

Via Ecumenica

The Church on the Way to Mission and Unity

Charles C. West

It is 100 years since the Edinburgh World Mission Conference launched the ecumenical movement in 1910. What have we learned that points the way ahead? What has history taught us in this century about the enterprise in which we still are engaged, and will be until the final judgment? Many perspectives will be brought to this question. Here is one more.

First, in 1910 we were rejoicing in the discovery of each other. The motive was evangelical. It transcended confessions and institutions. The goal was ecumenical: to bring the knowledge of God's saving work in Christ to the whole world, to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). In the process, which reached back into the 19th century, Christian missionaries to societies other than their own, discovered people from other churches engaged in the same apostolate. They often had great differences of structure, doctrine or worship, some imported from Western Europe and America, but some rooted in more ancient traditions. What does this mean for Christian mission? The God whom we worship is One. We are all members of the body of Christ, bound in the communion of the Holy Spirit. We are messengers of the same good news. Whence all this diversity?

So the missionary movement awoke Christians anew to the search for unity. It had two thrusts. The first was to infect institutional churches with the urgency of mission. This was not easy. The Christendom mentality dominated everywhere in the western world, and even in ancient churches of the Middle East and India whose societies were anything but Christian. Even the Roman Catholic Church, which was international and had a mission, was not free of it. Nor were Protestants. William Carey faced Baptist opposition to his mission in India. Students at Princeton Seminary, the bastion of American Presbyterianism, formed secret mission societies, for fear of professorial disapproval. Early mission societies were open, but independent; only later did churches form their own boards. Establishment suspicion of the whole mission enterprise was only overcome in the spirit of Edinburgh itself (where one Anglo-Catholic bishop confessed

that he felt like a lion in a den of Daniels). There it was demonstrated, for the first time in centuries, that participation on Christ's mission to the world is essential to being the Church.

The second thrust was equally important: to make missionary evangelists aware that they are members of the one universal Church of Jesus Christ and responsible to the whole of it. Mission bears false witness if it is not ecumenical. It is something which earlier evangelists tended to underemphasize and more recent ones often forget altogether. The Church is not a collection of individuals who have shared the experience of conversion. It is the community of all those who are bound together in Christ, past, present and future, even though its divisions continue and multiply. It is no accident, then, that out of Edinburgh grew the Faith and Order Movement – the effort of churches to face their differences, and to understand more deeply their given unity in Christ.

We are still discovering each other – our unity in Christ, our mission as Christ's apostles, and their interpenetration. Edinburgh 1910 set us on this road. It has led to the formation and work of the World Council of Churches. It has impelled the Roman Catholic Church toward greater ecumenicity, not only in faith and order but also in missionary work and social witness. It has drawn non-conciliar missions and churches also into the dialogue as partners. We have not arrived. We are still on this road. But it is significant that the most ecumenical organizations today, embracing all these Christians and the Orthodox as well, are the American Society of Missiology and the International Association for Mission Studies..

Second, we have learned, and are still learning, that *metanoia* is at the heart of mission, for us all. The English translation is “repentance”, which captures part of the meaning but not all of it. When Jesus said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” he was calling not just for changing certain ways of behavior, but for a whole new view of reality in the light of which we are being transformed. It is an ongoing process by which our witness to Christ's reign is changed, forgiven and turned by God's judgment and grace into a true witness despite the cultural bias, the economic disparity, the scientific and technological advantage, the political domination, in short the sinful self-assertion, with which it is mixed.

This has been the story of mission in the 20th century. Its early prophet was Roland Allen in 1912 with his question: *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (3rd, ed. London 1953). We have been learning his lessons ever since. Ecumenical mission has been itself transformed. When the International Missionary Council was formed, on impulse from Edinburgh, it was composed almost only of western mission boards and agencies. But its first two conferences, in Jerusalem 1928 and Tambaram 1938 were held in Asia and drew Christians from there into intense dialogue about theology and policy. Then, post-war, in 1948 the World Council of Churches was formed with churches from all over the world as its members. Mission was at its center, but as a common calling shared by all Christians everywhere. Western churches turned their mission boards into agencies of this common calling, cooperating with churches which they used to dominate. In the course of this they discovered that they too needed foreign missionaries: Christians from Asia, Africa and elsewhere who would help their people to repent and believe. In 1961 in the New Delhi Assembly, the IMC merged with the World Council of Churches. Their first combined meeting, in Mexico City in 1962, was entitled "Mission on Six Continents." We are learning mission from each other.

