



## Co-Operation And Unity

1970

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*The International Review of Mission* 59, 223 (January): 67-74.

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It is said that when a certain good Anglican from Tinnevelly visited London some decades ago, and was invited to a service in Westminster Abbey, he told his host that he could not consent to go until he knew whether it was CMS or SPG. The story could well be true, and it does illustrate the fact that the Church of God moves, if not like a mighty army, at least a little faster than the tortoise. When one reads old conference reports and sees how the same things are said over and over again, with little action to match the words, one is inclined to become defeatist. But a longer perspective justifies a more encouraging conclusion. We are still terribly small-minded, still slow to look beyond the interests of our own denominational or national group, but there is progress. David Edwards has pointed out how much of the magnificent energy of the Christians of the 19th century was spent in fighting each other (*Religion and Change*, pp. 272 f). Perhaps we have only learned the folly of this by the defeats we have suffered, but we have learned something. A brief review of the progress of co-operation since Edinburgh 1910 suggests that, even though we have moved slowly, we have moved.

The most important thing about the Edinburgh Conference, so far as concerns our present subject, was not what it said but what it did. By creating a continuation committee with J. H. Oldham as its secretary, it ensured that international and inter-denominational missionary co-operation should move from the stage of occasional conferences to that of continuous and effective consultation. What the Conference said on the subject is divided into five sections. The first dealt with comity. This involved the effort to avoid territorial overlapping, mutually destructive practices regarding discipline, and competition in salary scales. It was an agreement to treat one another as gentlemen, in spite of religious differences. It was fundamental to all that followed. Without it, there could not have been co-operation or unity. Yet even in 1910 it was recognized that the principle of territorial delimitation could not be applied to large cities and sea-ports. Today, with the vast shift from rural to urban life throughout the world, the principle of comity has to be applied in a different way. There are still areas where the older

pattern is applicable, but they are the exception. Increasingly typical is the situation where Christians of different traditions must work together as a team in a single urban situation. And this raises questions which go beyond comity and co-operation.

The second section of the Edinburgh report is headed 'Conferences'. These were periodic meetings of missionaries, in one city or country, which antedated the formation of the National Christian Councils. Their members were individuals and not missions or churches. They were confined to discussion and seldom moved to the point of resolutions. But they laid the foundation upon which, following the action of Edinburgh 1910, it was possible to construct in many nations enduring organizations for continuous consultation.

The third section is entitled 'Joint Action', but the reader will not find here anything like what is now called 'Joint Action for Mission'. The reference is simply to co-operation in the running of large institutions or services, such as Bible translation, publication of literature and the linguistic training of missionaries. The idea that the total work of the Church in an area might be the subject of joint planning is not envisaged.

On 'Federation and Union' the Conference heard many passionate pleas for full and complete union among Christians (not excluding Roman Catholics) but its own report is – naturally – cautious. The greater part of it is given to a careful study of the various unions achieved or planned at that time, and to a study of the relative merits of federation and organic union. Of all the sections in the Report, this is the one which makes the reader feel that we have really travelled a long way in these sixty years.

The final section deals with 'Co-operation at the Home Base', and here we are again reminded that we have moved a very long way from the unofficial and informal consultation which, outside of North America at least, was characteristic of that time.

As has been said, the important thing about the Edinburgh Conference was that it created a permanent organ of continuous consultation. This in turn led to the creation of national organs which could become partners in an international body. One can most simply review the growth of this movement by looking at the findings of the successive meetings of the International Missionary Council. The Jerusalem Conference of 1928 followed the pattern of Edinburgh by devoting one full volume to the subject. Almost half of the volume is occupied by a masterly state-

ment from John R. Mott, including a statement on 'Governing Principles in Fruitful International Co-operation'. This classic statement of the basic principles of conciliar organization as it has been developed in the modern ecumenical movement deserves reproduction in full:

In establishing new co-operative undertakings, or in fostering or developing existing co-operative enterprises, the Christian leaders of the various nations and races concerned should seek to apply in all times of questioning, uncertainty and indecision the following principles, which have been wrought out in different parts of the world through years of experience, both favourable and unfavourable

The most distinctive principle is that everything in the range of the co-operative programme and activities should be considered and dealt with from an international and inter-racial point of view.

The co-operative organization is established on the basis that the only bodies entitled to determine policy and action in a given field are the churches and missions.

The directing committee or council should in its personnel be truly representative of the nationalities and races which are associated in the co-

operative undertaking, as well as of the various churches and other agencies served.

There should be a sincere determination to understand and appreciate the different national and racial viewpoints.

The members of each national or racial group should, with open-mindedness and generosity, welcome the maximum contribution of the other national or racial groups.

The powers of the organization are consultative and advisory, not legislative and mandatory. Executive functions are not undertaken save as directed by constituent bodies.

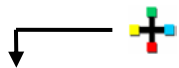
The co-operative organization does not deal with or make pronouncements on questions of polity or doctrine on which its constituent bodies are not of one opinion.

It exists not as an end in itself, but to render the maximum of service to the bodies or agencies which it represents.

