



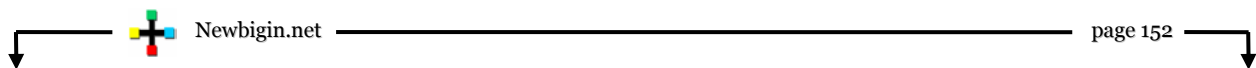
Christian Unity at Nairobi: Some Personal Reflections

1976

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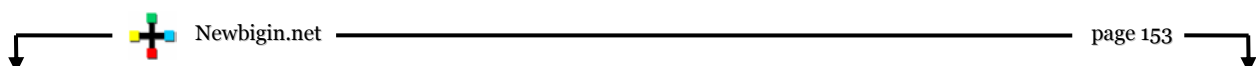


I have participated in all the five WCC Assemblies from Amsterdam onwards. I was very reluctant to go to Nairobi, partly because I felt I had had enough, partly because I found Uppsala (1968) a very unhappy experience, partly because I feared that the Nairobi meeting might become just an ungodly clash between the rich and the poor worlds. I came back from Nairobi deeply encouraged and strengthened in faith, with the conviction that this was the best of the five assemblies. This is a very different impression from the one which has been conveyed by the news media, at least in Britain. I am therefore the more glad to make this report. I shall speak first of the Assembly in general, and then of the specific work on unity.

I

An Assembly of this kind is a very demanding experience. About 3,000 people are present, representing every part of the world and every kind of Christian concern. Most of them have strong convictions about the priorities for Christian action - clashing convictions. One is forced over and over again, in hundreds of separate conversations and meetings, to look at things from a new perspective, to question one's own axioms. It is easy to become bewildered, to retreat into securities. It is hard to report.

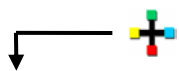
The first thing to be said is that the Assembly is *necessary*. If the Church is to be a reality in a place, its members have to meet. If the Church is to be a reality in the life of a nation, there has to be some kind of national synod or assembly. Equally if there is to be any reality in the claim that the Church exists as a global community, if there is to be any reality in our claim that Jesus Christ transcends nations and cultures and ideologies, then there has to be a place and a time when men and women of clashing cultures, nations and ideologies actually meet and test the reality of this claim in personal encounter. Without this, it



becomes merely a slogan repeated from within the walls of a ghetto. It is, of course, easy to make verbal claims for the universal validity of one's faith: the cash value of the claim is tested when people of every kind of human situation meet in the name of that faith. If we continue to make this claim, we simply have to accept the necessity of such meetings.

The Fifth Assembly was a more realistic testing ground for the Christian claim than any of its predecessors. If I may risk some oversimplification I would say that for the first three assemblies the old establishment (white, western, 'developed') was in unquestioned control ; the rest of the world was present, but on the margins. At Uppsala the rest of the world (black, young, poor) forced itself, often stridently, into the consciousness of the Assembly. At Nairobi there had been a clear shift of control. This, more than any of its predecessors, was an Assembly in which control was fully shared, in which no one part of the world could impose the agenda upon the rest. It was also more fully representative than previous assemblies of the whole range of the Church's life: there were more lay people, women, young delegates and (very important) ministers of local congregations. The shift in feeling was very obvious.

As compared with previous assemblies there was also a discernible shift in style. It was characteristic of this assembly that its final word to the churches was not a declaratory message but a prayer which can be used everywhere. It is a prayer that gathers up and expresses the themes of the Assembly. But it also expresses something about the style of the whole meeting - one in which prayer and praise were woven into the texture of the meeting rather than being conducted as separate exercises. The refrains sung during many of the plenary sessions - "Come Lord Jesus," "Abba Father, set us free," "Break down the walls of separation"; the music which helped so much to give life to the liturgical acts; and the unforgettable closing worship beginning with the rich solemnity of an Orthodox choir and ending with a gay dance down the steps of the Assembly Hall into the great square outside - these are things that I will always remember as expressing the feel of the whole meeting. Above all, the fact that for the first few days we met in 80 small groups for bible study of the main theme, that we met each other at the level of personal faith, need and experience, gave a texture to the whole meeting which has been missing (in my experience at least) in all of the previous ones.

