticized such a self-serving religiosity that seeks to keep oneself pure and clean, to the neglect of our social responsibility. If our theology keeps us away from people in need and ensures only our own security and comfort, we must be drifting from the way of Christ Jesus who came that others may have life in its fullness. Living away from people is dehumanizing, both for the one in need of help and the one in a position to help.

Finally, *living together means being in solidarity with the people in their struggles for life* regardless of their color, race, creed, religion or ideology. This was well exemplified by the Samaritan, the despised other who ends up crossing the boundaries and breaking down barriers set by ethnic and religious differences in order to be truly human. Being human means reaching out in compassion and love, sharing life in its fullness with someone who has been deprived, and empowering the other to live life abundantly. Thus, living together involves an active engagement that questions, overcomes and transforms the walls of separation, division, and hostility that prevent us from being in solidarity with one another. Living together is our only hope to survive together in this world.

**The second part of our theme provides a clue as to how we ought to live together: “in God’s household” means being part of “God’s household.” But what does it mean to live together in “God’s household”? How should we understand God’s household?**

While scanning the Bible Concordance, I found that the Bible has at least 119 references to *oikia* for “household” and “households”. In the Old Testament the word ranges in meaning from house or dwelling, to family (and all who live in the house, including slaves and servants), to clan or tribe (meaning a group of households), to an entire nation. In the New Testament, *oikia* refers to “father’s house”, the Jewish temple, church community which began in households/families. As a Jew, Jesus referred to the Jewish temple as his “Father’s house” (John 2:16) during his radical act of cleansing it. As he was facing his imminent death, he used the “Father’s house” in reference to heaven as abode of God and God’s children (John 14:2).

‘God’s household’ is a familial and familiar metaphor for the *reign of God* in our personal and communal lives as people in relation to the whole of creation. In this age of empire-building, the metaphor of the *kingdom of God* may help to convey an alternative vision to the kingdoms of the world; but God’s household conveys something that touches the very core of our lives – starting at home, into the church, the country and the world/universe.

There are indeed several senses in which *oikia* or “household” is used in the Bible and they do not always provide the best examples of what it means to be a good household, much less of a household of God. I would like to focus on three senses of the word: as *household of*

*love* (the family), as *household of faith* (the church), and as *household of hope* (the world or universe, which includes the country).

**(a) First Sense: Household of Love – Family**

We are all familiar with the household of love, the family, for each of us is a part of one. I call this primary household the “*household of love*” because it comes into being when two people fall in love and have a family. In our Philippine context, that household would include grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and others who live with us in the same house. Today, the structure of the family is changing because of migration, separation, and new forms of union. Expectedly it is in the *household of love* that members first experience acceptance, unconditional love, care and nurture, and responsibility. The sense of safety and protection is taught through certain boundaries that also give one a sense of identity. Thus, each one can say, “I belong to this particular family and not to another.” In my experience, the household of love nurtured me in a particular way, a particular perspective, a particular mindset, and a particular way of life. It was through mixing with children of other families that I learned of other households of love that were different from mine. There were times when I felt that my family did something better; there were also times when I felt envious of the ways that other families did certain things.

The Bible has many *examples of the household of love – the family* – and they are not necessarily the best examples of being part of the household of love.

(1) Violence in the family – e.g. killing of the first-born sons in Egypt; incest and sexual violence of Tamar; etc.

My son Cheekit was about 7 years old when, after reading the story of the killing of the first-born sons in Egypt (Exodus 13:1-16), he burst out crying, “Mommy, I do not want to be a first-born son anymore because I do not want to die like those children.” I tried my best to explain to him that such a thing happened a long time ago and that God would never allow that to happen again

(2) Patriarchal preference for boys – e.g. Hannah praying for a son.

I was re-telling the story of Hannah (I Samuel 1) praying for a son for a family talk at Kowloon Union Church one Sunday. A clever little girl named Hannah, who comes from a family of girls, interrupted me with her query, “But why pray only for a son?” I tried to explain that in her time the biblical Hannah had wished so much for a son but today many parents know that daughters and sons are equally important. Of course, deep in my heart, I knew that unfortunately in many Asian societies this was not always the case.

