



the Gospel and Our Culture

a network for encouraging the encounter in north america

In This Issue

David Kettle, coordinator of the GOCN in the UK, the older sister movement to our own, has had considerable experience not only in England but in New Zealand. It is on the strength of that that his colleague John Flett of the New Zealand movement DeepSight Trust invited his comparison of the two contexts. With John's permission, that is shared here and with it responses from several of the keenest observers of the North American context, including Douglas John Hall, Stanley Hauerwas, and Craig Van Gelder. This begins to show some of the distinct challenges posed in different parts of the Western world, in which there is nevertheless some commonality of agenda for movements that are companions to our own.

Jacque Mathey's article sets these movements within a still wider frame by showing how in global ecumenical circles the matter of "Gospel and Cultures" has become an increasingly important issue in recent decades.

The current emergence of a Gospel and Our Culture movement in South Africa and a European consultation scheduled for this summer highlight the importance of conversation across borders to provide mutual encouragement. The annual GOCN Consultation scheduled for October 17-19, 2002, will explore what can be learned from these conversations.

—the Editor

The Haze of Christendom

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'There are so many castles everywhere!' Our eight-year old son had been asked for his first impressions when our family moved back, four years ago, to the country where he was born but of which he knew so little.

England does indeed have its castles, but what James had seen in every village were in fact churches. To his eyes, as for anyone coming to

You are asking them to discuss the social and natural environment which they live and breathe. But they do not discuss such things; such things are just *there*, to be taken for granted; they are part of the way things are'.

The New Zealander may say 'Ah, religion may be little thought about in England, but just the same, *it is there*, making all the difference to the culture'. And of course there is some

The English church is like the pattern on wallpaper.
Religion is visible, but its meaning has faded,
and no longer invites attention.

England from New Zealand, the landscape was thick with them. So too—by comparison with New Zealand—the press, radio and television are thick with references to the Church.

And yet to English eyes, all this is somehow invisible. It is like the pattern on a wallpaper. As a rector friend remarked: 'You are keen to get people thinking and talking about Christianity. But you must realise that the very idea of doing so seems strange to them.

truth here. But the difference is not as great as it might seem at first sight. Surveys of personal religious belief and practice have found these not very different in Britain from what they are in New Zealand. It is certainly true that when it comes to having a public profile the Church is more prominent in Britain; but in the media this profile is conformed normally to old, familiar stereotypes; or else the Church is reported simply

in the terms of any large organisation. In other words the vocation of the Church is stifled: its vocation as a witness to Jesus Christ who opens peoples eyes to God and shows themselves and their world in a new light. Now can we really say that Christianity is present here, making its own difference to British culture, when its meaning has all but faded like this? (for those wishing to explore this state of affairs, Madeleine Bunting's 1996 lecture 'Religion and The Media' (ACCESS no. 940) is a good starting-point. England has a long history of such religion. I fancy it can be glimpsed in 'The Gospel According to Charles Dickens'—if one may so call the story of Jesus as the famous author wrote it for his children. This story was published by the Daily Mail newspaper, who made much of having publishing rights for the manuscript, to celebrate the millennium ('We are, after all, a Christian nation', the paper remarked). Dickens' Jesus was not exactly the Jesus of the four Gospels. He went so far as to write that Jesus 'would grow up so good that God will love him as his own son.' But he put no explicit mention on Jesus' lips of what St Mark calls the Gospel of God: 'the kingdom of God is upon you'. How odd, then, that when Dickens described this good man as choosing twelve disciples from among poor men, he wrote that Jesus did this 'in order that the poor might know always after that, in all years to come—that heaven was made for them as well as for the rich'. At this point Dickens portrayed Jesus as acting with universal import. But that we should attribute such universal import to Jesus' actions—which is a most extraordinary thing for us to do—Dickens seems to have taken for granted. Why indeed *should* the poor take any notice of what this one man did so long ago?

