

what kind of unity?

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FOREWORD

What kind of unity? A crucial question for all Christians, not least for the World Council of Churches which is constituted, according to the statement of its functions and purposes, 'to call the churches to the goal of visible unity...' Crucial thus also for the Council's Fifth Assembly next year in Jakarta. What will the delegates of the churches be able to decide together about the next stages of our common pilgrimage into unity? This book comes to help us all ponder that question.

The goal of visible unity has become a convenient target for criticism in recent years. Those concerned primarily about the crying needs for justice tend to see it as irrelevant, while those who are after a new cultural self-affirmation can write it off as cramping. And there are always the pessimists who gloomily assert that it is a hopeless quest. They all have evidence to draw on. But far more important than what men have made or not made of this goal is the clear and undeniable will of the one Lord 'that they all may be one: as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee... that the world may believe that thou didst send me' (John 17: 21 NEB).

That is what the whole search for Christian unity is about. That is the promise on which the World Council of Churches has been standing for over twenty-five years and the task which it was created to carry out. Especially through the patient work of the Faith and Order Commission on all the many facets of the present divisions between the churches, we have been trying to overcome the stumbling-blocks and build the bridges, so that all Christians can move into their proper, liberating unity in Jesus Christ.

The essays in this book, reprinted from the April 1974 issue of *The Ecumenical Review*, took their origin in a consultation called by Faith and Order in Salamanca, Spain, in September 1973. Very different in their starting points and in their distinctive interests, they nevertheless point, taken together, to an encouraging wholeness of vision for those who will take the trouble to read with care. I warmly commend them to all who would share, in their own places and by their own creative obedience, in the total quest for true unity and effective witness, under the leading of the Holy Spirit, in our time.

PHILIP POTTER

General Secretary

World Council of Churches

April 1974

DRAWN AND HELD TOGETHER BY THE RECONCILING POWER OF CHRIST

Reflections on the Unity of the Church towards the Fifth Assembly of the WCC

LUKAS VISCHER ¹

The unity of the Church ? What can we possibly say together on this subject today ? After so many years of conversations, negotiations and other efforts, is it possible to say anything that hasn't already been said before ? Does not a painful sense of *déjà vu* inevitably hang over each discussion ? Of course there are plenty of statements to the effect that the visible unity of the Church continues to be the goal of the ecumenical movement. It is even probable that the World Council of Churches will change its Constitution in this direction ². But do these statements represent a real advance ? Are we any nearer to the goal than we were ten years ago ? Many doubt this and even begin to ask themselves whether the goal is really worth all the efforts that have been put into reaching it. What then should the Fifth Assembly say about this question, so central to the ecumenical movement ?

Yet the fact that the theme of unity fails to arouse any immediate hopes and expectations, and is generally speaking not the 'in' thing, is no reason for paying less attention to it. On the contrary, this very situation compels us to the most careful self-scrutiny. Where do we stand ? What steps must we take if progress is to be made in the years ahead ? Certainly one of the reasons for this mood of hopelessness is the lack of sufficient agreement and conviction as to what can and should be done. Progress along the road to unity depends of course ultimately on our spiritual readiness for it. Only when we are driven by the reconciling, uniting power of Christ shall we be drawn together. But on the other hand this drive can only operate effectively if we can see clearly and together what is required of us today. Vague ideas about the desir-

¹ Dr VISCHER, Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches, is Director of the Secretariat of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order. This article, translated from the German by the WCC Language Service, incorporates in a revised form much of the substance of the staff preparatory paper for the Salamanca consultation and of Dr VISCHER's opening address.

² In the new Constitution of the World Council of Churches it is proposed to define the main goal of the Council in the following terms : 'to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe.' (*Constitution, Functions and Purposes* (i), in *Minutes of Central Committee 1972*, Geneva : WCC, 1972, pp. 65 and 220.)

ability of unity get us nowhere. In the long run they induce boredom. We must concentrate our thinking much more vigorously on the concrete problems of achieving unity.

