



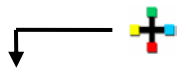
## A Fellowship of Churches

1985

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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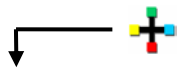
The World Council defines itself as "a fellowship of churches", and Dr Visser 't Hooft has reminded us that behind the English word "fellowship" lies the Greek *koinonia* with its rich biblical overtones. A "fellowship", as the English word is used, can be constituted simply by the decision of individuals to come together. *Koinonia* is constituted by the presence of a reality prior to any such decision; it is the fact of common participation in that reality. The *koinonia* referred to in the opening phrase of our Basis is a common participation in the reality of the triune God through the incarnation and the atonement wrought in Christ and through the continuing work of the Holy Spirit. This is the reality which is ontologically prior to the decision of various church leaders to form a council; it is the reality which makes that decision necessary. The WCC exists because of this pre-existing reality.

It is obviously important to keep clear the distinction between what the WCC is – namely, a fellowship of churches – and the instruments which it has created for various purposes. The WCC is not the Assembly, the Central Committee or the Geneva staff. These are its agencies and instruments and we have to consider their roles. The WCC is the churches which constitute it; it is the gathering of men, women and children, in great cathedrals and village huts and slum tenements, who all enjoy a shared participation in that pre-existing reality which alone constitutes them as one fellowship.

It is important to make this obvious point at the outset because it is so easily forgotten. I do not think it is unfair to say that, even in those churches which take their membership in the WCC most seriously, there is a tendency to think that the WCC is an assembly, or a committee, or a secretariat. How can these latter - the agents and instruments of the fellowship - help to make common membership a more vividly experienced reality for all who are part of it? To ask that question is to raise many perplexing problems, both theoretical and practical. Let us take first the theoretical issues.

## What are these churches?

The bodies which form the WCC are "churches". What does this word mean when it is used (in the plural) by bodies which affirm belief in one holy catholic and



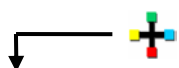
apostolic Church? In the New Testament the plural form of the word ecclesia is used only to designate the plurality of local assemblies. Christians assembling in a house may be described as churches (Rom. 16:5) but when the Christians of one place begin to form "denominations" – that is, bodies which require another name beside that of Jesus to identify themselves – these bodies are not described as churches (1 Cor. 1:10ff.). Because it is the one Lord who assembles his people in every place these many local assemblies form one assembly universally. For the same reason the assembly in each place is the catholic Church in that place, for it is the one Lord who is assembling them. It is not the branch of an organization which has its "headquarters" elsewhere. It is the Church, and the fact that the church is present in a plurality of local assemblies does not alter the fact that there is only one Church, having its being in the life of the one risen Lord and its unity visibly expressed through multiple networks of mutual support, visitation and counsel.

The "churches" which constitute the WCC are entities of a different kind. They are organized bodies of local congregations, normally defined geographically by the frontiers of a secular state, and generally existing side by side (cooperatively, competitively or polemically) with other local congregations also organized on a national basis. It is these nationally organized bodies of local assemblies which are the "churches" of which the WCC is composed.

What is the status of these "churches" vis-a-vis the one holy catholic Church which they all confess? They are of very various kinds and hold widely differing views of their status. Some see themselves as indeed the one Holy Catholic Church for their respective nations. Some see themselves as only one among a variety of possible forms of the Church. There is a great diversity of belief about what elements are essential for the manifestation of the true character of the one catholic Church. But, in spite of this diversity, I think it is not unfair to say that all, whatever their official ecclesiologies, are under pressure to conform to the style of what is usually called either confessionalism or denominationalism. By this I mean that they are increasingly obliged to accept as a fact (whatever their beliefs about what ought to be) the organization of church life in confessional families which support and are supported by local congregations existing side by side in each place in a mutual relationship which may be at any point in the spectrum between cordial cooperation and outright hostility, but which in any case falls short of organic unity. It is "churches" in this sense which make up the World Council of Churches.

