

Editorial

NEW DELHI, 1961

THE THIRD Assembly of the World Council of Churches will take place at New Delhi, India, from November 18 to December 6 this year. Some thirty delegates from the Canadian churches will be present.

1. The theme of the Assembly is challenging: "Christ the Light of the World." This theme may sound too bold and tactless for a meeting in a land proud of its own great religions, and in fact the World Council is an advertisement as much of Christian disunity as of unity. How can such an Assembly help the world to believe? The reaction among non-Christians will deserve earnest attention. But meantime it is a cause for thankfulness that the temptation to strike a minor note instead of a major one has been resisted. The Church must be ruled by her Lord, not by her own weakness. It may be that some feeble Christians and even some non-Christians will begin to learn that the Church lives on Christ, not on herself, so that even her brokenness, when she confesses it, becomes a sign that the kingdom, the power and the glory are his, not hers.

At a recent meeting of the Canadian delegates by way of preparation, one of them expressed the hope that in this day of India's rapid social change it will be made clear that Christ is Lord of technological science and human advancement. Will India, like the "Christian" West, fall into the trap of secularism, or will the very fact that the Assembly is meeting in India show that the Church is not a Western phenomenon but the Church of a God who has a design for India and the East that may put our Western pattern to shame?

2. A notable event, highly relevant to the Assembly's theme is the prospective integration at New Delhi of the World Council and the International Missionary Council. Reports show that the churches and missionary societies belonging to the I.M.C. almost unanimously approve both the idea and the terms of integration. A great gain in principle will be the result, for the World Council is not truly a world council if the world mission of the Church is co-ordinated through another council; nor is the I.M.C. truly a church council if mission is regarded as a project separate from all the standing concerns of the Church's existence. The gain in principle at this point is not a gain in mere "theory." Christian principle is not "theory," but dogma that shapes life. The integration will bring us realistically nearer the One Church for the One World. The ecumenical movement in its modern phase was born out of the setting-up of the I.M.C. at Edinburgh in 1910. Now mother and child are to be reunited.

3. A proposed basis of membership in the Council will be put before the Assembly. One of its improvements upon the present basis is its allusion to the integral character of the Church's life upon which we have just been remarking. The present basis runs: "The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour." The proposed new basis is:

The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The present basis says nothing about the task of the Church; the new basis makes it a main feature. It also reinforces the Trinitarian witness, adds a welcome binding to the Scriptures, and replaces *accepts* by the more fitting *confesses*.

4. As a new arm, the I.M.C., becomes part of the Council, one of the original arms, the Faith and Order Commission, will be raising questions with a view to making its role more effective. The F.O.C. differs from other parts of the total organization in the fact that its membership, like that of the Central Committee, is composed by direct representation from the churches, whereas other departments are run by special officers and committees. Yet at the same time the F.O.C. is classed in a rather subordinate way within the Division of Studies. The result has been an impairment of the Commission's power to confront the Council and the churches with the urgency of the call to oneness. The decision has already been made to provide the Commission with an ampler budget and to increase its secretariat from one to three. But the problem of reorganization has still to be faced.

To strengthen the F.O.C.'s function, as described in its constitution, "to proclaim the essential oneness of the Church of Christ and to keep prominently before the World Council and the Churches the obligation to manifest that unity," a new definition of unity has been prepared by the Commission for consideration by the churches. The first paragraph runs:

The Commission on Faith and Order understands 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 unto a fully committed fellowship with one another through one baptism into Him, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one 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 ministry 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.

Much may be said about this definition as we ask whether it truly depicts "the nature of the unity we seek." Its demand for unity among *all in each place* brings the problem down in a startling way to its real

roots. Bishop Newbigin has remarked that it is our lack of oneness on the local level that has led to the top-heavy organization of regional, national, and international councils on a plane at which the problem cannot be solved. Another comment upon the new definition worth quoting is that of Professor D'Espine: "By its very nature such a unity is visible, but it does not imply a single centralized ecclesiastical institution—which is very generally set aside as undesirable. It is compatible with a large degree of institutional and liturgical diversity, but is neither 'federal' nor merely 'spiritual'."

5. Many other matters of interest and concern will also come before the delegates: reports from the Division of Studies, from the study-commissions of the F.O.C., from Inter-Church Aid and Service to Refugees; a proposed new study on "Providence and History"; and the continuing matters of evangelism, rapid social change, men and women, the laity, and the major issues of international affairs. A matter of great importance is the application for membership of the Russian Orthodox Church, balanced by a new interest from the Pentecostal side and even by applications from one or two Pentecostal churches. These new features, along with the more active attention on the part of the Church of Rome to the wider aspects of ecumenicity, portend great promise and new tensions in interchurch relations. The ecumenical movement may, on the one hand, feel the stresses of the operation of religious power-blocs, or it may, on the other hand, just because of these new confrontations, receive fresh stirrings from the Spirit of the Church. The Assembly must seek to have a prayer-life that runs deep and true. The delegates can hardly fail to be made conscious that new Christian history and total history are in the making and that they are honoured with a great trust in being at the centre of its creation.

D.W.H.