If visible religion is a residue of Christendom in England, so too is the 'wallpaper' effect of inattention to its meaning and message. More

seriously, however, this inattention is found within the Church itself. Christian faith has become largely domesticated to English culture; godly saltiness has been lost, a godly ferment has subsided. Lesslie Newbigin saw theology in England as in 'an advanced state of syncretism'. The challenge in this situation—as it always

Like British culture, New Zealand culture is nurtured at deep, hidden levels by its Christian inheritance. In New Zealand this inheritance is not embedded to the same degree in institutions and traditions, and it is not so visible publicly. Rather, relatively lacking such strong institutions and traditions, New Zealand culture is more

In the New Zealand church, the rhetoric of individual, sovereign choice and of constructivism is dominant: Christian faith gets seen as a matter of private choice or in terms similar to ideological allegiance, and Christian self-definition becomes the focus of attention.

was in Christendom—is to co-operate with the Gospel in opening eyes anew to its truth, opening ears afresh to its message, awakening new embrace of its meaning.

The challenge of helping people to see with new eyes what is familiar is not, however, just for the Church in England or Europe. It presents itself also to the Church in New Zealand.

vulnerable to the power of rival secular ideologies and of consumerism.

But hand in hand with this kiwi vulnerability come strengths. Both the vulnerability and the strengths arise from New Zealand's particular cultural situation in which questions of cultural and personal identity are a lively matter, together with related decisions towards

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The Gospel and Our Culture Newsletter

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MOVING BEYOND THE HAZE OF CHRISTENDOM

Response to David Kettle

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“The haze of Christendom”—I like that. But there are obviously degrees of haze. Some places are hazier than others when it comes to the Christendom hangover. Evidently (if I follow Mr. Kettle’s account) Christendom is less visible in Canada than it is in our Commonwealth sister, New Zealand; and while we have our share of ecclesiastical “castles”. (especially in my province of Quebec), and share with both England and New Zealand the remnants of a Christendom-inspired monarchy, we have traveled consider-

Jesus Christ. At one point the camera focussed on a little group of clerics of various faith, but that was it. Of course, self-styled ‘conservative’ Christians found this outrageous, for with Charles Dickens they’d like to think this still “a Christian country”. But it isn’t, and it’s much better for Christians to recognize that fact, and to start from there—which is anyway the reality from which the New Testament started!

This is the point: When serious Christians have taken full and honest account of what time it is (namely, *After Christendom*, as Stanley Hauerwas has expressed it), they are in a position to start moving *beyond* Christendom. In Canada we haven’t done that much about it, but we are at least *positioned* to begin, and in some important experi-

Every word of [the New Testament] was written in the knowledge that Christianity was one alternative in a sea of faith-possibilities and a small alternative at that.

ably farther along the post-Constantinian highway, I think, than either the Motherland or the little sister down under. While, with approximately 20% of our population still going to church at least occasionally, we exceed the church-going habits of *both* our European founding cultures, the multi-cultural and religiously pluralistic character of Canada is far more visible than it is anywhere in Europe. Also, unlike our US-American cousins, we are not a nation of ‘natural’ believers; like most northern peoples, there is a strong streak of religious and ideological skepticism in Canada, and I for one find it entirely healthy! For “religion” has never been a trustworthy ally of Christian faith, and today, when its fundamentalistic expressions are so poisonous to the peace of the planet, it is to be avoided where- ever possible

It was instructive to watch, side by side, the televised memorial services immediately following the September 11th attack on New York and Washington. The service in the USA, occurring, to begin with, in the most important ecclesiastical “castle” of that country (the Washington Cathedral), was blatantly and (I would say) *militantly* christendomian. Token presences of Jewish and Muslim figureheads notwithstanding, Christian triumphalism reigned supreme (and I mean triumphalism, right down to “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”). The Canadian memorial service, with a hundred-thousand people assembled on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, didn’t even mention God, let alone

ments beginnings have been made. For instance, in Quebec, which until 1960 or so was still in a state of nearly-medieval Catholicism, the bishops have stopped trying to get everybody baptized, confirmed, married and buried by the church, and begun to concentrate on the nurture and education of those who still ‘show up’; (b) recognizing their new status on the *edge* of power (rather than part of the Establishment), have engaged in really prophetic ethical and social activity. Since they don’t have to legitimate existing authority and official ‘morality’, any longer, Christians in the post-Christendom context are able, if they are willing, to explore *their own faith and traditions* for responsible worldly witness.