## The interdenominational principle

Before criticizing this state of affairs, one should first see its strengths. There have been, especially among Protestants, many movements which made it a principle to bypass denominations. "Undenominational Christianity" has been around in some parts of the world for a long time. It is in effect an evasion of the difficult issues and in the end it amounts to the creation of just one more denomination. The ecumenical movement in its present form would have been impossible without the explicit acceptance, in the first decade of this century, of the "interdenominational principle". Whereas it was of the essence of "undenominational" gatherings that one left the distinctive convictions of one's own church outside the door, thereby in effect expressing disbelief in them, it was and is of the essence of the interdenominational approach that one brings into the shared fellowship the fullness of one's own



ecclesiology, however great the conflicts and tensions that result. And it is unfortunate that this crucial distinction is now so often ignored and there are many organizations calling themselves interdenominational which are nothing of the kind.

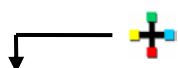
However sharply we may have to criticize denominationalism, we cannot go back on that crucial step which made the modern ecumenical movement possible. The denominations exist in their separation because of beliefs which were held, at least at one time, to be vital to the integrity of a Christian confession. One cannot simply agree to ignore them. Truth is not reached by pretending that differences do not exist. Intransigent minorities have often been and may be again the indispensable bearers of truth.

On what basis, then, do we have fellowship with bodies of Christians who deny what has been (at least at some time) held to be vital to a Christian confession? Commenting on the formation of the WCC, Archbishop Brillioth wrote: "If the Amsterdam delegates had been consistent, they should have separated with an anathema. But, thank God, they expressed their firm resolution to stay together in spite of differences which might well seem almost fundamental." To pronounce "anathema" is to sever the corrupt member from the body (Gal. 4:5), to cut off the fruitless branch from the vine (John 15:6). We exist in separation because of anathemas pronounced in the past, but our continued existence bears witness to the fact that God has not in all cases ratified the anathema. The branch continues to bear fruit. If we now refrain from the anathema, it can only be because we have been compelled to recognize that God in his mercy has not abandoned those who were in his name consigned to perdition.

What then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? God forbid! If "denominations" still exist, it is only by the mercy of God to those still living in sin. The decision to refrain from anathema and to stay together cannot be a decision to accept the status quo. It can only be the starting point for the long, costly and painful business of confronting one another with the truth of the gospel as we see it, so that we may be converted, radically changed in order to become what God intended – his one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

In that famous Toronto Statement of 1950 the Central Committee firmly rebutted the charge that membership in the WCC implied the relativizing of the ecclesiologies of the member churches. It affirmed that "no church is obliged to change its ecclesiology as a consequence of membership in the World Council". As a rebuttal of ill-informed attacks this sentence is understandable and – in the context of that moment – defensible. But it would have been better if the word "consequence" could have been replaced by the word "condition", for surely the WCC is in no position to assure its member churches that the process of "mutual correction" which the Amsterdam Message looked forward to will leave our ecclesiologies permanently unaffected. That would be to absolutize relativism, to accept pluralism as a permanent principle and to abandon the hope that we can be led to the place where we can agree in the truth of the gospel.

As bodies which confess that they are a fellowship of churches because, and only because, they share a common life in Christ, the member churches of the WCC can never settle for a life of peaceful co-existence, professing a shared life but denying it in their practice. If we cannot go back on the "interdenominational principle" (and we cannot), we are equally forbidden to rest content with it. It follows that the common



agencies created by the WCC – Assembly, committees, secretariat – are failing in their responsibility if they are not continually challenging the member churches to examine themselves in the light of their own confession. They cannot seek a too cosy relationship with the member churches. And yet they must keep and hold the confidence of those churches. This is an exceedingly difficult role to play. There is, there must be in it something of the struggle, the agony, that comes so clearly to expression in St Paul's correspondence with the church in Corinth. It is as though the WCC, through its appointed organs, has to be continually saying to the member

churches: "Examine yourselves to see whether you are holding to your faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless indeed you fail to meet the test. I hope that you will find out that we have not failed. But we pray God that you may not do wrong – not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed" (2 Cor. 13:5-7).