One thing is clear from the outset : the Assembly can do no more than provide a stimulus. The actual initiative for unity has to come from the Church at ground level. It is the member churches and congregations, even individual Christians, who must take the necessary steps. The World Council of Churches can only provide the opportunity for common reflection. The World Council realizes this quite clearly. At its meeting in 1973 the Central Committee of the WCC addressed an explicit appeal to the churches to share in this common self-scrutiny, urging them to 'give fresh thought to the nature of the unity we seek and above all to say how they think this unity should be achieved'.³ The Assembly is to be seen therefore simply as a meeting point for those who are already at their various stages along the way to unity. They should once again concert their efforts so that these converge.

I

The tension between the call to fellowship and the conflicting convictions of the churches

Christ prayed that His disciples might all be one. Unity is therefore in accordance with His will. To go on living in division can only be disobedience. But the reasons for the divisions between the churches are not arbitrary. The churches believe that loyalty to the Gospel obliges them to hold certain convictions. For the sake of Christ they must bear witness to these convictions and live by them. There is an obvious tension here. On the one hand, the churches hear the call to unity. They must do all they can to obey this call and to achieve fellowship with one another. On the other, they hear the call to witness to Christ as He wishes them to witness to Him today. Obedience to this task leaves them no room for any compromise. They must obey this call even if doing so leads to controversies and divisions.

This tension is of fundamental importance for the ecumenical movement. Apart from this tension, the very existence of the World Council of Churches is inexplicable. A fellowship of divided churches ! On the one hand the churches have let themselves be drawn together, knowing that the unity in Christ which they confess in the creed goes beyond the unity they have achieved in their own traditions. *Within* this fellowship,

³ *Minutes and Reports, Twenty-Sixth Meeting* (Geneva : WCC, 1973) p. 88.

however, they have felt themselves compelled also to remain divided, for the time being at least. They are not yet in a position to witness together to Christ; they do not even yet know the form the unity in Christ to which they are called must take. It is significant that when the World Council of Churches was founded it was unable to commit itself to any definite conception of the unity to be achieved. It had, on the contrary, to content itself with leaving the different confessional conceptions as they were, side by side. The fellowship within the World Council of Churches was simply to provide an opportunity for a dynamic interaction between these conceptions.

The tension first became apparent in the ecumenical movement in the encounter between the confessions. But is it confined solely to this encounter? Does it not constantly appear wherever different interpretations of the Gospel come into conflict in the Church? The start of the ecumenical movement among the churches has not prevented new antitheses and conflicts from appearing. As the churches wrestle with the realities of our time, they are faced with fundamental questions and their answers to these questions are so different that their very fellowship is sometimes questioned in the churches. As the churches try to clear up the unresolved differences of the past, therefore, they must at the same time find ways and means of defending unity against the threat of new divisions. The same tension arises. The call to unity is stronger than ever but the question arises whether the fact of standing in fellowship does not obscure the clarity of the necessary witness.

The fact that old and new antitheses exist side by side makes it quite clear that the ecumenical movement is not simply the way from confessional divisions to the manifestation of visible unity. It is rather a cross-section of the Church's constant effort to make real the unity it speaks of in the creed — to make it visible where it has been obscured, to maintain it where it is threatened, to recover it where it has been lost. In a sense the whole history of the Church is an ecumenical movement. Even in the future the Church will never be relieved of this responsibility for unity. To say this is not to reduce the importance of the specific tasks which the modern ecumenical movement has set itself. The existence of different confessional traditions side by side flagrantly obscures unity and we must therefore do everything we can to enable them to recognize each other openly and to bear united witness to Christ. The knowledge that the Church in every age has to struggle for its unity only serves to underline the urgency of this task today.

