

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

Address to the Annual General Meeting, 27 April 2009

Must the Ecumenical Movement Change Course for the 21st Century ?

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1. ***Precisely what is 'the ecumenical movement?'*** Already in 1974, in taking up the responsibility for 'Ecumenical Affairs' in the (then) British Council of Churches, I found myself defining the movement – which had after all by then come into being and had been enthusiastically followed for over 50 years, among many, if by no means all Christians, in the light of the proceedings of the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 - as follows:

The ecumenical movement is the movement, under the leadership of God, the Holy Spirit, to explore and live out the wholeness and integrity of the Church of Jesus Christ, in her service of the wholeness and integrity of our one world, as created by God the Father.

2. ***The 21st Century is already facing us with at least three huge, and largely new challenges, whether we Christians like them or not !*** Each in its own way points us to the second half of that definition. Just what do we think God intends by way of 'wholeness and integrity' of our world ?
3. ***The 'easiest' is perhaps that of the contacts and explorations summoned by the presence of the variety of 'world faiths' in virtually every major city in our world.*** We can no longer expect to live in a 'single faith' community, rather in a world where the several major faiths are present and deserving of mutual awareness and respect.
4. ***At the same time we – not least we Western Europeans who have for so long considered ourselves as 'leaders in human civilisation' – are having to face up to a decisively new stage in our economic goals and expectations.*** Recent

research is revealing just how damaging economic competition and consumerism is to the 'flourishing' of all who are trapped in its tangles, so that we urgently need to be developing simpler, more locally based and financed ways of living with our neighbours.

5. ***Most recently, we and all humanity are having to respond to the vast challenge of climate change, brought on by our reckless Western economic expectations, which could so easily plunge this entire planet into a state of fatal heat and death.*** Scientists are now warning us and all governments that the present pattern of carbon emissions will raise the temperature of our atmosphere much quicker and to a much higher temperature than we know how to cope with, so that huge populations may find themselves faced with huge changes in the sea level and increased desertification. The recent G20 meeting gave as good as no attention to this dimension, which only goes to show how we have let ourselves and our futures be determined by a seriously inadequate set of aims and expectations. It is of the highest urgency that Christians, along with many others, play as full a part as we can in opening up new possibilities for the limitation of carbon emissions and any other significant reductions in what we humans demand of our environment.

This cannot be the place to go into any of these in the depth and detail that each deserves, let alone the three taken, as they need to be, together. But they undoubtedly need to be seen as three dimensions of the challenge which, under the leading of God the Holy Spirit, you and I and millions of our fellow Christians in all parts of the world now need urgently to be exploring and testing out. It is clearly of the utmost importance that new possibilities of a wholeness and integrity that we have seldom, if ever, learned to live out before, be experimented with now by many, many people of all backgrounds, and whatever the way in which they/we define ourselves, as Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, etc, or simply as human beings.

Already in his astonishingly accurate predictions in his article in *The Tablet* of 8 January 2000, one of the last he wrote, Adrian Hastings wrote of 'a crisis in human history so unprecedented that it is hard even now to imagine it.', and ended: 'For those of us who see what is happening, there is a double obligation. First, to do all in our power to bring the world's leadership to its senses while something can still

be done to limit the scale of the disaster. Secondly, to recognise that global catastrophe is in the judgment of hard realism very likely to come upon us and, therefore, to prepare ourselves and small communities of faith and sanity to live undesperingly within it. Even ... on the deck of the Titanic there is a Gospel to preach and a pattern of behaviour reflective of that Gospel. There is little time to lose in preparing ourselves mentally for Christian life in the very hardest of times.'

Forgive me if I don't try to open up any of these three carefully. They are the most important things we can be talking about, for sure, but in each case it's not enough simply to lay out one way of looking at a horribly complicated 'it'. For each of us here tonight, and many beyond, I can only launch a call to get exploring and testing out new, sustainable and modest ways of living.

But let me at least offer a few suggestions of articles and books that I have so far found to be inspiring and helpful in these three areas:

World Faiths:

- Rowan Williams' address on 'Christian Identity and Religious Plurality' at the Porto Alegre Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 2006, published in *The Ecumenical Review* of January/April 2006, Vol 58, nos 1 & 2, pp. 69-75.
- Christopher Lamb's *Belief in a Mixed Society* (Tring, Belleville and Sydney, Lion Publishing plc, 1985, pp. 160, ISBN 0-85648-210-2, then £ 3.95)
- Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism – An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression* (Oxford, One World Publications, 1997, pp. 288, ISBN 1-85168-121-3, then £ 14.99)

Economic Goals and Expectations:

- Bob Goudzwaard's address to the January 20th 2009 conference called by Churches Together in Britain & Ireland, 'Underlying Causes of the Global Economic Crisis', with his analysis of 'the empire of Money' – available from

www.ctbi.org.uk

- *A Green New Deal – Joined up policies to solve the triple crunch of the credit crisis, climate change and high oil prices*, by the Green New Deal Group (London: New Economics Foundation, 2008, pp. 44, ISBN 978-1-904882-35-0, £ 10.- by post, but also available for downloading from the website: www.neweconomics.org)
- Peter Selby's *Grace and Mortgage – The Language of Faith and the Debt of the World* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997, pp. 191, ISBN 0-232-52170-0, then £ 10.95)
- *real world economic outlook – the legacy of globalization: debt and deflation*, edited by ann pettifor and janet bush (Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York, USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, pp. xxxviii & 232, £ 16.99, ISBN 1-4039-1795-7, ppbk)
- *The Spirit Level: Why more equal societies almost always do better*, by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (London: Allen Lane, £ 20.-, 2009, ISBN 978-1-846-14039-6)

Climate Change:

- Rowan Williams' sermon in York Minster on 25th March, 2009: *Renewing the Face of the Earth: Human Responsibility and the Environment* © Rowan Williams from www.archbishopofcanterbury.org
- *The River Runs Black – The Environmental Challenge to China's Future*, by Elizabeth Economy (Ithaca, USA, and London: Cornell University Press, 2004, pp.337, ISBN 0-8014-8978-4)
- Michael Northcott, *A Moral Climate – the ethics of global warming* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, in association with Christian Aid, 2007, pp. 336, ISBN 978-0-232-52668-4)
- Alastair McIntosh, *Hell and High Water – Climate Change, Hope and the Human Condition* (Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd., 2008, pp.289, ISBN 978-1-84158-622-9, £ 8.99 ppbk.)

6. What about the unity of the churches ?

In the run up to the centenary of the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910, which is generally reckoned to have been the decisive starting point for what has become the world- and church-wide ecumenical movement, it will be of interest to compare how it was at Edinburgh, where any reference to denominational differences of doctrine was forbidden, that Charles Brent had his dream of a different conference where those differences, indeed divisions, would be faced head on ! Together with Archbishop Nathan Söderblom's commitment to doing what could be done to overcome the divisions that had produced the First World War, it became the 'essence' of the new movement to understand how the three 'concerns' for world mission, Christian unity and Christian service of world-wide peace, could belong together and strengthen each other. That led in the late '30s to the decision to found a World Council of Churches, whose central goal is now defined in its Constitution as:

The primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches is to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe.

My only doubt about that as an adequate formulation of what the Holy Spirit is leading us into today is that it starts, and can so easily stop with, the purely inner- and inter-church matters of faith and worship. Of course these are crucial, and yet our experience of say the last 50 years, has shown just how slow we Christians are to discover and obey any actual uniting agreements, such as have been explored by, for instance, the Faith & Order Commission of the WCC, let alone at more national or local levels. I find it particularly dismaying that it has been the 'older' churches who are liable to hold on to their already centuries-old attitudes and expectations, refusing, for no better reason than that 'we are right', the approaches from 'newer' churches - whether the Roman Catholics refusing to allow any value to Anglican ordinations, or the Anglicans refusing to accept Methodist ministers as equal to their own. By the end of the 20th century there has been a virtual stop to the actuality of hoping to unite separate churches, even if it surely remains the most obvious reason for not believing the witness of any of them that they are so sadly divided, even in witnessing to a man

who proclaimed the coming Kingdom of God for all humankind and all creation.

So as two vital early steps in trying to re-discover the leading of the Holy Spirit into what God wants of us his followers in this new century, I suggest two relatively simple, yet far-reaching steps:

a) ***begin with friendship with people from whom you are separated*** in some way (by language, denomination, faith, culture, political allegiance, or whatever), practising a commitment alike to listening before speaking, to respecting the other as other (not a potential copy of yourself), and of shared/equal enquiry for the sake of eventual united and uniting action. At the international level the Global Christian Forum which has grown up in the last 10 years, is a notable and yet still hardly known example of what can be possible - even if it too has hardly reached the stage of any common commitment to active service.

b) and that any such commitment be ***towards worthwhile service of the wider community around you***, at every level, and not only to your fellow-Christians, good as they of course can and will be as allies in what the Spirit is encouraging you to explore and do for the common good. In all such service, the three challenges identified here (above) deserve always to be kept in mind, so that we avoid narrowing down our purposes in ways that could make it harder to realise the needs of humanity in all three dimensions.