It devotes itself to tasks which can best, if not only, be done internationally. It avoids duplicating, or competing with, the agencies which created it and which it seeks to serve. The genius of international co-operation lies in the fact that it is based on the hearty and continuous assent of those who co-operate.

In determining what activities should have right of way in its programme, it makes a constant study of priorities with reference to concentrating on the tasks which at the time are of most central or fundamental importance. It undertakes no more than it can accomplish thoroughly.

The Tambaram Conference of 1938 devoted only thirty pages to the subject of co-operation, and thereafter the subject does not appear as

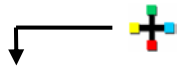


a separate issue. It has become something to be taken for granted. The Tambaram meeting was troubled by the fact that co-operation was too much a matter of institutions only, such as schools and colleges, and that the 'visible church' was not sufficiently involved nor sufficiently recognized in this sort of co-operation. It went beyond previous thinking in calling for 'joint planning for the whole Christian enterprise in any given area' – a first suggestion of the idea of 'Joint Action for Mission' (*Tambaram Madras Series IV*, p. 399). Much more clearly than any previous conference it called for the organic union of the churches as essential to their faithfulness in mission.

At Whitby in 1947 the great issue was the co-operation between 'older' and 'younger' churches – a nomenclature which was even then felt to be embarrassing. The slogan 'Partnership in Obedience' expressed the conviction that the dichotomy of sending and receiving churches had to be overcome in a common and shared commitment to the missionary commission given by the Lord Himself. Willingen in 1952 strongly voiced the opinion that co-operation is not enough. It called upon National Christian Councils to take the question of Christian unity on to their agenda and to recognize that, within their co-operative activities, the disunity of the churches continues to hinder the fulfilment of their mission (*Missions Under the Cross*, p. 194). Five and a half years later, at Accra (Ghana), the delegates expressed 'a desire that we determine here at this Assembly to accept this fact of the one Church sent into the world in obedience to Christ, and prove our acceptance in our thinking and speaking by refusing to use the terms "sending and receiving countries", "older and younger churches", and to school ourselves to accept the thought of the one mission of Christ's Church'.

At the New Delhi meeting, where the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches became one body, the concept of 'Joint Action for Mission' was accepted in

a form much more far-reaching than had previously been seriously considered. The idea was that all the agencies of church and mission in a given area should bring together their resources, their plans and their hopes, and develop together a total missionary approach to the total area. It was always understood that this was something very difficult to achieve, and that the places where it would happen would – at least for many years – be few. In the ensuing years the phrase ‘Joint Action for Mission’ has been very frequently spoken, sometimes understood, and very occasionally applied to a real situation. These rare cases seem to have

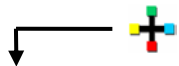


occurred more in North America and Australia than in the other continents. They do not seem likely to occur except where there has been a drastic shaking of the foundations. The most systematic attempt to propagate the idea was made in a series of three ‘Situation Conferences’ organized by the East Asia Christian Conference in 1963, as indeed the whole idea owed much to the Bangkok meeting of that body in 1959. But there are as yet few signs of action along these lines among the Asian churches.

The Mexico meeting at the end of 1963 shifted the discussion into the new context which was created by the accomplished fact of integration between the IMC and the World Council of Churches. On the one hand, the concept of Joint Action for Mission was discussed in terms which included the missionary outreach of congregations in the secularized cities of the West – with very fruitful results; on the other hand international and interdenominational co-operation was discussed in a context which included the great work of inter-church aid along with that of missions. This meant that a picture could be sketched with more confidence than before of a truly world-wide and integrated pattern of missionary action. The meeting called for the development of international and inter-confessional missionary teams, and for a vigorous effort to apply the insights and experience of inter-church aid to the missionary work of the churches. This was also the first international missionary meeting at which the Orthodox churches were officially and substantially present.

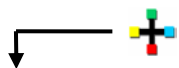
The Uppsala Assembly of 1968 called the churches to discern in a new way the ‘priority situations for mission’ and to ask themselves in each locality ‘Are we totally structured for mission?’ It called for a congregational commitment to mission in its neighbourhood, for teams to undertake specific tasks, and for new structures of global co-operation which would make the resources of the whole Church available for the use of the whole Church – their deployment being determined not by historic relationships or traditional procedures, but by need. It also called for mutual support between agencies of foreign mission and those of evangelism in the same country.

If one now tries to say something about the shape of things to come, it will be convenient to divide it into two parts, and to speak of local and of global co-operation. Under the first of these headings it can confidently be said that there is a strong tide in the direction of small local and functional groups of Christians working together to tackle specific



issues. This kind of co-operation has become much easier than it was before. Christians are more and more inclined to feel that the divisions between the great Christian traditions are irrelevant to the practical issues that they have to face in the secular world. Little difficulty is felt in joining with those of other traditions for a common task which is – let it be said frankly – often seen far more vividly than are the issues about which earlier generations of Christians fought with one another. Whether or not this perspective is fully adequate to the realities with which we have to deal, it is a fact that Christians are more and more inclined to feel that traditional confessional loyalties ought not to count against the claims of obvious immediate duty. If the denominations lag behind, so much the worse for them! Those who see the job to be done will go ahead and do it, tarrying for none.