Another thing: On the other side of religious establishment (whether legal or cultural), it is possible to take notice of and, actually *relate* to, other religious faiths. I was surprised to find no reference to religious plurality in Kettle’s statement. Perhaps in New Zealand and England it is still possible to avoid this. In Canada it isn’t. Nor, I would venture, can *any* Christian afford to overlook the necessity of relating to other religions (not only Islam!) after September 11th.

But why should any Christian want to do that? The pluralistic situation is the *normal* situation of Christian faith if one takes the New Testament at face value. Every word of

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BETWIXT AND BETWEEN: NEGOTIATING MODERNITY

Response to David Kettle

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David Kettle obviously knows New Zealand and England far better than I do. I have, however, been to New Zealand, as well as Australia, and I do have some impressions that are not the same as Kettle's characterizations. Perhaps my difficulty is I first went to Australia before I went to New Zealand and I tended to see New Zealand through Australian eyes. I'm quite well aware that New Zealand is not Australia, but I think there are more similarities than differences.

Australia quite simply is the most secular country I have ever had the opportunity to visit. I don't say that in criticism. Indeed, it seems such secularity offers the church a great opportunity to distinguish the Jesus of the Gospels from the Jesus of Dickens. I often observe that the public philosopher of America is usually identified as John Locke. The public philosopher of Australia is Jeremy Bentham. That means utilitarianism goes all the way down in Australia. There simply is no civil religion.

Even though New Zealand was settled more by the Scot than by English criminals and Irish revolutionaries, New Zealand still remains more on Australia's side from that of the American and British experience. The reason as Kettle points out is Christianity is in the stones in England. It's very hard there to deny that your past was determined by Christianity. Of course, from an evangelistic point of view

that's both good and bad. But as a determinedly anti-Constantinian I regard the cultural lags in England as resources for Christian resistance to secular forms of Constantinianism. I think that's a more ready possibility in England than it is in America. The American difficulty is that Christianity is not in our stones—we simply don't have that many stones—but rather Christianity is so thoroughly in the American civil religion. As a result, even when people think they're speaking secular speech, they oftentimes are underwriting the kind of Protestant liberalism that was designed to shape American habits while denying that as a religion they wanted to rule. And so I regard the American temptations as much deeper than the possibilities open to the church in England.

Accordingly, I think New Zealand is a wonderful testing ground for the recovery of a church that knows how to survive without general societal support. Of course as Kettle quite rightly notes, New Zealand is no more immune from the world Nicholas Boyle describes in his wonderful book *Who Are We Now?* than England or America. However, I think New Zealand will at least be a wonderful laboratory for how the Gospel can be reclaimed in a world that is very marginally Christian. It is a good thing for the church to exist in a society in which rugby is the national religion. At least there's less chance of confusion. ■



Douglas John Hall Response continued from page 3

it was written in the knowledge that Christianity was one alternative in a sea of faith-possibilities and a small alternative at that! Part of the reason why we've been so standoffish vis-à-vis non-Christian faiths is that Christendom, over sixteen centuries, conditioned us to believe that 'the world' (at least the West!) was our missionary preserve; and our link with imperial peoples from Rome to America has underlined that assumption. Why should we bother with the others? We had *a priori* knowledge of their inferiority! And wherever they encroached on our "terri-

tory", we could always rekindle the coals of *our* particular and most effective version of 'Jihad'!

When Christians recognize that all that is finished (and only then, I fear), they are in a position to realize that Jews and Muslims and Buddhists and others are not *competitors* for territory and "souls" but potential *companions* in a world that flounders between godlessness and deadly "true belief" of one kind and another.

Let us stop lamenting the death of Christendom, then, and start working on the life that that death makes newly possible! ■

RESPONSE TO “THE HAZE OF CHRISTIANDOM”

*Craig Van Gelder
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It is always striking for me to read a critique of Western culture that is written from the perspective of the established church of Christendom. In “The Haze of Christendom,” David Kettle contrasts the current situation of the established church within Western culture in the countries of England and New Zealand. He offers some suggestive insights regarding how the church appears to be functioning differently within these two locations – in England with a “wallpaper” effect of the pervasive but ineffectual institutional presence of the church, versus an overlay of the institutional church on top of an energized secularity within New Zealand.

