

## The Concept of Ecumenical Mission\*

Delegates to the International Missionary Council's Assembly at Willingen in 1952 felt very grateful to Bishop Newbigin for his stimulating judgment on the missionary enterprise as "having become bogged down in trench warfare," and having in consequence lost its mobility and capacity for dynamic advance.

Those who attended the Ghana Assembly in 1957/58 felt similarly indebted to Professor Freytag for his frank and penetrating analysis of the present missionary situation. As he pointed out, whereas, in the past, Western missions have always had many problems, they have now become a problem themselves. "We are uncertain about their patterns as they are, and even more, the historic, basic conceptions of missions are being questioned." There is no doubt whatsoever as to the continuing necessity of prosecuting the unfinished task; the question is whether our present patterns, and the conceptions behind them, are "the right expression of the obedience God wants from us today." Dr. Freytag drew attention to the new political and cultural situations created by the rise of new nations, the reality of the younger churches, and the growing reality of the ecumenical era. All of these, as he indicated, are tending towards an external limitation, or a deliberate self-limitation, on the part of Western missions. A "lost directness" has resulted from appeals for increasing material and financial aid and less personal help, as well as from changed conditions which often take away the initiative from Western missionaries serving in and under younger churches. There is a growing recognition on the part of churches in the West, and an obviously necessary appeal to churches in Asia, Africa and Latin America to recognize, that the missionary obligation is of the *esse* of the Church. In many cases this raises the question of the validity and necessity of the "vicarious service" of separate missionary societies. "What was a historic expression of genuine obedience in its time becomes an entity in itself, separated from the character of obedience, and stands in the way of a fresh and new expression of the same obedience which is now

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asked of us." Dr. Freytag has exhorted us to abandon all defensive attitudes, to take actual decisions on the basis of our present insights, and to concentrate on the essential proclamation of the Gospel, with less emphasis on institutional service.

What are these insights which have to be translated into present action? It is the writer's purpose in this slight article, respectfully offered in honour of Dr. Freytag's outstanding leadership in the field of missionary thinking, to suggest with great temerity that the most important of these is the growing concept of ecumenical mission. If we steer our course by this bright star, the Holy Spirit will surely lead us forward out of the doldrums in which the missionary enterprise has of late been becalmed!

In his invaluable Burge Memorial Lecture for 1953, Dr. Visser 't Hooft traced the development of the word "ecumenical." The careless use of this term, as synonymous with "world-wide" or "interdenominational," is to be deplored. This word must never "be isolated from the missionary and evangelistic context in which it belongs. The Christian Oikoumene has only the right to call itself by that name if it remembers that it exists to be the salt of the earth, that is to represent 'the coming Oikoumene' in the midst of the Oikoumene which is the whole inhabited earth." The popular definition of "ecumenical" as "relating to the whole task of the whole Church to bring the Gospel to the whole world" is to be commended. The concept of ecumenicity thus defined, the term "ecumenical mission" was bound to arise.

These words found a dynamic organizational embodiment in the Asia Council on Ecumenical Mission, set up in July, 1955. Although this Council may have been abortive in its claims even to represent Asia, let alone to display the marks of true ecumenicity, it nevertheless led to the formation of the East Asia Christian Conference, now fully recognized by the W.C.C. and by the I.M.C. as the regional organ in East Asia of ecumenical co-operation within the framework of those two bodies. The preparatory conference held at Prapat in March, 1957, declared itself as follows: "Our common evangelistic task has been given to us by our common Lord, Who is Lord both of the world and the Church. We would commit ourselves in common obedience and fellowship to the dynamic pursuit of this divine mission. Already as a result of our meeting we have come more fully to realize that the churches in Asia are eager and ready to share in the world-wide task of Christian mission, particularly in the evangelistic task so insistently needed in our contemporary situation, and to engage in these tasks unitedly convinced that 'we can do together what we cannot do separately.'"

Before taking up the question whether regional ecumenicity is itself a contradiction in terms, let us look at the linking together of Mission and Unity in our accepted definition of the term

“ecumenical.” Since the meeting of the Central Committee of the W.C.C. at Rolle in 1951, increasing consideration has been given to the interrelatedness of these two vital concepts. In a statement then adopted, it was pointed out that : “On the one hand, the missionary movement has been from the beginning imbued with a deep sense of the calling to unity. Because the Gospel is one and the world is one, those who were inspired to recall the Church to its duty to take the Gospel to the whole world could not fail to see a vision of unity which transcended those divisions within which churches unmindful of their missionary calling had been so long content to live. The young churches which have grown up as the fruit of this missionary movement have already, in many areas, formed regional unions of churches, and the fact that the Church is now—for the first time—world-wide, has inevitably compelled Christians to think afresh about its unity. On the other hand, the movement towards unity has from the beginning concerned itself with the Church’s witness to the world. Unity has been sought out of a deep conviction that only together can Christians give true witness and effective service to the world.” Many elements of actual confusion, as well as several implications for both Church and Mission, were pointed out. “The division in our thought and practice between ‘Church’ and ‘Mission’ can be overcome only as we return to Christ Himself, in Whom the Church has its being and its task, and to a fresh understanding of what He has done, is doing, and will do . . . The obligation to take the Gospel to the whole world, and the obligation to draw all Christ’s people together, both rest upon Christ’s whole work, and are indissolubly connected.” It was fully in line with this thinking that the I.M.C. at Willingen boldly and categorically declared : “Division in the Church distorts its witness, frustrates its mission, and contradicts its own nature. If the Church is to demonstrate the Gospel in its life, as well as in its preaching, it must manifest to the world the power of God to break down all barriers and to establish the Church’s unity in Christ.” While every step towards unity will strengthen the churches’ capacity for world mission, prosecution of ecumenical mission is likely to provide in the long run the best stimulus towards greater unity. Ecumenical mission is surely the way forward to renewal of the missionary enterprise.