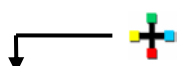


The theme - "Jesus Christ frees and unites" - had a much more significant role in the whole work of the Assembly than had the themes of the earlier ones. It was a theme packed with tension. Can liberation and reconciliation really go together? Can we really talk of unity in Christ between oppressor and oppressed, between white and black in South Africa, between Capitalists and workers in Latin America? Powerful theological voices in recent years have said "No." At least, if we insist on the theme, must we not say that liberation is the precondition for real unity? That the fight for justice must come before the talk of reconciliation? Must we re-phrase the theme to read: "Jesus Christ divides, frees and then unites"? And, if so, does that not in effect postpone unity to the End, leaving liberation as the only operative item on the present agenda?

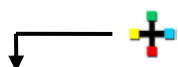
The theme might well have led us that way; but it did not. It might have led us into impossible attempts to balance freedom and unity against each other; but it did not. What happened was that we were pressed back behind the two verbs to the subject of them both - Jesus Christ. It was very important for the whole meeting that the keynote address on the theme was given by a white male North American - Robert MacAfee Brown - who spoke with quiet honesty but without any masochistic stridency about the sins of domination which he represented, but who went on to direct our attention wholly to Jesus Christ himself, who helped us to see how we create images of

Jesus in our own likeness, and how we need each other's often discordant witness if we are to learn to see Jesus as he really is. This opening made it easier for others to follow with a like honesty. There was a readiness to confess the sins of our own nations and cultures (including a very moving and quite unprepared intervention of Canon Burgess Carr who confessed his own heartbreak as he recalled the failures of the new national governments in Africa), rather than to speak only of the sins of others. My own bible-study group, after exploring several biblical passages on liberation, was led to a very strong conviction that liberation is meaningless if it refers only to the negative process of being freed from some kind of bondage, and formulated a slogan which well expressed our corporate experience: "To be free is to be totally bound to the truth who is Jesus Christ."

The two major addresses of M. M. Thomas (Moderator of the Central Committee) and Philip Potter (General Secretary)



Were - in different ways - masterly interpretations of the way the Council had travelled since Uppsala and of the situation which the Fifth Assembly must confront. The World Council has been severely criticized since Uppsala on the ground that it has become too much absorbed in the 'horizontal' dimension of the Christian life and not enough in the 'vertical.' Some of the criticism has been, in my opinion, justified, but the issues have been confused. It is not a question of finding a right compromise between 'vertical' and 'horizontal' (which would presumably be a trajectory of 45 degrees, leading into an orbit which would touch neither earth nor heaven!). It is a matter of finding the right relation between the law and the Gospel. It is a matter of so speaking and acting that it becomes clear *both* that it is Jesus Christ and he alone who frees and unites, *and* that the freedom and unity which he has given is not a merely private and spiritual affair but is a freedom and unity which be-comes operative in the public life of men. Both Thomas and Potter, in their different ways, pointed us to the center of our faith and called for a profounder spirituality, but one which would not be a spirituality of escape but "a spirituality for combat" (Thomas), a "spirituality for engagement" (Potter). As Desmond Tutu of South Africa put it: "It must be *seen* to be the case that it is the Gospel of Jesus Christ which is the source of our concern for *shalom*." As compared with Uppsala, Nairobi was much more truly centred in the Gospel, but it did not for that reason lose any of the sharpness of Uppsala's call for action in the world." To quote Roger Mehl (France), "Faith must always be translated into tangible deeds in regard to one's neighbor our actions add nothing to the work of salvation carried out by God alone : they are merely testimony that we have not received his salvation in vain, that we have not belittled it. . ." To my mind this was the most important difference between Nairobi and Uppsala. Uppsala was a shattering proclamation of the Law - a law by which the Christian world is condemned as under God's wrath. Perhaps God intended us to hear only the law at that moment; we did not hear the Gospel. The fundamental criticism that can be made against the programs of the WCC during the seven years since Uppsala is that they have given the impression of being the work of those who are under the Law rather than under the Gospel. At Nairobi we really heard the Gospel; we heard the call to faith in Jesus Christ; we were able to make together that true confession of