The end result in both locations, however, seems to be similar—the marginalization of the church’s voice in public society, or perhaps more accurately, the disregard of the church’s voice in public society. But Kettle suggests that the potential strategy for the church within its marginal location seems to be different within these two countries. In New Zealand a vibrant opportunity for an engagement with the forces of secularity seems waiting to happen, or is at least available as a strategy to be pursued. In England the pale of nominalism seems to have the church so paralyzed that little opportunity seems to be available for any meaningful reengagement of the public voice of the Gospel with the culture.

Interacting with Kettle’s critique from within my location in the United States leads me to offer two further reflections about Western culture and the established church in the two countries of England and New Zealand. First, I was struck by what he did not say about contemporary Western culture in these two countries. His discussion of culture, which included themes such as individualism, privatization, and consumerism, felt very modern in many ways. No mention was made of the emerging postmodern condition. Nor were some of the more positive characteristics of the postmodern condition mentioned which provide open doors of connection for both the Gospel and the church – i.e. a resurgence in spirituality within the secular, and the search for community among so many of the younger generation.

Further, while globalization was referenced, the more concrete challenges of a multicultural society and religious pluralism were not referenced. Much of the church’s opportunity to “establish” a different location within the legacy of Christendom may be embedded in a reconfiguration of how it conceives of the human social

community in light of cultural and religious pluralism. The established church within Christendom assumed domain, control, and cultural homogeneity. Postmodern global culture is rich in diversity and requires a different way of thinking about the “other.” Our understandings of both the church and the Gospel undergo significant transformation when we begin to develop the ability to see God through the eyes of the other. The logic of this approach stands in stark contrast to the logic of Christendom. Christendom bears a conceptual and institutional legacy that simply cannot be

The church must embody the Gospel message it seeks to proclaim if it is to move beyond the paralysis of wallpapered Christendom....

“tweaked into fit” with the postmodern globalized world.

Second, the solution Kettle offered was to “cooperate with the Gospel in opening eyes anew to its truth. . .” This call to rethink the Gospel and to let the Gospel speak in fresh and new ways, however, seems to beg a very important question about the very nature of the Gospel. God’s Gospel truth always becomes embodied in relation to the church as it becomes located in human faith communities. It seems to me that the issue is as much a need to rethink ecclesiology as it is to rethink the Gospel. The church must embody the Gospel message it seeks to proclaim if it is to move beyond the paralysis of wallpapered Christendom, or to find sufficient resources for engaging an energized secularity

It is at this point that an insight offered by Lesslie Newbigin still waits to be more fully unpacked. To a large extent in the emerging postmodern condition, the church must come to a self-awareness that it is the hermeneutic of the gospel. It is the embodied character of the Gospel within the living faith community that provides compelling evidence of the truth claims that the Gospel makes. Taking this approach requires a careful rethinking of our ecclesiology at the same time we work to rehear the truths of the Gospel. But it is probably at this point that the established church within Christendom is most hampered, in being paralyzed by its legacy and cultural assumptions. An effective engagement of the public voice of the Gospel with postmodern globalized culture within a Christendom context will most likely require fresh expressions of the church. And most likely these fresh expressions of the church will come from the margins of society where they will radically reshape both our understanding of the church and the Gospel. ■

GOSPEL AND CULTURES: A WCC STUDY PROCESS

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In the 1990's, under the leadership of Christopher Duraisingh, the World Council of Churches pursued a study process on the relation between the Gospel and the cultures of the world. The decision to focus on Gospel and cultures had been taken following the 1991 Canberra assembly. This theme had not been treated in depth in the WCC since the Bangkok world mission conference in 1972, which had affirmed cultural identity as fundamental to any Christian theology and spirituality: "culture shapes the human voice that answers the voice of Christ". Many groups worked at local and regional levels during the years between Canberra and the world mission conference in

'beyond certain inculturation theologies' made at Salvador by Dr. Musimbi Kanyoro on behalf of many African women. Arising from experience during the *Ecumenical Decade - Churches in Solidarity with Women*, this request parallels similar attempts by African theologians of the younger generation to challenge cultural justifications of oppression. The new mission documents of the WCC recognize the fundamental *ambiguity* of cultures: every culture bears traditions, world views and practices which may oppose authentic Christian witness, as well as elements which may illuminate the Gospel and enrich the church. Also new, by comparison with Bangkok 1972, is the central affirmation that for human beings "primary and ultimate identity is identity in Jesus Christ". This may be seen to reflect in part the devastating consequences of ethnocentrist and racist violence in many parts of the world, including Europe.