But when the present ecumenical movement is seen in this wider context, two important consequences follow :

a. *The partners in the movement change*

As the partners themselves, with their convictions and concepts, change, so the problem of unity changes. The fundamental approach remains the same, of course. No matter who the partners are, they must let themselves be drawn into fellowship by Christ. But the way the problem presents itself differs in accordance with the specific identity of the partners. This change is also characteristic of the ecumenical movement. The movement's *data* change with the entry of each new member into the fellowship. A dialogue between Reformation churches has different presuppositions from one which includes the Anglican Communion. The nature of the encounter changes significantly again when the Orthodox are involved.

In recent years the ecumenical movement has expanded in two directions. On the one hand the Roman Catholic Church has become an active partner. This changed the character of the problem far more than was at first realized. Questions which had hardly been broached before now became acute. Many people would undoubtedly have preferred to avoid this new situation and in any case the full effects of the shift in patterns have still to be felt. But the change is inescapable.

The second direction in which the movement has expanded is quite different. The ecumenical movement has become more inclusive because it now embraces movements and groups which belong to none of the historic confessions. Take, for example, the Pentecostal churches, the indigenous African churches, but also the countless groups based on shared experiences or on some common social or political objective, which cut right across the confessions and which, as they discover their own unity, cause divisions in their church.

If the ecumenical movement is to remain true to its task, it must face up to these new dimensions and complications of the problem of unity, even if this means reinvestigating some of the positions reached, or apparently reached, so far. The ecumenical movement is such that the full extent and complexity of the problem of unity becomes clear and accessible only with the passage of time.

b. *The demands of unity change*

No less important is the second consequence. As the historical situation changes, the achievement of unity assumes new perspectives

The ecumenical movement does not take place outside the developments of history but is involved in the changes in the general situation. The achievement of unity cannot be compared to the solving of a jigsaw puzzle, where all the pieces are already to hand and it needs only imagination, time and patience to assemble them into the complete picture. As the churches wrestle with their task, it assumes a new form. The Church in its fragmentation is not a fixed quantity but a living thing. It lives, proclaims the Gospel, and is related to the world around it. It influences that world and is itself shaped by it. The criteria for the establishment of unity have not been laid down in advance. They have to be tested anew in each new situation. What sufficed to maintain unity in the early centuries was no longer sufficient in the fourth century. It is possible to consider the Church of the fourth century as representing a deviation from the fellowship required by the New Testament, but this is not enough to explain the difference. In fact, additional elements were needed if unity was to be maintained ; for example, a greater emphasis on organization. There is a vital difference, after all, between a new movement seeking to preserve its unity and a Church coextensive with the Roman Empire trying to manifest its unity. The same is true of the modern ecumenical movement. The unity needed today is not exactly the same as the unity which many pioneers of the ecumenical movement believed to be essential. For example, in the period since the beginning of the ecumenical movement we have come to realize more and more that mankind shares the destiny of a common history and that this must be taken into account in the life of the Church. In the early days of the ecumenical movement, the Church's centre of gravity was still in the Old World. Although the missionary efforts of recent centuries broadened its horizons, the supremacy of the old established churches remained. But meanwhile the Church's outlook has changed. There is a growing awareness in the churches that they must find a new way of expressing the universality of the Church. There must be an unqualified respect for the individuality of the younger churches. The older churches have to learn to be partners. This process demands a new kind of unity. Other examples could be given. What is quite clear is that the goal itself has not been laid down once and for all. Like the Church itself, this goal is affected by historical changes, new situations and fresh insights.

