



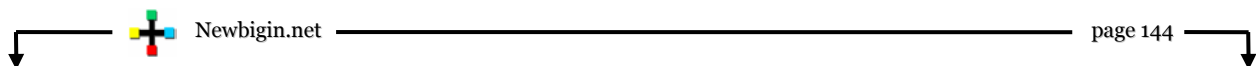
A Review of "Living Today Towards Visible Unity," by Thomas F. Best

1989

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This volume contains the report and related papers of the Fifth International Consultation of United and Uniting Churches, held at Potsdam (German Democratic Republic) in July 1987. With the report are included four substantial papers by Paul Crow, Elizabeth Welch, Alan Black and Leslie Boseto on global and local issues encountered on the way -to unity, and six shorter pieces from the USA, Madagascar, Indonesia, Belgium, India, and the D.D.R., each giving a valuable and distinctive insight into local experience in the quest for visible unity.

Ever since the formation of the WCC the united churches have had to consider the best way to make their distinctive witness within the ecumenical movement. At Amsterdam in 1948 an evening was set aside for meetings of the world confessional families and the representatives of united churches had to decide whether to attend separate meetings or to hold a meeting of their own. They did hold such a meeting and were encouraged by the fact that Visser t' Hooft chose to attend this rather than the meeting of the Reformed churches.

From Evanston onwards there was pressure on the united churches to form a world body comparable to the world confessional bodies, but this was resisted on the ground that they should make their witness within these latter bodies, and that their natural home was the WCC itself. However for nearly 20 years the WCC was not able to sponsor meetings of the united churches for fear that it might appear to be putting its official support behind a particular model of unity. From 1967 onwards, however, the WCC has sponsored a series of consultations in which churches who have experienced both the pains and the joys of union can share their experiences. This is surely right, for they have important witness to give, as this volume demonstrates. But the present report from the



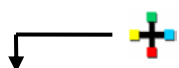
consultation at Potsdam wisely rejects again any proposal for a world federation of united churches "as if even thinking of it were something like 'ecumenical treason!' "(p. 128) and

confines itself to asking the WCC to "set up a small continuation committee of this consultation" (p. 16) and to ensure a worthy input from these churches to the next Assembly.

This volume gives evidence of many different routes that churches are exploring on the way to unity. The paper from Indonesia describes how the actual experience of working together in a council of churches has led the members to recognize that they have already become something more – a "communion of churches" – and to begin to draw the conclusions from this fact. The volume also illustrates how much the cultural milieu governs the way unity is approached. In Papua, New Guinea, "people are the security"; there is already a deep sense of human inter-relatedness which is part of the very stuff of society (p. 80f); in the Western world, with its consumer society, where every individual is an autonomous center free to decide according to personal preference, the road to unity will be very different (p. 58).

While it is not surprising that there is a variety of routes, I find it surprising that in this particular consultation there was not agreement about the goal (p. 13). All member churches of the WCC are committed to the search for visible unity, but (I had thought) this group of churches is committed to organic unity in some form. The report makes it clear that this is not so. In his review of "models of unity" Paul Crow describes the organic model as "an endangered species," and he is clearly right. The conciliar model once again appears as an alternative to the organic model, in spite of the firm statement of the Nairobi Assembly that it envisaged a conciliar fellowship of churches which would be locally united. The crux of the matter, as Leslie Boseto affirms, is what happens locally, but Paul Crow seems to suggest that in a conciliar model of unity the separate confessional traditions would still have some distinct embodiment (p. 32).

Two anxieties constantly reappear in the discussion of models: the anxiety lest proper diversity be suppressed, and the anxiety about full participation. Both are legitimate, but both need scrutiny. Every living church must have room for diversity, but the question is whether the diversities are about issues inherited from the past or about the issues facing the church now. Our trouble is that the former – which is not a currently burning issue is entrenched in ancient structures with all their resistance to change, while the latter does deeply divide us and make us much less ready to tolerate diversity. One of the reasons why unity matters is that it enables us to concentrate on the real issues. I am also struck, in reading these papers, by the danger that in our eagerness to encourage diversity we are not ready enough to challenge each other.



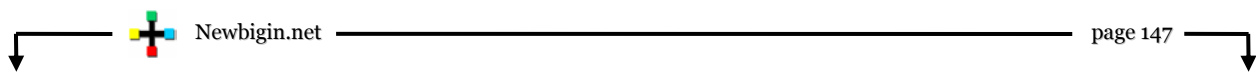
There is little in these papers about the "mutual correction" of which Amsterdam spoke, and much about mutual recognition. Yet, as Black rightly points out (quoting John Webster Grant), "In our eagerness to retain the treasures of the past [we run] the risk of preserving the bad along with the good" (p. 52).

The other anxiety which constantly surfaces is about ensuring that everyone participates in making decisions, and in particular that clergy do not dominate laity. Having been slightly infected with the "hermeneutic of suspicion," I cannot help feeling that this is part of the general fear of leadership which perhaps our culture owes to Freud's teaching about the role of the father. Western culture does at present have an animus against any kind of leadership, and yet it is only with good leadership that the possibility of participation by everyone is maximized. I fear that an excessive concern about participation might lead to paralysis.

The report identified "the main new emphases" of this consultation (p. 5ff) as being the evaluation of different models of unity and the exploration of the relation between the search for church unity and the search for human unity. Much of the material in this volume is concerned with the latter issue. And surely it is right to insist that the unity of the church cannot be an end in itself, but must be seen as a sign, foretaste and agent of human unity. Early ecumenical thinking (e.g., Edinburgh 1910) saw this in terms of the evangelization of the world; contemporary ecumenical thinking focuses more on the struggle to overcome the barriers of race and class and gender. I have come to the reading of this report straight from reading *The Myth of Christian*

*Uniqueness* and a number of similar works which would, of course,, absolutely reject the Edinburgh 1910 model of human unity and see the role of the church simply as one among a number of agencies called to work for justice and peace. In this scenario church unity or disunity does not matter. But is it clear enough in these papers that the church is not merely an agency working for peace and justice, but is itself the God-given place where peace and justice are actually made possible. I welcomed Leslie Boseto's sentence, "Mission and Diakonia must overflow like a river from within the fellowship of Christians who show constant love for one another" (p. 76). And this leads me to one final reflection.

This is a very Protestant collection-perhaps inevitably, given the present state of the movement for unity. No Anglican voice is heard. One Roman Catholic is quoted as pleading for "greater theological reflection" in the work towards unity (p. 46) and the voice of Orthodoxy is only faintly heard in the discussion of the relation of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church to the Church of South India and Church of North India. A strong Roman Catholic or Orthodox voice would have raised the challenge that the church is something *given* to us and not something that we shape. Perhaps



this is a danger of which all ecumenists need to be aware. The discussion of the role of the Mar Thoma Church illustrates this point. The writer frankly acknowledges that the crucial problem which has frustrated the efforts of the three Indian churches to form a single church is not theology but ethnicity. If the Church of South India and Church of North India could engage in a really deep theological exploration with the Mar Thoma Church of the things which divide these Eastern and Western traditions, that would be an immensely valuable gift to the whole ecumenical movement.

At every point in these discussions, the fundamental question is about identity. Can great Christian communities of faith dare to lose their identities and find a new identity defined simply by relation to Christ? The answering to that question calls for a deeper engagement in prayer, in theological exploration, and in shared discipleship than we have perhaps realized. How can we reach the point when we know in the deepest part' of our being that every other relationship is secondary to this primary one? This report, representing the shared work of men and women deeply committed to the quest for unity and with costly experience of that quest, is a challenge to press on.

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