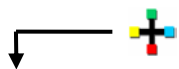
sin which is only possible to those who know that they are forgiven. I hope and believe that the 'works' which will follow in the coming seven years will truly be works which point men to Jesus Christ. This may sound very subjective: I can only say that it expresses what I felt most profoundly about this meeting.

II

Let me speak now more specifically of the work of the Assembly in the field of Christian Unity. The Report of Section II ("What Unity Requires") is in three parts dealing respectively with the Goal, the Context, and the "Companionship in Struggle and Hope" which is ours on the way to the goal.

1. On the question of the goal of our work, perhaps the most important action of the Assembly was not the work of the Section, but the action of the Plenary in accepting as the first of the newly defined "functions" of the World Council of Churches "to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship." To those of us who remember how impossible it would have been for this to be accepted at the time of the founding Assembly in 1948 it was something of a miracle to see this accepted almost without dissent. (There was indeed a serious question raised by a representative of the Salvation Army, and I felt that it was not fully met.) One might ask, cynically, whether this acceptance was more than a piece of lip-service to an idea which no one takes very seriously, but that would be a mistake. At many points I was struck by the strength of the demand that we must keep steadily before us the goal of full corporate, organic union. The statement of New Delhi was explicitly recalled and reaffirmed, and there was no move in any quarter to go back on it.

However, following the work done at Louvain and at Salamanca, and in various studies of the Faith and Order Commission, the Section devoted most of its attention in this part of the Report to the concept of 'conciliar fellowship.' The difficulties and misunderstandings to which this concept has led were freely admitted and discussed. Over and over again it has been denounced, or welcomed, because it was thought to be a way of describing the goal which would be less costly than full organic union. Those who see it this way, and who therefore embrace or reject it, have in view the kind of *uncommitted* conciliarity



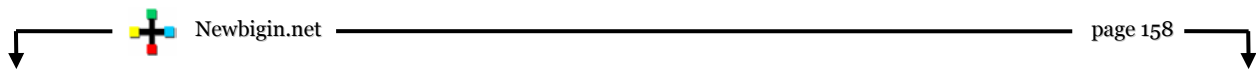
which is (alas) exemplified in many of our local and national councils of churches, and in the WCC itself. All who have been through the experience of moving from the present type of conciliarity in - for example - a national council of churches into full organic union understand very well the difference. There is a profound contrast between the character, the spirituality of a meeting from which we can go knowing that we are not absolutely bound by its decisions, and the feel of a meeting where we know that the decision will bind us all right down to every local congregation. Total commitment is costly - and is worth the price; uncommitted conciliarity is cheap. I hope and believe that by the time the discussions at Nairobi were over everyone understood that we were talking about a committed, a costly conciliarity, about a kind of conciliar fellowship which assumes full organic unity and describes something of its character.

But why use this term if it is so ambiguous? I confess that I have had my own doubts, but that the discussions at Nairobi have helped to dispel them. I think I see three factors that can make this term helpful at the present moment in our journey towards unity.

(a) The term "organic unity" frightens many people because it conjures up the vision of a tight bureaucratic structure destructive of the necessary freedom and variety. Such people rightly feel that, if the Church is to be the home for all man-kind, it must have an immense openness, freedom and variety in the very texture of its life. In our present circumstances they see denominational variety as the only way in which this freedom can be safeguarded. Their experience of single denominations is such that the prospect of a merger of these bodies into a still larger

denomination rightly appalls them. Some new term is needed to make clear that the goal is not that. The term 'conciliar fellowship,' with its reference to the meeting in council and for common counsel of churches which in different nations and regions retain their distinctive traditions within the wider fellowship, suggests a less forbidding picture of the kind of unity to which we look forward.