What, then, is Ecumenical Mission? Just as every local church ideally and scripturally focuses the Universal Church, so every local missionary enterprise should focus the missionary task of the whole Church. The local church is more than a minute “part” of the whole; it is a microcosm mirroring the macracosm. Similarly, every enterprise of ecumenical mission must mirror the wholeness of the missionary task, and the wholeness of the Church which undertakes it. In a token way, though obviously only in a token way, it demon-

strates something of the total programme by which the Church witnesses interracially, internationally, and interdenominationally, to the relation of the Gospel to the whole of man's human needs. It is essentially a witness to two things, to the unity of God's purpose and to the reconciling power of Jesus Christ. To the unity of God's purpose, because His care is for the needs of the whole man and of the whole of mankind, to redeem one fallen humanity without partiality and on the same terms for all. And to the reconciling power of Christ, because it is through Him, as Lord both of the Church and of the world, that all things in heaven and earth are to be brought into one. Even now it is evident that Christ is to be found both sides of every barrier which men erect against one another, both within and outside the churches. Missionary work is ecumenical, however small its scale, when it manifests the universality of His Spirit and His purpose, and nothing less.

On this understanding of the nature of Church and Mission, it will be seen that regional ecumenicity is a genuine possibility, provided a consciousness of, and loyalty to, the whole task and the whole Church imbue the regional, as well as the local, manifestation. The decision taken at Prapat to include on equal terms fraternal members from Australia and New Zealand within the fellowship and operations of the East Asia Christian Conference was of crucial importance. What might have seemed an "ecclesiastical Bandung Conference," along the lines of "Asia for the Asians," thus became truly ecumenical in spirit and in outward manifestation.

It is to be recognized that there are large numbers of international and interdenominational or interconfessional, as well as undenominational, missions which could not claim to be ecumenical. This is because they fail to reflect the wholeness of the Church, even more than because of the tendency of many of them unduly to narrow the sphere of their application of the Gospel to human need. This is not, as it might at first be taken to be, a judgment based upon attitude and adherence, or non-adherence, to the recognized organs of the Ecumenical Movement. The contention that our Lord's prayer for the unity of all those who believe in Him is to be interpreted in spiritual, not in organizational terms, is a fair one. The fundamental issue, however, is whether that unity is a visible one, through which the world may believe. "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." A claim to ecumenicity cannot be automatically denied to those who have not taken up membership in ecumenical councils, so-called. It cannot be conceded, however, to any who, in a sectarian spirit, claim a monopoly of truth, or of "holy orders," and virtually unchurch; or in practice compete with or oppose, the missionary efforts of others who claim obedience to our One Lord.

Similarly it must be denied to such missionary work as ignores, or militates against, the presence of other Christian churches within the sphere of its operations.

A question here inevitably raises itself as to the place of any form of denominational mission in this new ecumenical era. Provided it operates within the spirit and framework of "the whole task of the whole Church," it may be defended at our present stage of ecclesiastical disunity. But it forfeits the possibility of ecumenicity whenever it is nationalistic or denominationalistic. Although the continuance of denominational missions within the ecumenical framework cannot yet be disowned, it is obvious that missionary work which manifests more of the marks of ecumenicity far better represents today the mission of the Christian Church in the modern world. Western missionary societies have been increasingly uniting in inter-Mission co-operative enterprises. The new and exciting factor, however, which opens up a whole vista of new possibilities, is the express desire of Asian churches—undoubtedly to be followed by those of Latin America and Africa—to participate in the world mission of the Christian Church.

The more advance that is made along these lines, the more will practical difficulties emerge, and considerable confusion and heart-burning are to be anticipated. Nevertheless, it is the writer's conviction that this is the sphere in which we are called upon to implement Dr. Freytag's challenge to move forward, step by step, in faithful obedience, expressed in this and that practical decision made in the light of this concept of ecumenical mission. It would be unchristian to hope to see where this obedience will ultimately lead us. In faith we have to go forth, not knowing whither we go. It would be quite unrealistic to think in terms of simply abandoning historic societies and traditional methods. What we are called upon to do is, with a sense of urgency and courage, to keep modifying their structure and operations in an approach towards ecumenical ideals.