What bearing have these considerations on the oft-mentioned *malaise* in the ecumenical movement ? Has the tremendous effort which

dominated the first half of the present century come to an end without having achieved the desired results? Have other tasks now come to the fore? Why all these dialogues about unity? Why a special Week of Prayer for Unity? Why this obsession with a unity which no one really wants because no one really needs it? Talk of this kind is obviously specious. The ecumenical movement has not had its day. We have to ask why people speak of a *malaise*. Might it not perhaps be because the ecumenical movement has moved from the stage of being a mere vision into the stage of implementation? Discussions and negotiations have brought us to the point where decisions must be taken. But this makes demands which are not easy to meet. There could also be an even deeper reason for the *malaise*. It could be due to the fact that the churches do not sufficiently realize the changes which have come about and that their thought and action is determined by models of unity which are no longer applicable because they no longer correspond to the realities of today. Perhaps the real name of the *malaise* is intellectual laziness.

The unity of the Church has not become any less essential in the present world situation. It is just as urgent, possibly more urgent than ever. But it is obviously easier to enter into the tension between fellowship and identity in a provisional and non-committal way than to persevere with it right to the end, until the spurious elements have been sifted from the genuine and true *koinonia* is born. To talk of the end of the ecumenical movement today is really to run away from this tension and to abandon the struggle for unity the whole Church must always engage in. Unity is necessary. But if we refuse to accept the struggle within the context of the ecumenical movement, the only alternative is to remain imprisoned in lesser unities. We either retreat into our confessional identities, maintaining and renovating them simply to give protective cover to our longing for identity, or else enlist under the banner of some other movement. Either *my* confession or *my* movement, *my* organization, *my* (spontaneous!) group. The only defence against such further disintegration is to have the courage to persevere in the tension of the ecumenical movement and to fix our hope on the fellowship — however fragile it may still be — which has already emerged in that movement.

Concepts of Unity

At its meeting in Louvain in 1971, the Faith and Order Commission proposed the initiation of a study entitled 'Concepts of Unity and Models of Union'. It did so in the belief that, in view of the considerable changes which have taken place in recent years, a careful study of the different concepts of unity and union might perhaps help us to advance. What can be said about this?

First, a few remarks about concepts of unity. The importance of the concepts of unity adopted by the churches must neither be exaggerated nor played down. Not everything which really constitutes a church's unity is expressed in its concept of unity. Important as the formal concept may be, agreement about it is not in itself enough to end division. Factors not expressed in the concept continue to be divisive in their effect. Unity consists ultimately not in a church's concept of unity but in the fellowship which that church lives. On the other hand, the importance of the various concepts of unity must not be underestimated. For they underlie the spontaneous reactions which differentiate the individual churches in the ecumenical movement. It is these concepts which lead to decisions for or against specific proposals for church union. A decision apparently in conflict with the formal concept of unity can only be taken if there is a convincing demonstration that the contradiction is not of decisive importance.

The differences between the various concepts of unity must not be exaggerated. In many respects there is a consensus. All churches assume, for instance, that unity has already been given in Christ. All agree that unity does not mean uniformity and that it not only permits but positively requires great diversity. In many respects, too, the various existing concepts overlap. The differences will appear most clearly if we put the question: what visible signs of agreement are necessary before we can speak of unity? The answers here differ widely.

There are those, for example, who will insist, primarily or solely, on *spiritual unity*. For them, unity is the harmony of those who believe in Christ in their hearts and are related to Him in faith. Only God knows who those are. Of course their faith seeks to be expressed in fellowship, and that fellowship will seek visible form. But the forms are secondary and must constantly be recreated. Unity is for them the work of the Spirit, cutting across all confessions.

Then there are those for whom unity is guaranteed by the *living tradition*. In the power of the Holy Spirit, God is constantly recreating the Church in historical continuity with the first disciples. The Church's faith, worship, ministry, witness and so forth stand essentially in that succession. 'Divided Christians can therefore only find their unity as they let themselves be drawn together into this living and lived tradition.' ⁴

A third group of voices sees the *episcopal structure* as of decisive importance. The Church is visibly one when its bishops are in communion with each other. Not for their own sake, as individual persons, still less as the arms of a single bureaucracy, but as the representatives of the churches for which they are severally responsible. Church union, for these, is hardly conceivable until the non-episcopal churches are willing to take episcopacy into their system. But there is a variety of views on the precise form — from the Roman Catholic view of the primacy within the college of bishops to the Anglican readiness to accept several possibilities provided all are clearly episcopal.