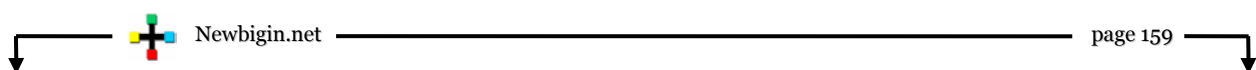
(b) There are many among the member churches of the WCC who have absolutely no experience of organic union. It is very difficult for them to imagine what it would mean. In spite of the fact that more than 60 organic unions of separate



churches have taken place in the past 50 years, even so well-informed a theologian as Prof. John Macquarrie can write of organic union as though it were some strange and inconceivable monstrosity. (See his *Christian Unity and Christian Diversity, passim.*) But all of them have some experience of membership in a council of churches. This can at least be a starting point for them. They can imagine what it would mean for such a council to develop into a fully committed fellowship with full eucharistic fellowship, full mutual acceptance of members and ministers, and full commitment to a growingly shared life.

(c) In particular there are the Orthodox Churches, who are almost totally separated from any kind of contact with movements for organic reunion among Protestant churches, but for whom the word 'conciliar' evokes deep echoes. It seems to me that it is almost impossible to awaken the interest and commitment of the Orthodox Churches for any concept of unity other than the simple return of all others to the Orthodox fold, except through the concept of conciliarity. For the Orthodox, as is well known, the ecumenical councils have the same kind of authority and evoke the same kind of reverence as does the Bible for Protestants. And it is manifest that one of the essential marks of the councils was that they could unite in one fellowship and in one faith a variety of churches separated not only by distance but also by various cultural and political factors. In the moving peroration of his address to the Assembly Fr. Argenty of the Russian Orthodox Church held out the hope that, if not the 6th or the 7th Assembly of the WCC then at least the nth Assembly would in fact be the 8th Ecumenical Council, would be the place at which the Church recovered its true character as "a conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united and bound together in one eucharistic fellowship."

For these three reasons I believe that the concept of conciliar fellowship is one which, always interpreted in such a way as to include and not to replace organic union, can help us along the road. But if this is accepted, one consequence immediately follows. The consequence is that the question will be asked more and more insistently: "Why do we not have full eucharistic fellowship at the meetings of the Council?" This question was in fact asked at Nairobi, far more sharply and insistently than ever before. "The man who will not eat bread



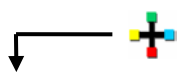
at the same table with me - how can I call him my friend?" asked one of the delegates from Zaire in the plenary debate. I had the impression that the sting of that question was felt, not merely brushed off, by some at least of the Orthodox delegates.

But that leads on to the questions which we have to look at in part 3.

2. "Unity requires a fuller understanding of the context." In making this the heading of its second part, the Report was following up the work done by the Faith and Order Commission in the last seven years on the theme of the unity of the Church and the unity of Mankind. This is new territory for Faith and Order, and it has proved difficult - as interdisciplinary studies always are. Some critics have accused the Faith and Order Commission of straying from its proper path by taking up questions of political, racial and cultural unity and disunity. The Nairobi report firmly insists not only that this is proper, but that unity requires it. The reason is given in a few sentences:

Since Christ died and rose for all and his Church is to be the sign of the coming unity of humankind, it must be open to women and men of every nation and culture, of every time and place, of every sort of ability and disability. In its mission it must actively seek them wherever and whoever they are, and in its company they must find their true home. It follows that, in order to be faithful to our calling to unity, we must consider this calling within the wider context of the unity and diversity of humankind. It is because we have often failed to do this that many have dismissed the quest for Church unity as irrelevant to their real concerns.