(3) Faith in God at the expense of family – e.g. Abraham’s treatment of Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael, Isaac.

Remember how Abraham asked his wife Sarah to tell King Abimelech of Gerar that she was Abraham’s sister (Gen. 20:2) in order to ensure his safety? Remember how Abraham and Sarah mistreated Hagar and Ishmael? And remember how Abraham almost sacrificed his

son Isaac to prove his faithfulness to God? The renowned Bible scholar, Walter Brueggemann, called Abraham's family a good example of a dysfunctional family.<sup>2</sup>

Whether in the Bible or in our present contexts, many families, the so-called primary households of love, which are the basic units of society, have failed to reflect their nature of being households of love for they sometimes perpetrate abuse, discrimination, violence, etc. Consider the cases of spouse and child abuse, incest and sexual violence, discrimination of girl children, etc. If families are part of God's creation, we must help recover their role as mirrors of the household of God – where members live together in love, where the weakest and most vulnerable are given special attention and care, and where everyone is valued and nurtured to become a responsible member of the wider community. We also need to guard against romanticizing the "ideal past" of families for we must live in the present with its own challenging realities.

### **(b) Second Sense: Household of Faith – Church**

We are all familiar with the household of faith, which in our case, is the church. I call this "second household" the "*household of faith*" because, in the case of the UCCP, it came to being when five denominations united in faith as one denomination, inspired by the prayer of our Savior, "that they may be one." I think our ancestors of the faith did not always agree on many things but in faith, they decided to be united. I grew up in this household of faith, where I learned a wider meaning of acceptance, love, care and nurture, and responsibility. This household of faith also taught me certain boundaries – I belonged to this faith family and not to another; I affirm certain beliefs and not others. It also gave me a sense of identity and nurtured me in a particular perspective and way of life. Yet I knew that there are other households of faith around me with their own beliefs and teachings. The boundaries set by my household of faith are to keep me strong in my faith and to protect me but sometimes they keep me from venturing into meaningful relationships with people from the other households of faith, i.e. the other religions.

The renowned Indian theologian, Dhyanchand Carr, links the tendency of many churches to be concerned with self-preservation and self-propagation to the Noah's Ark model of mission. He said that this traditional approach assumes that "the church comprises of people plucked out of the evil world which is set for damnation and hence, they need to be kept undefiled and pure to enter their heavenly abode."<sup>3</sup> For the faith community that follows this Noah's Ark model, mission means "helping a few more who are drowning to get on board the ark" and helping "the people of God already on board from being tempted to jump into the flood".<sup>4</sup> This Noah's Ark model of mission continues to operate to this day.

Unlike the Noah's Ark model, we find in the Jesus model a type of mission that is more engaged with life – not for the sake of self-preservation and self-propagation but for the

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann in one of a series of lectures I heard while at Union-PSCE in Richmond, Virginia (1996-99).

<sup>3</sup> Dhyanchand Carr, "Innovative Methods in Theological Education," in *CTC Bulletin*, Vol. XIX, No. 3 (December 2003), 79-86. Narrative on the Noah's ark is found in Genesis 6-8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 79.

sake of realizing the fullness of life for all. Let us remind ourselves of that Jesus model of mission by reading what I call, "the shortest sermon" (Luke 4:18-19, which Jesus actually read from Isaiah 61:1 and 58:6):

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."<sup>5</sup>

Jesus concluded by saying, "This passage of scripture has come true today, as you heard it being read." The people in the synagogue were so impressed and marveled at what he said. But they asked, "Isn't he the son of Joseph?" – a comment that can be a positive surprise or a derogatory remark questioning Jesus' authority. Jesus talked about prophets being unwelcomed in their home places and cited prophets who saved people who were not Israelites.<sup>6</sup> Elijah was sent to a widow from Sidon, not to the Israelite widows. Elisha healed Naaman, the Syrian, even when there were many Israelites who were sick with leprosy (verses 25-27). The people were so angry that they dragged Jesus out of the town and almost threw him over the cliff.