The Committee on New Forms of Mission at the Ghana Assembly noted that: "The period since the Willingen Assembly has been characterized by increasing recognition on the part of both younger Churches and older Churches that nothing less than the whole of the emerging world Christian community must become the base of the mission of the Christian Church. This vision has already begun to be matched by action, and is the truly new factor in the present situation." Nevertheless, that Committee also reported that "despite Willingen's clear statement of its new insights and concerns, few new forms of mission have as yet arisen from that stimulus."

The Committee surveyed such advance as has been made, and went on to suggest guiding principles "in the exchange of per-

sonnel designed to further the mission of the Church, primarily at present between one Asian country and another, or between younger and older Churches, but also from other regions to one another as this new form of mission gains ground." It called for provision to be made for some missionary funds to go into a pool in which national and denominational labels would be lost. "Plans should be devised for the use of this pool in meeting special needs and particularly, strategic opportunities, irrespective of national and denominational boundaries, but without breaking existing relationships and responsibilities." A later important section said that "the missionary potential of laymen going abroad in business, professional, and various other capacities should be realized as multi-directional, and not simply from older Church to younger Church areas." Such laymen abroad, and similarly overseas students, should be drawn not only into the fellowship of the churches, but equally into their ministries of evangelism and service. Many churches, both in the West and in the East, could easily make far more effective demonstration of ecumenical mission if this potential were realized and utilized.

It was anticipated that from the new institutes which have been set up in several places for the study of non-Christian religions, and of Christian social responsibility, important suggestions for new forms of mission would arise in due course. Attention was drawn to the vital importance of the production and distribution of far more Christian literature, and to the need of far better use of other modern media of mass-communication. These are tasks which should obviously be prosecuted largely along ecumenical lines.

In all these matters we may hope to receive a new lead from the Commission of World Mission and Evangelism, to be set up if plans for the integration of I.M.C. and W.C.C. are implemented in 1961. In the writer's opinion, the new Division to be established in connection with this Commission should be given executive powers and resources to enter the field of ecumenical mission administratively, as well as inspirationally. This departure from the I.M.C.'s traditional policy of non-assumption of executive missionary responsibility seems necessitated if an adequate lead is to be given. But in no sense should such action replace the direct missionary enterprises of the churches in both East and West. It must be limited in scope, and pioneering in purpose. Not only would anything else be unrealistic and unnecessary; it would in principle be wholly wrong for any such centralized organization to usurp Church responsibility for direct missionary action. The new Division, like the traditional I.M.C., should, and could be, no more of a super-Mission than the W.C.C. is a super-Church—and for the same reasons.

Many problems will inevitably arise regarding the respective scope and functions of this new Division and of the existing Division of Inter-Church Aid. These will often better be met by a policy of "solvitur ambulando" than by paper-work along a priori lines, although the latter will be necessary. It may well be that as time goes on, the Division of Inter-Church Aid will increasingly concern itself with the institutional apparatus which is the legacy of the Western missionary enterprise, leaving the Division of World Mission and Evangelism to concentrate upon its central and essential tasks. The more effectively the Division of World Mission makes every department of the W.C.C. aware of the missionary *dimension* of every aspect of the Church's life, the more desirable will it be that its own *function* be limited to promoting the advance of the Gospel across the frontiers between faith and unbelief. All Christian decision, Christian living and Christian action, as Dr. Freytag reminded us, are part of the total missionary enterprise. The Church's inner life and worship are themselves part of God's missionary action in the world. But on the human plane, the Christian mission at its heart denotes all deliberate action designed to win men and women to faith in and allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. It is this "cutting edge of Mission" which must be the proper business of the new Division.

The Christian Mission, as has often been said, is to be fulfilled to the ends of the earth and to the end of time. Whenever we think in Scriptural terms of the meaning and magnitude of this Divinely initiated task, we find it impossible to think otherwise than of one Church confronting one world with a Gospel relevant to all human need. To think thus is to think in the inevitable category of ecumenical mission. Nothing less is adequate to the condition of this tragically divided world of the twentieth century. To set our small endeavours in the context, not of denominational or confessional advance, but of God's purposes for the whole of mankind is to lift them to a new level of vision and effectiveness. All Christian mission must be based upon missionary churches turned outwards to the world, with the home base anywhere there is a church. Its significance must be seen to be the witness of Christ's reconciling power, as experienced and demonstrated by what is already literally a redeemed cross-section of all mankind, the One Body of which Christ is the Head.

As long as the churches are themselves divided, so long and to that extent will their mission be impaired. There is thus an eschatological element in all thinking about, and attempts to act upon, the concept of ecumenical mission (as was recognized in Dr. Visser 't Hooft's definition already quoted). We are not thereby excused if we acquiesce in divided and competitive missions, undertaken by divided churches, without an earnest and practical seeking

after the ecumenical ideal. For the true function of eschatology in the Christian life is not to put off to a hidden future the vision and obedience which seem too hard for the present, but to enable us here and now to live and work in the power and by the light of that which is still to come.

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