I am sure that this is true. At this point the theme of the Assembly - "Jesus Christ frees and unites" - helped to give us the right theological basis. It is within the missionary context of that promise, within the magnetic field of the Lord who, dying to set us free, draws all men to himself, that we have to speak of the unity of the Church. To ignore this context is to speak of something other than the Church of the New Testament. Consequently the Report goes on to speak of unity across some of the gulfs that now divide us - able and disabled, women and men, oppressors and oppressed - as well as speaking of the kind of unity which can safeguard personal freedom in community

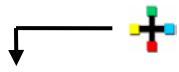


and honor without absolutizing our differing cultures. If our thinking about the unity of the Church does not deal with these questions, it will be irrelevant to the real business of the Church - which is to be the sign and first fruit of God's purpose to remake all humankind as one family.

In his closing address Dr. M. M. Thomas said that the ecumenical movement is "an adventure in the understanding of the significance of Jesus Christ for our time." If we try to choose a narrower context for our work in the field of Church unity we shall rightly be by-passed. But if we are faithful to that definition, then we have a right to challenge those who dismiss this work as irrelevant. It is in fact of central relevance, for the significance of Jesus Christ for this or any other time can never be defined in terms of programs either of public justice or of private spirituality; it can only be defined in terms which include the creation of a visible community of people within which the reality of God's shalom is tasted and enjoyed here and now in foretaste. To by-pass the issue of reunion, of the taking shape of that visible community in which all men and women of every kind have the possibility here and now of living in the fellowship of God's reign, means in the end to turn the Gospel into Law.

3. The third part of the Report deals with the "companion-ship in struggle and hope" which unity requires. "The healing of our divisions is a slow and complex process which has many elements." Some of these are in tension with each other. There are those whose prime concern is to safeguard the inherited forms of faith and life and who see the way forward in terms of growing understanding between the world confessional families. Others are impressed above all by the need to give in each place a credible witness to the Lord who wills to free and unite all, and therefore see the way forward in terms of visible organic union in each place. "These two ways of approaching unity must be complementary and not competitive." In fact they are often in conflict.

At the risk of over-simplification I would say two things as I reflect on the Nairobi discussions in their context. The first is this: that the prime obstacle to Christian unity at this moment, at least as far as concerns the Protestant and Anglican churches, is the corporate egotism of the separate ecclesiastical bodies. Far-reaching

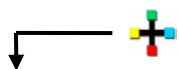


agreements in theory are not translated into practice because to do so would mean the loss of a long-cherished corporate identity. No one should speak lightly here ; what is being cherished is indeed something precious. But the truth must also be stated : it is more and more difficult to see real theological reasons for the continued separation of many of the churches which make up the World Council.

The second point is this: I have referred to the sharp questions put at Nairobi by Protestants to Orthodox about eucharistic fellowship, and to my feeling that these questions were being taken more seriously than they would have been some years ago. There is a sense in which I must say that I hope the Orthodox will not give way too quickly - and that goes for the Roman Catholics too. Eucharistic fellowship between churches which are not yet organically united can be, I believe, a means through which the grace of unity is given, provided only that it is within the context of a serious commitment to organic union. Eucharistic fellowship which is merely an occasional gesture without any serious commitment to organic union could be a real profanation of the sacrament. I do not think that this danger should be underestimated. There is a narrow road to be travelled and we must pray for wisdom to find it.

The one thing that is impermissible is not to move. The note of judgment was sounded at Nairobi, as was fitting in the Advent season. We deceive ourselves when we imagine that unity is a problem which we can solve at our own pace in our own time. Unity is a matter of obedience, and the time for obedience is always now. If the time is passed by, it does not necessarily come again. The WCC exists because of the commitment of the churches (weak and faltering, but real) to come together, to stay together, and to go forward together to the goal of visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship. The WCC is only a temporary camp on the road. When people in charge of a camp do not insist on moving on, the camp becomes a shantytown and eventually a slum. That could happen to our conciliar structures. To remain as we are would be to choose the path of decay and spiritual squalor.

But there is promise along with the call to obedience. During the sessions in Nairobi I had often sounding in my ears the text from which Dr. Visser t'Hooft preached when he visited



the Church of South India a year after its formation: "We are partakers of Christ only if we hold fast our first confidence firm to the end." That is a warning and a promise which all of us concerned with Christian unity do well to take into our hearts.

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