The household of faith that was gathered in the synagogue did not get what Jesus was talking about. They liked the "life in its fullness" agenda of good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and the year of the Lord's favor. But they wanted it only for themselves, the chosen people, the select few on board the ark of salvation. They were angry with Jesus because he included in his act of salvation those they regarded as outside the covenant. This was a terrible blow for the people who thought that only their faith community was the true household of God, deserving of the blessings of fullness of life.

Our *household of faith* today must beware of this tendency to misappropriate the teachings of Christ Jesus to suit our own interests or agenda. When the church wants the good news of fullness of life for all, only for itself, it may be in danger of taking the gospel in captivity. I wonder if our division within the United Church of Christ in the Philippines is because of this captivity of the gospel for ourselves. Consequently, like the household of faith gathered in the synagogue at that time, some people's anger may be directed now at our church workers and members who are working to alleviate the suffering of others who are outside our household of faith. Instead of thanking them and encouraging them in their work of announcing and sharing the fullness of life that Christ came for, we may be participating in dragging and throwing our own church workers and members over the cliff – as we continue this name-labeling of church workers who are risking their lives by working for justice, human dignity and fullness of life. What we do to them is what we do to Christ Jesus all over again.

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<sup>5</sup> Jesus adds "to let the oppressed go free" from Isa. 58:6 and does not include "and the day of vengeance of our God" from Isa. 61:2.

<sup>6</sup> "Luke," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. IX (Abingdon Press, 1995), 103-9.

Many times, the household of faith also falls short of its role of being a mirror or reflection of the household of God:

- By keeping Christ's fullness of life agenda only for themselves and not for others outside the household;
- By understanding the fullness of life agenda as something that is only spiritual rather than affecting the total life.
- By romanticizing the so-called "ideal past" (traditions) of the household of faith – when every generation has to take account of its faith in the face of present-day realities.
- By dragging and throwing out our workers over the cliff – through name-calling and labeling of our workers and members who are working to uphold human dignity and fullness of life for people who have been deprived or robbed of the same.

As one household of faith, the UCCP needs to recover that role of mirror or reflection of the household of God.

### **(c) *Third Sense: Household of Hope – World / Universe***

Two biblical passages specifically use the phrase "God's household". I Timothy 3:15 says: "If I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in *God's household*, which is the church of the living God...." Ephesians 2:19-22 refers to the holy temple with Christ as the chief cornerstone. Both passages, I would say, connote a narrow sense of the household of God as the household of faith, i.e. the church. For me God is much bigger than the church or all religions put together. Being the parent of all that God made, God's household must be the whole universe, the whole wide world, including humanity, plants and animals, and all that is! I call this the household of hope because I believe that the survival of everyone and everything in God's creation depends on our ability to learn to live together as one household with the whole creation.

Although it does not explicitly use the phrase "household of God", the creation story in Genesis 1 gives us some clues as to how we must live together in God's household. According to the narrative, God's creation covers a wide range of creatures – from simple matter that constitutes water, land, and air; to living organisms such as plants and animals that constitute matter and life; and to human beings, woman and man, that constitute matter, life and spirit.<sup>7</sup> The household of God encompasses everything in the whole universe – everything, which after each creation, God said was good. How then do we live together in God's household?

First, we must *affirm God's will for plurality and diversity*. We go against that will if we desire and force everybody to look, think and act the same. My son Cheekit was around 6 years old when he asked me a serious question: "Mama, why couldn't have God just created us all the same so that there would be no fighting and hurting?" He had just returned from school in Richmond, Virginia where I was doing my graduate studies, and he learned about the slavery of African people. After a moment of silent prayer, I replied: "What would it

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<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Nona Calo whose series of Bible studies on this when I was working as Christian Education coordinator for the Visayas Jurisdiction of the UCCP in 1984-85 remain unforgettable.

have been like if the garden had flowers of the same kind and same color? I think God intended the world to be a beautiful garden of flowers and plants with different kinds, colors and fragrances." Differences not only in our physical features but also in our theological positions, in perspectives or points of view about various matters, should not be taken as negative or bad. Handled with love, patience and openness, these differences are actually opportunities for us to grow with and learn more from each other.