In respect of global co-operation we must also expect big advances. The great development of inter-church aid across all the continents during the past two decades has completely altered the picture. Global co-operation is now possible in a measure which was not glimpsed even at the time of the Whitby meeting of the IMC. The various attempts to keep inter-church aid and missions apart have broken down. The abolition of the famous 'Herrenalb categories', by which an attempt was made to preserve this separation, has opened the way for a much more far-reaching effort at global planning. I am sure that it cannot be long before we have a computer service to make available a total picture of the local resources and foreign aid available for any situation, so that planning of further aid or of new projects can be done on the basis of a complete and unified picture of the situation. No system of global planning will be perfect, but we would be irresponsible if we did not use the best techniques available to ensure that the sharing of resources is done in the most rational and economical way possible. If these forecasts are anywhere near the truth, they raise in a sharp form the question of unity. If co-operation does not lead on to unity, then the life of the churches involved in this co-operation becomes subtly changed. For the Church is not merely an organization for getting things done, nor even an organization for propagating a message. Truly understood, the Church is the bearer of the gift of a new kind of life, a life which is a foretaste of the true end of man. It is the place where a truly human life – that is a life in the fellowship of the Father and the Son through the power of the Spirit – is not merely talked about and worked for but truly lived and experienced – even if only in foretaste.



A merely functional view of the Church can never endure for long. It is true that the opposite distortion can live for a very long time. It is true that there have been too many centuries when Christians have thought of their church membership too much as a thing to be enjoyed and too little as an obligation to be accepted on behalf of those who are not Christians. But an extreme reaction from this can lead to sterility. If I understand it rightly, part of the passion behind the revolt of the radical student left is powered by a rejection of the merely functional view of human institutions and human ideas which has recently been so dominant. There is a longing for a kind of existence which is worthy in itself, and not merely as a means towards or a stage towards something which is promised in the future. Truly understood, life in the Church is life in a fellowship which is – in foretaste – the fellowship of all human beings simply as human beings with their Maker. We have to confess that the actual life of our churches falls immeasurably below this standard, and yet the Church would cease to exist if it were not the case that even our introverted and ineffective churches have not been abandoned by the Lord but do continue to give to their members, or to some of them, a real experience of the life of Christ in the midst of the life of the world. Some of those who are eager for co-operation in specific projects have also a sort of nausea for the Church which they do not attempt to conceal. But co-operation which leads away from the Church will lead us into the wasteland. The question of church unity cannot be evaded.

What kind of church unity? The mere tying together of our existing over-organized denominational structures is an enterprise that evokes less and less enthusiasm. Yet the New Delhi vision of the unity of 'all in each place' in a committed fellowship which is also recognizable as one universal fellowship in all times and places remains valid. If the emphasis falls only on 'each place' one may end with a multiplicity of local groups or teams which are deeply involved in the life of that 'place' (whether geographical or functional) but which give little sign that they have any organic connection with Jesus Christ. If the emphasis falls exclusively on the universal fellowship one may end with a vast ecclesiastical bureaucracy which has little similarity to the Church of the New Testament. I am more and more impressed by the fact that the language which the New Testament uses about the Church presupposes a multiplicity of small groups in which all the members can have a personal knowledge of and care for one another; it is almost



impossible to transfer it directly to the institutions which we call denominations, or even to the typical urban congregation. I am sure that we need structures which are far more flexible, which work through much smaller groups, and which allow for a great deal of freedom and initiative. But I do not think that this can be achieved by bypassing the question of reunion in the traditional sense. If we try to do so, there is a real danger that we lose the great essentials which have been preserved and handed on through the ordered life and liturgy of the great churches.

One cannot do everything at once. The attempt to do so usually ends in doing nothing. I think it would be fair to say of our experience in South India that it is only now, more than twenty years after the inauguration of the union, that we are beginning seriously to tackle the questions of the structure of the Church and to feel our way towards more flexible and 'local' forms of church life. But I think it would have been a mistake to try to tackle these latter questions without also facing the major questions of faith and order which were involved in the negotiations which led up to union. In certain circumstances it may be necessary to begin by dealing with the traditional faith and order questions, recognizing that some of the urgent questions of structure may have to be tackled only after union is achieved. The way of co-operation and unity has not been easy. There have been losses as well as gains. The great divide between conservative evangelicals and others has been one of the major tragedies of our time. Nevertheless I do not believe that it is possible seriously to doubt that these sixty years have been years of real progress in the fulfilment of our Lord's will for the Church. I would endorse the words of David Edwards in his recent book: 'The boredom with the ecumenical movement which has been noticeable among Christian intellectuals in the 1960's (in the period when the ecumenical movement has for the first time made a major impact on the Christian public) is a betrayal of realistic hope for Christian renewal' (*Religion and Change*, p. 280). And I would end with the text which Dr. Visser 't Hooft gave us in Madras Cathedral when he addressed the Synod of the Church of South India in 1950: we share in Christ if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end (Heb. 3. 14).

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