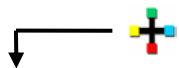Unity Of "All In Each Place"

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Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement (Nicholas Lossky, José Míguez Bonino, et al.; Geneva: WCC Publications): 1043-46.

At the first WCC assembly in Amsterdam, provision was made for meetings of the World Confessional Families but not for representatives of united churches (see **united and uniting churches).** The latter met in an extracurricular exercise. The assembly's report did not discuss local unity except for a brief commendation of the "courage and enterprise" which had inspired "some notable unions" of churches *(The Universal Church in God's Design, 125).*

Immediately following the first assembly there was sharp debate about the ecclesiological significance of the formation of the WCC. Did it commit the member churches to specific models of unity (see **unity, models of)?** Would it press churches to unite? Would it become a "super-church"? At the meeting of the central committee in Toronto (1950), these questions were squarely faced, and a statement was issued which has remained determinative of subsequent development (see **Toronto statement).** Membership in the WCC committed churches to the quest for unity but did not imply acceptance of any particular model of unity. There were in fact many different models on offer – re-integration into the Orthodox church, organic union* on the lines suggested by the Lambeth Quadrilateral,* a federal relationship between the world confessional families (see **federalism) –** and for some the WCC itself represented the desirable form of unity. The WCC could not espouse any of these but continued to show an interest in local unions of churches by publishing regularly surveys of such unions or plans for unity in many parts of the world.

The Lund Faith and Order conference (1952) and the Evanston assembly (1954) followed their predecessors in omitting discussion of the local schemes of union from their agenda, but after each of these meetings there were unofficial consultations of representatives of united and uniting churches in which leading personalities in the WCC participated. The representatives at Lund of younger churches involved in united or uniting churches felt obliged to counter the suggestion that their eagerness for unity might be "mistaken for a by-product of Asian nationalism" (Lund report, 130*).* But in the debates which centred on the Toronto state-

ment, it was made clear that, while the WCC could not propose the acceptance of a particular model of unity as *a condition* of membership, member churches, if serious in their quest for unity, could not remain permanently uncommitted to one model or another. In a lecture at the time of the Evanston assembly, the writer of this article affirmed that "the proper form of the church's unity" required "first that it must be such that all who are in Christ in any place are, in that place, visibly one fellowship; and secondly that it must be such that each local community is so ordered and so related to the whole that its fellowship with all Christ's people everywhere, and with all who have gone before and will come after, is made clear" (published in *The Journal of Religion*, 35, 1, 1955).

These phrases were to be further refined in the following five years. The impetus to do so came partly from a conference of North American churches on "The Nature of the Unity We Seek", partly from a WCC central committee request for F&O comment on the Toronto statement and partly from the appointment of a committee on the future of F&O. In 1958 that committee presented a report advocating a "churchly" model of unity, in contrast to a model which appeared to call only for co-operation. The next year the F&O working committee submitted to the central committee a report which contained the following sentences: "We believe that the unity which is both God's will and his gift to his church is one which brings all in each place who confess Christ Jesus as Lord into a fully committed fellowship with one another through one baptism into him, preaching the same gospel and breaking the one bread, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all; and which at the same time unites them with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministries and members are acknowledged by all and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls the church."

After further discussion this statement was adopted by the third assembly in New Delhi with small modifications – one of which was to remove the semicolon which divided the "local" and "universal" parts to make it one single sentence. In spite of this attempt to hold the two parts of the statement together, it was the "local" emphasis which captured attention. The fourth world conference on F&O at Montreal (1963) gave much attention to the local church.* It affirmed that "the proving ground of unity is the local church" (80) but was concerned that new forms of the local church might in fact be forms of schism.* It was no doubt by inadvertence that the Montreal report put a comma at the crucial point from which a semicolon had been removed! It followed that the fourth assembly at Uppsala (1968) thought it necessary to recover a balance which had been tipped one way. It emphasized the global dimension of unity and expressed the hope that "the members of the WCC, committed to each other, should work for a time when a genuinely universal council may once more speak for all Christians" (*The Uppsala Report*, 17).