Second, we must *affirm God's will for interdependence and interconnectedness* of all in God's creation. Nature in all its diversity teaches us that we are part of a great web of life. We can see it in the food chain that science teaches us. We experience it through the impacts of calamities that may be caused by our abuse of creation or our lack of understanding of the nature of creation. It is now known that when the tsunami hit Asia in December 2004, most of the places that were badly affected were those where the mangroves have been removed to give way to tourism. We also know that the deaths of many people during the tsunami were due to the lack of timely information about the impending disaster. But the small *Moken* tribe, known as sea gypsies from Myanmar and Thailand, survived because they recognized the earth's tremor and the receding seawater as a sign of danger. They remembered a legend that was handed down through the generations that when the spirit of the sea wants to reclaim the shore they must run for higher ground. If we take time to learn from the wisdom of our indigenous people, maybe we will be helped to reclaim our connectedness with nature and learn to live together with it.

Last year, one Indian theologian responded to my presentation on the interconnectedness of creation by saying that it is in his nature as a human being to kill a snake whenever he sees one and that it is in fact in the Bible. While living in the CCA Centre, which we call a mini-Jurassic Park because of a jungle like setting on a semi-secluded hill, I have learned with a lot of hesitation that snakes are just afraid of us as we are afraid of them. If we take time to get to know snakes better, to understand what angers or irritates them and also what they are good for, we can have a better appreciation for them instead of killing one each time we see one. At the CCA Centre, we have learned to observe traffic rules with snakes and visiting wild monkeys, just as drivers of vehicles observe traffic rules on the road. We have learned how important it is to recognize and respect each other's presence, in order that we can live together in the same compound.

Third, in order to affirm and reclaim God's will for harmony and interconnectedness of God's creation, *we must transform our patriarchal mindsets and practices that affect the way we relate with one another*. Shaped and reinforced by our cultures and religions, such male-dominated mindsets and practices have left us broken and divided as women and men, as people coming from different socio-economic classes, ethnic and linguistic groups, or from different religious communities. For as long as certain groups of people – coming from a particular sex/gender, socio-economic class, ethnic or racial group, or religious community – claim to be superior and better than others, we will continue to live in a culture of domination and subjugation that will keep us divided, disconnected, broken. Even the anthropocentric notion that human beings are the central elements of creation has led to the abuse and misuse of creation, hence, our disconnectedness from creation. The dualistic thinking that groups people as either allies/friends or enemies, saved or unsaved, good or evil, chosen or condemned, leftist/rightist, humanity/nature, spirit/matter, etc. will keep

us opposed to and suspicious of one another. We have to rise above and transform this thinking because life does not consist of simple clear-cut dualisms. We need to regard each other as friends and partners – equal in human dignity in the sight of God.

The household of God is a much wider community where we are not only bound by a certain bloodline or communal affinity (as in the household of love) or by our common religious identity (as in our household of faith). In the household of God everyone and everything belong together. If we believe that God created everything and everyone, and that God affirmed that each is very good, then we all belong to God regardless of differences in our nature, sex/gender, race or religion, and what have you. How then can we just claim the household of God to be the small household of love or the slightly bigger household of faith?

To live together in the household of God is to live as friends with one another, regardless, sharing a common vision of peace for all. As Jesus said, “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends...” (John 15:15). Friendship in the household of God means actively being in the work of Christ Jesus: “You are my friends if you do what I command” (John 15:14). His command is that “whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will s/he do, because I am going to the Abba/Father...” (John 14:12). Being in the household of God does not keep us at the level of friendship but it takes us to a different level – that of being children of God: “Dear friends, now we are children of God...” (1 John 3:2). This status of God’s family is not based on a special bloodline, on our claim to be the inheritors of the “chosen race” or of having the best religion in the world. It is simply based on the fact of doing the will of God, our Parent/Abba: “For whoever does the will of my Abba/Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12:50). And what is the will of God? I think it is beautifully captured in the phrase *fullness of life for all* (John 10:10b), which is demonstrated in the ministry of Christ explained in Luke 4:18-19.