It the providence of God, world events played their role as well. For three centuries industrialization in Europe had displaced people from their rural homes into cities where masses of them worked inhuman hours in factories under subhuman conditions. The established Church did not follow them there or take up their cause. So another faith, Marxist communism, gave them hope and inspired their resistance. It believed in the human solidarity that would emerge from revolutionary struggle against the utter inhumanity of wage labor in a system driven by lust for the accumulation of private wealth and capital as a substitute for humanity. Its goal was a society where all property is common, all needs are met and each is free to contribute in harmony with all. That faith had no use for religion, the opiate people take, said Marx, to dream of a better world and dull the pain of this one.

This faith challenged Christian faith not only by its atheism, but more centrally by turning the prophets' witness to the judgment of God on human injustice into a human revolutionary movement that inspired millions of people with a hope they did not find in Christianity. The challenge influenced Christian mission profoundly. Major theologians

in all parts of the world defined the Christian message with relation to it. It was clear why a Christian should be part of the revolution. The law and the prophets impelled it. But why should a revolutionary become a Christian? What was the gospel for people struggling for justice against systems of imperialism and exploitation, and for the humanist ideology that organized them? Churches wrestled with this question wherever they were. It was an exercise in missionary *metanoia*.

The most dramatic example was China. When the Communists came to power in 1949 there were perhaps 700,000 Protestant Christians in China. Then foreign missions were abolished. Their influence was destroyed. The government allowed carefully controlled space for ecclesial existence but pressed masses of people in its reeducation to give up their “superstition”. Now, 60 years later, Communist ideology has subsided but, with all its troubles, the Communist Party is still in control. Christianity, both Protestant and Catholic, is flourishing. No one knows how many Christians there are; the estimates run from 18 million, the official estimate, to as high as 130 million. Missionary *metanoia* at work again, prodded by an atheist power.

This has happened, less dramatically, in many other ways. Liberation theology has energized and transformed Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, in Latin America and has inspired movements elsewhere as well. In Africa, where Christianity is growing most rapidly in the world, new forms of church life and worship are emerging that continually drive us to revise our traditions and our witness. *Metanoia* is the heart, the life blood, and the circulatory system of Christian mission.

Third, we are still learning the ways in which Christian mission is entwined with human power, and how that power can even become demonic at times. It is an extension of *metanoia* into the field of society. There was naïve optimism about these powers at Edinburgh 1910. John R. Mott set the tone. He was not unaware that human progress in harnessing steam and electric energy, in industry, transportation and communication could be used for human greed and violence. But this only gave new urgency to his call for mission, for, “Every one of these wonderful facilities has been intended primarily to serve as a handmaid to the sublime enterprise of extending and building up the Kingdom of Jesus Christ in all the world.” (*The Evangelization of the World in This Generation*, N.Y. 1900, p. 131) There was reason for this optimism. Mission schools were bringing

new math and science to old cultures everywhere, along with a Christian view of history and human values. Mission hospitals were saving lives and improving public health with the new science of medicine. Rural missionaries improved the living standards of millions with new methods of farming and the new science of nutrition. One could extend the list. But at the same time the European-North American world, from which most of these missionaries came, was extending its economic and political domination over the lands to which they went. Christians in mission spent a large part of the 20th century working out their relation to this imperialism and to the nationalist, and sometimes Communist, resistance movements this resistance generated.

This struggle is largely over now. Two world wars and a massive economic depression weakened the power of the west. Colonies have largely disappeared, though not the economic domination they produced. The nuclear and ideological confrontation of the Cold War distorted and misdirected that power to the point where most of the rest of the world declared itself non-aligned. Today, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Cold War is over as well, but the powers remain. They are more diverse, more antagonistic, and often more religious than before. Christian churches used to find themselves defining their mission over against two centers of power: western capitalism and Soviet Communism, with varying degrees of entanglement with each. Now we face many centers. Violent religion is certainly one, not limited to Islam. But more insidious for faithful mission are the subtler powers: nationalism, religious or secular, ethnic tribalism, corrupt power that undermines just government, economic powers that control and manipulate human lives for their profit, and the world corporate and financial powers that are the new imperialists, to name only a few. Analytical *metanoia*, a shrewd analysis of the powers that confront us, and with which we may be more entangled than we realize in the world today, is essential to Christian mission.