In 1972 in Bangkok, the WCC affirmed cultural identity as fundamental to any Christian theology and spirituality:
"culture shapes the human voice that answers the voice of Christ".

Salvador de Bahía, 1996. Their findings appeared in a series of 18 pamphlets published by the WCC between 1994 and 1997 and in many other documents and/or review articles. I want here to consider some results of the Salvador conference which shaped the formulation of the recent study document *Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today*. This document was adopted by the new Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) of the WCC in April 2000¹.

The move beyond 'certain inculturation theologies'

Firstly, a clear affirmation of the principal *equality of all cultures* in relation to God and the Gospel can be seen as a new emphasis, at least for the ecumenical movement. Since the end of the colonial era there had been a tendency within WCC circles to view cultures from the South positively, while Western or Northern cultures were criticized. This was a healthy and understandable reaction against the reverse tendency which existed earlier (and unfortunately still exists) in some mission circles. If this new emphasis finds practical expression, it could have important consequences for partnership relations in mission.

Another significant step follows the request to move

Culture and Religion

In Western thinking on inculturation, there has traditionally been a sharp distinction drawn between 'culture' and 'religion'. Recent mission documents of the WCC, however, understand religion as an integral part of culture. It is argued that real inculturation of the Gospel in individual and community life, in language and worship, and in ethics and organization inevitably uses terminology, symbols, rites and institutional forms which have not only a cultural but also a religious background. From such a perspective, to judge instances of inculturation is not to ask whether they are "syncretistic" or not, but whether they allow for an authentic and dynamic witness to Christ or not. One can even envisage - as in the recent WCC Mission Statement or at Salvador - using the term "syncretism" without negative connotation, because this no longer connotes a pluralistic approach to religious questions, nor a relativistic position, but takes seriously a broad definition of culture which includes religion. Dialogue on this matter must continue.

This new approach had been prepared by the work of section IV of the San Antonio World Mission Conference (1989), which recognized positive values in popular religiosity linked with community, joy, bodily life situation (health, fertility, sexuality, work), use of symbols and symbolic

language, oral culture, etc. The Gospel and cultures study process confirmed such an approach by arguing that (for example) Pentecostal and African Instituted churches are often much better inculturated than the traditional mission churches which are too influenced by an over-intellectual and dualistic Western theology.

This leads to the question of *intercultural hermeneutics*. The WCC understands itself as a “fellowship of churches on the way towards full *koinonia*”. The WCC will now have to address the question of *criteria for authentic inculturation* if it wants to progress towards real mutual recognition by member churches.

The Gospel and ‘Western’ cultures

Western cultures have so far received no special attention, although it should be noted that at least five of the Gospel and Cultures pamphlets were written in such cultures and two of these directly addressed the question of witness in secular texts.² At the WCC Harare assembly in 1998 there was a clear request for the new *Mission and Evangelism team* of the WCC to resume work on the question of mission in secularized and “Western” contexts. A first consultation on this took place in Germany last year. It was co-organised by the *Faith and Order* and *Mission and Evangelism teams* of the WCC and dealt with “Ecclesiology and mission”³. The next step is planned for June 2002 in Northern Germany, when it is hoped to foster a dialogue between representatives of Gospel and cultures networks and people struggling with postmodern contexts both in Northern and Southern countries. Postmodern cultural influences are rapidly spreading around the world and the time has come to enable Christians in various cultural settings to talk together about these and about the new challenges and opportunities they bring for the witness of the churches. ■

Notes:

1. The Salvador materials have been published. Cf. Duraisingh, Christopher (ed): *Called to One Hope. The Gospel in Diverse Cultures*. Geneva, WCC, 1998, 234 pp. The mission statement has appeared in a provisional form in: *International Review of Mission*, Vol. LXXXVIII Nos. 348/9, January/April 1999, pp. 109-27. The WCC intends to publish it soon as a booklet, together with the 1982 Ecumenical Affirmation on Mission and Evangelism, still the official text of the WCC on mission.
2. Anton Wessels: *Secularized Europe: who will carry off its souls?* Geneva, WCC, 1996, G&C pamphlet No 6, 48 pp.; Collective (ecumenical study group of the “Evangelisches Missionswerk”): *Germany: Seeking a relevant witness beyond contrast and assimilation*. Geneva, WCC, 1996, G&C pamphlet No 13, 53 pp.
3. The documents of the ecclesiology and mission consultation will be published in the *International Review of Mission*, July 2001.



David Kettle's Haze of Christendom continued from page 2 present and future ways of life. These questions and decisions are less answered implicitly by dint of tradition, than in England. In New Zealand these questions and decisions arise as live issues to be given attention and responsibly pursued. Of course pursuit of these big questions and choices may become trivialised among people adrift on a sea of consumerism; it may become dominated by a fierce, romantic spirit of individual autonomy, rationalised perhaps by a ‘constructivist’ philosophy; and it may become captured by ideological passions more extreme than one normally meets in England, where the weight of tradition offers ballast. But in New Zealand the big questions and choices are in the air; and the opportunity is there for Christians to engage them with all the vast riches of Christ and to share the fruit of this engagement

For the Church is far more than a voluntary association serving those who chose to become members.



insofar as people are able to receive it.

Meanwhile the same forces of ideology and consumerism are increasingly felt also in Britain. Nicholas Boyle describes how Britain had been sheltered from the cultural effects of the European Enlightenment until the 1980's, enabling archaisms from Christendom to survive. Today, he says, British society is at once polarised and homogenised: ‘the great institutions that gave it depth and complexity fade away. Instead we have on the one hand the undifferentiated mass of individual “consumers” and on the other hand the legislative and executive power of central government’ (‘Understanding Thatcherism’, in Boyle, *Who Are We Now?*, T&T Clark, 1998, p21.)

In summary, I am contrasting two situations in which the Church finds itself. In the first, the ‘wallpaper’ effect predominates: religion is visible, but its meaning has faded, and no longer invites attention. Faith may continue to shape life in tacit ways, but less and less so. Such a Church lives in the haze of Christendom. In this cultural setting the challenge facing the Church is to help people (including its own people) to pay new attention to the Gospel, to see the Gospel with new eyes, and to take personal responsibility for it in a new way in the world. In the second situation, the rhetoric of individual, sovereign choice and of constructivism is dominant: Christian faith gets seen as a matter of private choice or in terms similar to ideological allegiance, and Christian self-definition becomes the focus of attention. Here the challenge to the Church is to help people (including its own people) to sacrifice their self-attention and look steadfastly beyond themselves to God

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and God's world. In this cultural setting the air may be clear, so to speak, but there is more need than ever of responsible, discerning attention and listening in order to decide the way ahead. For the Church is far more than a voluntary association serving those who chose to become members. Its task is to serve God and God's purposes in the world; and obedience to this task requires that 'sovereign' individuals become reflective, and listen carefully to God and to each other, in order more faithfully to exercise their Christian freedom.

The former situation, I suggest, is more characteristic of Britain. As I found when I left New Zealand four years ago, to land in England is to descend into the haze of a still fading Christendom. The latter is more characteristic of New Zealand; by comparison with England, the air is bracing and turbulent. But the features of both situations, and the challenges which they present to the Church, are to be found in both countries; and there is no justification, in either place, for focussing on one challenge to the neglect of the other. ■



Q 2001 CONSULTATION TAPES

Audio tapes of the October 2001 Consultation on *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* are still available. We are making the set of 5 tapes available for \$20. Orders with payment included may be sent to:

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Q ADVANCE NOTICE

The GOCN Annual Consultation will be held on October 17-19, 2002 at the Techny Towers Conference Center, Techny, Illinois. Discussions will focus on gospel and culture conversations in other parts of the globe and how they impact the North American movement and also conversations across national boundaries. Additional details available soon.