### **Some Implications for our life and mission as UCCP**

We live in concentric circles: the household of love (symbolized by the family) and the household of faith (symbolized by the church). And by what we have reflected on so far, we have so much to do to set these households straight. We also have to remember that there are other concentric circles around us, and together, we are all parts of the wider circle of the household of hope (the world/universe), which is the household of God.

Our theme, “Living Together in the Household of God,” humbly assumes that even though the household of God is a given, by virtue of the fact that God created all of us and everything in creation, we are far from living together as members of the one household of God. This may be due to a limited understanding of the household of God or due to our captivity to a narrow theology that has blinded us to the depth and breadth of God’s love. We can truly participate in realizing this vision of “Living Together in the Household of God” if we try to set our two concentric circles right – our household of love and household of faith – and transform our perspective and lifestyle with regards to the wider circle of the household of God. What are some practical implications of this for our life and mission as UCCP in the next quadrennium?



Our UCCP theme provides our vision for the next quadrennium: “Living Together in the Household of God”. That vision springs from the mission of our Lord and Savior, Christ Jesus, who as the cornerstone of our household, showed us the **WAY** to and the **TRUTH** of the **LIFE** in its fullness that God intended for all to have.

- We do mission out of gratefulness for the good news of fullness of life; having experienced it for ourselves, we now are compelled by the gospel to share it with others. Otherwise, what is good news if it is not shared?
- Mission involves a wide range of engagements depending on the gifts of the household members – there is room for talents in education and nurture, witness and service, pastoral and prophetic ministries, advocacy and solidarity, etc.
- The Bible provides many bases for mission – Matthew 28:18-20 is only one example and it was labeled the Great Commission only when scriptures were arranged into chapters and verses. Some churches find Matthew 25:31-46 a greater commission, mandate, or challenge which is more appropriate for their time and context.
- Mission must include mission to ourselves – in our households of love and faith – to make them safe spaces of acceptance, unconditional love, care and nurture, and responsibility; i.e. to make them reflect God’s household.
- Affirming plurality means affirming our being both an *evangelical* and an *ecumenical* church. This is one of the unique elements of our being a united/uniting church. We are *evangelical in faith* for we are rooted in the good news of God’s will for fullness of life which Christ Jesus came to demonstrate in his ministry. We are *ecumenical in commitment* for we are grounded in Christ’s prayer “that they may be one”. Oneness is not uniformity but the ability to live together meaningfully in spite of and because of our diversity.
- Aside from reconciliation in our households of love and faith, we also need to re-claim the interdependence and interconnectedness of the whole creation, transforming oppression at all levels, promoting non-hierarchical style of leadership, learning from the ways of women, youth, children, Indigenous people; and being humble before the mystery of creation.
- In terms of our Christian Education and Nurture program, both in the local churches and in our formation centers, we need to broaden education in the basic tenets of our Christian faith (Christian Education or CE), which is our first language, into Religious Education (RE), which is the second language of conversation/dialogue with other faiths.
- Our tendency to compartmentalize the holistic ministry of our Lord and Savior may be a reflection of the specialist approach in theological education. In order to effect an integral approach to ministry, we need to have an integrated and interdisciplinary methodology in our formation and education programs.
- Finally, we have to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who is Christ’s advocate today. This means being open to surprises for no one knows where and how the wind blows. Peter opened himself to the leading of the Spirit (Acts 10) in a dream and was helped to acknowledge that God does not show partiality for those who come from the covenant faith community only. “In every nation whoever fears God and works righteousness is accepted by God”. Justice and righteousness can only come from God, whether it is acknowledged or not.

These are just some implications to begin with. I believe that as you have opened to my sharing today, you would also come up with more ideas to add to these.