The example of St Paul's relation to the church in Corinth may suggest ways in which we should be thinking of leadership in the WCC, but before following up this suggestion I would like to raise some further and more difficult questions about membership.

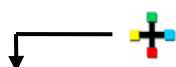
### **Other forms of the church?**

The member bodies of the WCC are entities for which no clear theological rationale can be given because they do not correspond to what are called "churches" in the New Testament. They are not local assemblies of all who confess Christ in one place. They are what are now commonly called "denominations", or-at least-they are all under constant pressure to accept that definition of themselves even if they also (quite properly) protest against it. Is it necessary that this should always be the case? Are "denominations" the right building blocks for the visible manifestations of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church? I want to suggest five points which are relevant to this question.

a) It has not always been taken for granted that it must be so. Para-ecclesial bodies such as the YMCA, YWCA, WSCF and World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches played a very important part in the moves which led up to the formation of the WCC. The first three listed above took part as full members in the Westfield College Conference (1937) at which the basic plan for the formation of the WCC was developed.

b) The International Missionary Council, which played a crucial and pioneering role in the early stages of the ecumenical movement, was organized on the basis that the member units were national councils of missionary societies or churches. This had two good effects: it placed the emphasis upon local cooperation and ensured that the world organizations could not become, or be thought to be an alternative or a rival to fellowship with immediate neighbours; and it made it possible to promote and enable a large amount of creative work with a very small central staff.

c) One of the striking features of the present situation is the vast proliferation of para-ecclesial bodies of many different kinds. Simply by way of illustration, and without any suggestion that the list is exhaustive, I refer to the "base communities" or "grass-roots groups" which are such a burgeoning growth in many Roman Catholic lands; to the "house-church" movements in Britain and elsewhere; to the ever multiplying evangelical and charismatic movements especially in the United States but



also elsewhere; and to the many "issue groups" which bring together Christians of all confessions to campaign on specific ethical or political matters. Whatever may be one's judgment of these movements, they represent a formidable part of the totality of Christian presence and witness in the world of today.

d) In a recent article Brother Pierre-Yves Emery of Taize has drawn attention to something which is familiar but not sufficiently noticed. Denominations commonly tolerate within their own ranks differences of belief and practice wider and deeper than those which divide the denominations and which are alleged to be the justification for their continued separation from one another. One has to ask, therefore, how far we are honest about our denominational identities, how far our ecclesiological and theological statements are rationalizations of decisions which are actually taken on other grounds and on the basis of other interests.

e) We are bound, it seems to me, to take seriously what the sociologists of religion tell us about the nature of denominationalism. Put briefly, it is that the denomination is the visible form

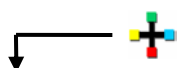
taken by bodies of Christians who have accepted the privatization of their religion. In other words, it is a form of syncretism: it allows the expression of Christian faith to be determined by factors deriving from another, and alien, system of belief – in this case, the beliefs which have controlled the public life of the West since the Enlightenment. Denominationalism is essentially the product of the North American experience in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but it has increasingly become a global phenomenon, imposing its assumptions even on churches whose basic beliefs are incompatible with it. I do not know enough to speak with confidence, but I suspect that in North America even Orthodoxy is seen as, and is under pressure to see itself as, a "denomination".

Where do these five observations leave us? I am not sure. But I think that they ought to be in our minds as we reflect upon the meaning of membership in the WCC. Of course the Council has been careful, from its inception, always to involve a high proportion of "consultants" alongside the officially appointed delegates of churches. Without this provision, the effectiveness of the Council's work would have been small indeed. Without this, the Council could hardly have challenged and disturbed the member churches as it has; it would have been in the dangerous position of merely representing them as they are and failing to call them to what they are intended to be.