This vision of a "genuinely universal council" was taken up at the next meeting of the F&O commission (Louvain 1971). In a statement entitled "Conciliarity and the Future of the Ecumenical Movement", a vision of unity was sketched in the form of a "conciliar fellowship of churches". There were factors which favoured this shift of emphasis. Movements for local organic union which had seemed promising ten years earlier were faltering. The growing role of the Orthodox churches in the life of the WCC was giving wider recognition to the role of ecumenical councils* in the history of the church. And (most importantly) the massive presence of the Roman Catholic Church in the ecumenical movement from the *1960s* onwards had shifted emphasis from local schemes of union to bilateral dialogues* between world confessions. It was obvious that the RCC as a single world communion should find its partners in the world confessional families. These thus assumed a much more prominent role than in the preceding decades. "Conciliar fellowship" seemed to be a more attractive (and less costly) way to unity than the sometimes traumatic experiences of organic unions in which churches surrendered their separate existence to form new bodies. By the middle of the decade a WCC publication was able to list almost *50* of these bilateral conversations between world confessional bodies *(Confessions in Dialogue*, 1975).

The relation between these two approaches to unity was discussed at a conference in

Salamanca (1975), and its findings were taken up by the fifth assembly at Nairobi in the same year: "The one church is to be envisaged as a conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united. In this conciliar fellowship, each local church possesses, in communion with the others, the fullness of catholicity, witnesses to the same apostolic faith, and therefore recognizes the others as belonging to the same church of Christ and guided by the same Spirit" *(Breaking Barriers*: Nairobi, 1975, 60).

The acceptance of this formulation led naturally to the question: What is a "local church... truly united"? At New Delhi it had been recognized that the word "place" did not have a simple unambiguous denotation. It affirmed that the unity among Christians "must be found in each school where they study, in each office or factory where they work, and in each congregation where they worship" and, furthermore, that "place" may imply not only local communities but also wider geographical areas such as states, provinces or nations *(The New Delhi Report, 118).* A consultation called by the WCC in December 1976 sought to clarify the issues. It noted that by using the term "place" for all levels of the church's life, the third assembly (New Delhi) avoided a clear definition. It affirmed that "the church cannot even be conceived apart from the reality of places" *(In Each Place: Towards a Fellowship of Local Churches Truly United* [WCC, 1977], 4).

It considered the missionary obligation to relate the gospel to the specificity of particular groups in changing situations and affirmed that "a place is not merely a geographical area which can be identified on the map. It has temporal dimension as well" (5). It attempted a definition of the term "local church"* as follows: "The term refers to an area where Christians can easily meet and form one committed fellowship in witness and service. Every local church will normally gather in one eucharistic service. The conditions of the area may be such that there is need for several separate services. Even then it must be made evident that these communities understand themselves as one eucharistic fellowship" (8).

Common language is widely recognized as legitimate grounds for forming a distinct congregation. But "is it proper to recognize distinct eucharistic assemblies in the same area on the basis of distinct language, race, culture and other factors?... There is no agreed ans-

wer to these questions" (9-10). It is agreed, however, that in the course of its missionary outreach into new cultural groups, "as a provisional measure, there must be room for the formation of a congregation within [the] receiving culture, speaking its language and sharing its style of life, through which the full riches of that culture may be brought into the life of the universal church" (10). In a final section, which suggests the direction for the future, the consultation noted that "in many places small groups and fellowships have grown around common concerns and interests" and that in many cases "their commitment to the unity of the church leads them to anticipate the communion of the future" (11). These discussions about the nature of "local unity" need to be continued. The sixth assembly (Vancouver 1983) re-affirmed the Nairobi statement and sought to develop it further through a search for a common understanding of the apostolic faith, through mutual recognition of baptism, eucharist and ministry (see ***Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry),*** and through common ways of decision making. The WCC has also sponsored consultations of united and uniting churches by themselves, and with the Christian World Communions* including the Roman Catholic Church and representatives of the Orthodox churches.

• E. Benignus, *All in Each Place,* Cincinnati, Forward Movement, 1966 • W.B. Blakemore, "All in Each Place", *Midstream, 3, 2,* 1963-64 • A.H. Dammers, *All in Each Place,* London, BCC, 1964 • M.B. Handspicker, "All in Each Place", *Study Encounter, 1,* 79, 1965 • M. Kinnamon ed.,

Unity in Each Place... in All Places...: United Churches and the Christian World Communions,
WCC, 1983 • L. Newbigin, "What is 'a Local Church Truly United'?", *The Ecumenical Review,*
29, 2, 1977.