

## **Faith and Order Movement turns 100**

By Tom Ferguson, October 19, 2010

[Episcopal News Service] The year 2010 is one of anniversaries and commemorations in the search for Christian unity: the modern ecumenical movement got its start 100 years ago in Edinburgh, Scotland. This week we celebrate the leading role the Episcopal Church took in shaping the developing ecumenical movement.

The World Missionary Conference was held in Edinburgh in June 1910, called to discuss questions of cooperation and collaboration in the global mission field. The 19th century had been a time of ambitious efforts at global missions, with the goal of "evangelization of the world in this generation." The Episcopal Church was very active in the global mission field, as was the Church of England, with extensive missionary work in Asia, Africa, South America and other areas. The missionary conference was called because of the ways in which competition in the global mission field was counterproductive, particularly through the duplication of efforts and how exporting divisions and competition for converts demonstrated the internal divisions of Christianity.

The Edinburgh missionary conference was the broadest collection in centuries of Anglican and Protestant leaders (there was no Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox participation.) Notable Anglican attendees included Charles Henry Brent, missionary bishop to the Philippines for the Episcopal Church, and William Temple, future archbishop of York and archbishop of Canterbury. The focus of the Edinburgh conference was cooperation, and questions around church-dividing issues and controversial points of doctrine were intentionally avoided.

Bishop Brent became convinced that cooperation was not enough, that Christians needed to understand one another and engage in substantive theological dialogue. Upon his return from Edinburgh, Brent brought his concerns to the General Convention, which on Oct. 19, 1910, passed a resolution calling for a world conference with representatives from all the Christian churches "for the consideration of questions pertaining to the Faith and Order of the Church of Christ." This is an important date in the history of the search for greater Christian unity.

In the words of the Rev. John Gibaut, current director of faith and order at the World Council of Churches, "This action of a church -- not a theological faculty or missionary society -- ensured an ecclesial commitment to overcome past histories by means of theological dialogue and to prepare the way for the church's unity in faith, order, life, work, worship and mission so that the world may believe."

Bishop Brent and the Episcopal Church would take a leading role in the nascent Faith and Order Movement. The First World Conference on Faith and Order was held in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1927. Bishop Brent presided over this conference and took a leading role in the search for Christian unity, making him one of the few Episcopal bishops to land on

the front cover of Time magazine. He died in Lausanne in 1929, and his work would bear fruit in establishing the World Council of Churches.

This past June, a [conference](#) was held in Edinburgh to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the World Missionary Conference. This coming November there will be two more significant events: the Boston Theological Institute is sponsoring the conference ["The Changing Contours of World Mission and Christianity,"](#) Nov. 4-7; and the National Council of Churches of Christ is making the [celebration](#) of the centennial of the Edinburgh conference the cornerstone of its General Assembly, being held in New Orleans, Louisiana, Nov. 9-11. As part of that celebration, delegates will be called into a visioning process of what the next 100 years of ecumenical engagement might entail.

One hundred years after Edinburgh, it is true that the search for Christian unity still has a long way to go. We should also keep in mind the tremendous progress we have also made since Bishop Brent's charge that we need to understand one another better. And we need to continue our commitment to this work, for the same reasons we began to walk this path 100 years ago: as Bishop Brent later wrote, "The unity of Christendom is not a luxury, but a necessity. The world will go limping until Christ's prayer that all may be one is answered. We must have unity, not at all costs, but at all risks."

-- The Rev. Thomas Ferguson is ecumenical and interreligious officer for the Episcopal Church.