We have to ask, at every point in the ongoing story of the Council, how its agencies (Assembly, Central and other Committees and – above all – the Geneva staff) are to fulfill this immensely difficult task both of representing the member churches as they are and also challenging them to become what they are not but are called to be? How can the member churches be challenged without being alienated? How can they have the strong feeling that it is they who are the Council and that membership in this world fellowship is vital to the integrity of their life in Christ, and yet also face the painful and probing questions which the agencies of the Council must put to its members?

### **Apostolic and pastoral leadership**

It seems to me that this is a call for what I can only describe as apostolic and pastoral leadership. I turn again to the example of St Paul in his dealings with the churches. The deep agonies and perplexities which are so obvious in the letters to the Galatians and the Corinthians are signs of the tensions which his role involves. He is



one with them. They are his beloved children. They share a common life in Christ. He cannot repudiate them or treat them as enemies. And yet he has to rebuke them, to call them to account in the presence of the Lord. The tension is between solidarity on the one hand, and the need for honest questioning on the other. True pastoral and apostolic leadership needs both. Only if both are present (in their inevitable tension) will one be saved from sterile confrontation and alienation at one extreme, and from a cosy but ultimately cowardly co-existence at the other. It may sound presumptuous and even alarming to say so, but I do not see how the member churches can be said to be taking their membership seriously if they are not ready to acknowledge this kind of apostolic and pastoral leadership from those whom they set aside for the work of the Council, whether as full-time staff or as members of Assembly and committees.

So that I may not seem to be talking mere theory, let me suggest a few practical consequences of this way of looking at membership. I am sure that this list is far from complete.

a) It would mean that the member churches were very fully and seriously involved in the appointment of full-time staff to the Council – deliberately seconding them for this wider ecumenical service, undertaking to pray for them, and promising to receive them back into their service at the completion of their allotted period. It might also mean the willingness of churches

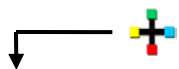
to second for ecumenical service on these terms more persons who are already holding positions of crucial leadership in the member churches.

b) It would mean that the member churches accept that it is their responsibility and not primarily that of the Geneva staff to interpret the work of the Council to their members. News of the Council's work should come to the readers of church papers as news of what "we" are doing, not as news about "them". In order for this to happen, I would like to suggest that there should be a regular procedure by which the same kind of background briefing which is available to the Geneva staff would be shared with the people in the offices of the member churches who hold the relevant portfolio, e.g. on evangelism or urban mission or peace issues. In other words, if the readers of church papers are to know the work of the Council as part of what "we" do, the staff of the Council will have to treat the leadership of the churches as part of "us".

c) The fine work already done to help people in all the member churches to pray regularly and with understanding for one another needs to be continued and intensified. If our common membership in Christ is not continually sustained and made effective by intercessory prayer it is in danger of being forgotten and therefore, at critical moments, denied.

d) Perhaps more needs to be done (I speak in ignorance) to build bridges between the membership of the WCC and the many para-ecclesial organizations and movements to which I have referred. Clearly they have much to give, but clearly also (as it seems to me) they cannot give all that they might if they are without the correction which we have learned to receive in the ecumenical movement during the present century; which means – to put it in another way – that they and we need each other to learn what it is to be the one holy catholic and apostolic Church in the context of this one interdependent but bitterly divided global community at the end of the twentieth century.

What is certain is that we cannot stand still. The WCC has taken as its starting point the "churches" as they now are. It has, in the classical Toronto Statement of



1950, eschewed any claim to have one required definition of the nature of the unity which God wills, though it has sought at various times to sketch a vision of it. It is a fellowship of churches in which competing and conflicting visions can confront one another in dialogue. But dialogue is not an end in itself. Its purpose is to come to a fuller grasp of the truth. For that we have to be continually pressing forward, ready to face honestly the painful process of mutual correction "until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God".

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