What, then, does all this mean for Christian mission in the 21st century? Let me close with three proposals.

1. Christ is both our mission and our unity. This is the reality in which we live and which gives direction to our lives. It is God's reality, not ours. It is God's mission and Christ's church. We can take part in it, in many ways; in prayer and liturgy, in doctrine and theology, in church institutions which confess it, and in witness to the world

through proclamation and service. But we cannot encompass this reality. The Holy Spirit is at work beyond us and through us all. To discern how this is so, and to follow the Spirit's lead, is the *via oecumenica*, the ecumenical way, to which we all are called.

There are various ways we can go astray. They are usually misdirections of true and good work to which we are called. It is good, for example, to bring each individual to experience conversion to Christ. But when this experience creates communities of the saved that ignore their communion with other believers, then the Holy Spirit becomes a judge of this very conversion, and the world sees, not Christ, but the division of Christians. It is right that mission should penetrate the culture and customs of peoples and form churches that affirm and transform these cultures. But when a church becomes the sanctified expression of one tribe or nation, even the tribe of white Americans, and cannot reach out to include other peoples in its community, then the work of the Spirit is denied, and the mission of God is obscured.

This is happening too much in the church today. Independent churches and missions are flourishing. Conciliar churches are losing members. We are more aware than ever before, through communications and economic forces, of the unity of the world, but we are at the same time more provincial and individual in our response to it. Councils of churches and church service organizations are weaker, and private groups which call themselves Christian are stronger. The issue here is not organizational, but spiritual. The very question of oneness in Christ is too often neglected or not raised. Christian mission is in danger of dissipating in the marshes of individual experience and group identity. For the sake of God's mission in this fragmented and self-destroying world, we need to rediscover the *via oecumenica*.

2. We are justified by God's forgiving grace, not by our works, even our good deeds in the work of mission. This is the good news we have to proclaim. It is good news for the world, whether religious or secular; the world of which we also are a part. It is liberation in the profoundest sense, liberation from self and freedom from the powers and values of the world that would force us to conform to their standards. Confronted with a just and loving God in Christ, the world and Christians alike can only repent. But the freedom that forgiveness brings, to live in hope, and to be, with all our self or group

centered sin, responsible actors and witnesses in the world: this is the message of our mission.

It is always endangered. The world judges us by its own standards. They may be the standards of another religion (Gandhi was good at that), or, more commonly, they may be humanist standards, based on an ideology, such as Communism, or derived from the culture from which they arise. In any case these standards almost always apply to behavior, and tempt us to justify ourselves by our own good works. To distinguish between God's judgment and the world's is the discipline of Christian life, and of our mission as well. But the endangerment comes also from the temptations of our own pride. Even Christians engaged in mission want to be good in their own eyes. They want to have their works appreciated as good deeds. But self-justification is the cancer of Christian life, intensified when we believe that it is the Lord's work we are doing. We are doing the Lord's work. It is responsible discipleship. But, as churches or members we need continually to evaluate our projects and our actions in the light of God's judgment on them, and in so doing bear witness to God's grace to us.

3. The crucified and risen Christ is lord and savior of the world. This is both the reality in which we live and our hope for his reign to come. We testify in mission to this judgment and this hope. We cannot avoid understanding the powers of this world in the light of this reality, or bearing witness to God's purpose for them. Paul, in the New Testament, teaches us both to respect those powers as instruments of justice (Romans 13), and to resist them when they become autonomous (Ephesians 6). Churches in mission are involved with these powers. They transport us to meetings, print our materials, and manage our communications. Our members are employed by them. Church endowments are managed by them. We compensate by contributions to charity, but they are not sufficient to control the powers or give them direction. Nor are our efforts purify ourselves by living more simply and eating organic foods. We live in faith between the reign of Christ, and the powers in the world that have their own laws and objectives. In this world prophecy, as a dimension of responsible action, is essential to mission. It is prophecy that gives hope to these powers by pointing them toward their function in the world that lives by, and anticipates, the coming of Christ: banks, industry and commerce to serve economic equality and the common good, governments to bring

justice, especially to the powerless and the poor, cultures to cultivate inclusive community and care for the dependent. One could expand the list. All of this, churches in mission should bring to God in reflection and prayer in order, collectively or through their members, to bear responsible prophetic witness in the place where they are. This also is Christian mission. Let us hope that in the 21st century, it is a dimension of the Church's ministry.