

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

Agenda For The Ecumenical Movement In The Next Century

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A - A look back

'Ecumenical Movement' (please, never 'ecumenism') is a dangerously quick phrase for a long, and never less than controversial, struggle over the last 200 plus years:

- starting from the hard-won simplicities of the Moravians it has grown immensely in scope, to encompass 'the whole Gospel, whole Church, whole world, whole of human life';
- my definition: **the striving, under the leading of the Holy Spirit, for the proper integrity of the Church of Jesus Christ, in her service of the proper integrity of the human family, in the purposes of God.**
- while we rightly identify this movement with the family of 'councils of churches' (as foretastes of Councils of the Church universal), never forget that it started with simple people, young people, lay people - and only in the later stages began to convert church leaders;
- three broad strands in the rope, at each level from local to universal:
 - a) the 'classical': overcoming the quarrels between Christians and churches;
 - b) the 'secular': overcoming the splits and blindnesses in the wider community;

- c) the 'cultural': discerning the diversity of integrities in the different communities and traditions - and how these can belong together in Christ.

B - A look forward

Much will rightly change, but essentially the same movement. Need to hold together God's will and gifts in at least 7 areas.

1. Unity among Christians

- A quality of relationships, among persons and institutions, by which we can grow into the fullness of Christ - therefore: **Church as Council**.
- Urgent need for partnership with 'new' communities of Christians, whether 'African Instituted', 'Pentecostal', Chinese, or whatever.
- Doing relationship, in mutuality; learning from each other; more important than the 'right' words or texts.

To study: the Canberra statement, Desmond Tutu at the 1993 Santiago Faith & Order Conference, articles from 'Churches Together in Marriage ...

2. Unity in exploratory worship

- Let God be God - and praise God: bring the **world** before God in love. Explore and share in the extraordinary renewal of worship in the WCC, Iona, Taizé and elsewhere - where worship is shaped as the over-riding joy and priority.
- Worship deserves far more imagination and creativity than our tired European traditions allow for: in the setting, the actions, the music, the symbols, etc., etc.
- Worship will involve a much deeper, truer and spontaneous grasping (being grasped by) the heart of the tradition, the central purpose of Jesus among his disciples than the liturgical fuss and clutter of separate churches can reflect.

To study: **Canberra Worship Book**, Iona volumes of songs, Brian Wren's hymns, etc., etc.

3. **God's concern for justice**

- one of three universal threats, tending towards planetary suicide;
- the inescapability of 'engaging the powers of this world'
- the growing alienation of those who shape life the way they want to from those whose life is shaped by the wishes of others, of the power-wielders from the power-sufferers
- the dominance of 'economic realities', i.e. of the greed of the few, depending on the military, the social, the educational and cultural power-realities
- can human communities learn to share for the sake of all, to give power away before our own greed and its consequences eats us all up?

To study: **Christian Faith and the World Economy Today**, Ulrich Duchrow's **Alternatives to Global Capitalism**, Walter Wink's three volumes **Naming, Unmasking, and Engaging the Powers**.

4. **God's concern for peace**

- No longer two superpowers, but increasingly dominant and competitive powers in regions, with resurgent nationalisms, and the constant jockeying for advantage - uncertainties all round.
- vital to discern a future effectiveness for the UNO and its family;
- how can we train peace-makers with double and triple sympathies?
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To study: Dervla Murphy's **Tales from Two Cities**, Geiko Müller-Fahrenheit's **The Art of Forgiveness**

5. **God's concern for the natural creation**

- Shocking statistics such as '97% of Britain's meadowlands destroyed since 1945'; 'all 17 of the world's major fishing areas have reached or exceeded their limits'; if, as currently expected, the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere

doubles in the years ahead, 36 countries will be covered in water and 100 million people have to move to higher ground.

- the results of millions of selfishnesses, small and large.
- God calling his people to a new asceticism: live more simply than others may simply live; (note how few of us yet do !)
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To study: Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz's **God's Spirit - Transforming a World in Crisis**, Michael Northcott's **The Environment and Christian Ethics**, the *Guardian* and WWF's **Primer**

6. The challenge of inter-faith relationships

- 'Unless a person can be a Christian in a world in which other, equally sensitive, equally devout, equally intelligent persons are Buddhist, Muslim and Hindu, then I do not see how anyone can be a Christian, a Buddhist or a Muslim at all' - Wilfred Cantwell Smith.
- A challenge for the 21st century comparable to that of science in the 19th and technology in the 20th; all sorts of complexities, but a tradition is gradually evolving.
- For instance the 'Four Principles' of the CCBI's **In Good Faith**:
 - Dialogue begins when persons meet each other
 - Dialogue depends on mutual understanding and mutual trust
 - Dialogue enables common service to the wider community
 - Dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness
- And then - ? Can we trust the Holy Spirit ?

To study: Christopher Lamb's **Belief in a Mixed Society** and **Yours Interfaithfully - an English Christian tries to stay honest**; Birmingham City's poster **Sacred Spaces**, etc.

7. Witness and Evangelism - 'May they all be one that the world may believe'

- 'Mission is quite simply the participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus, wagering on a future that verifiable experience seems to

belie. It is the good news of God's love, incarnated in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world.' David Bosch's final sentence.

- Christians owe everyone the story of what God has done in Jesus - but you have to wait for the moment when your neighbours want you to share it !
- It is the joy of the resurrection that turns people into evangelists;
- All our neighbours are as much children of God as any other, and will have their stories to tell us first.
- A world of difference between sensitive and imaginative sharing of good news and the imposition of ideas and prejudices by self-appointed propagandists.
- The good news of Jesus positively encourages each community to make the most of their own culture, identity, spirituality, etc.

To study: **China - A Future and A Hope** (CCBI pack), **Getting to know Wai-Wai** an Amazonian ethnography by Alastair Campbell, anything that brings alive the 'otherness' of fellow-humans.

God of many names –

Shangdi,

Tianzhu,

God of all peoples,

God of China

No great wall can keep you out,

no great dam stop your love flowing.

From mountain to sea,

in paddy field and city,

you walk with your people

you see

smile

suffer

weep

In you strangers become friends,

and so

we weep for China's pain,

sing of China's faith,

pray for China's people,

hope for China's future.

Lord God of all peoples –

Tianzhu,

Shangdi.