Another classic concept sees agreement on the '*Gospel rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered*' as the one necessary presupposition. What is being emphasized here is the sources from which unity can always be renewed: if these are undefiled, then whatever the diversities the Church will be preserved in purity and unity. Finally, there are those who set less store on agreed conceptions of the faith than on *common goals and a common willingness to act together*. This concept gave rise to the slogan 'doctrine divides; service unites', and can be found, in practice, in many local action groups.

The list could easily be extended. Yet these five concepts of unity are enough to illustrate how widely the churches differ in their assumptions. Each of the five is capable of many variations in detail. No church ties itself exclusively to any one of them; each church has its own distinctive concept. All these concepts are brought into the ecumenical encounter. As the churches meet one another, these concepts of unity clash. To a large extent, the degree of fellowship possible between the churches depends on them. But in the encounter they are also called in question. Can they be maintained without modification? Do the churches not have to learn from one another? Must not the ecu-

⁴ From the report of a meeting of Orthodox theologians in Geneva, August 1973. See *Minutes of the Working Committee of Faith and Order 1973*, Geneva: WCC, 1973, pp. 46 f and the article by Professor BRIA, below, pp. 224 ff.

menical movement serve as a crucible where these different concepts can be melted down so that a new and more inclusive concept may emerge? This is the direction in which the ecumenical movement has demonstrably influenced the churches. At least three factors have played a part in this process :

a. *The diversity of the biblical witness*

Does the New Testament really present us with only *one* concept of unity? In recent years it has become increasingly difficult to evade this question. Earlier each church was convinced that its own concept of unity had its roots or could at least find support in the New Testament. They were also agreed that all of them had to submit themselves and their concepts of unity to the judgment of Holy Scripture. They expected that from this wrestling with the Bible the one correct concept of unity would emerge. They soon discovered that the different concepts of unity were reductions out of the total witness of Scripture. They realized that the other churches could also with some justification appeal to the Scriptures. Exaggerated emphasis on particular elements in the structure of the Church needed correction. Particularly illuminating in this connection is the discovery made by the Faith and Order Conference in Lausanne in 1927, where the delegates agreed that not only episcopal but also presbyterian and congregationalist structures could be derived from the New Testament and that therefore all three elements should have their appropriate place in a reunited church. A concept of unity was thus arrived at by the process of addition. But the discussion has moved on since Lausanne. Is it not now seen to be the case that the various writings of the New Testament contain different concepts of unity? Can Paul, Acts, the Gospel of John and the Pastoral Epistles really be brought under a common denominator? Are we not confronted with different types of unity already in the New Testament? If this is true it challenges the very assumptions of the ecumenical discussion. Instead of looking for the one correct concept of unity we have to ask how these different concepts are related to each other. We are still far from having fully explored what this new approach to the question implies for the ecumenical movement.

b. *The different concepts of unity are historically conditioned*

The tremendous historical changes we have experienced in recent decades have made it easier to recognize that the different concepts of

unity are themselves historically conditioned. Every elaborated concept is an attempt to describe the unity confessed in the creed, of course. It has been undertaken with an ultimate sense of responsibility to the Church's Lord. It cannot therefore simply be abandoned. Yet each attempt was made at a particular moment in history, and the circumstances and experiences of that moment have helped to determine the emphases characteristic of the concept in question. The importance of the episcopal structure for the unity of the Church, for example, was recognized in the controversy with gnosticism. It was in the developing imperial Church that the role of councils in the service of unity was seen to be important. In the succeeding centuries it was repeatedly modified to meet changing circumstances. We cannot grasp the true significance of the concept adopted in the Augsburg Confession (c. 7) unless we remember the breach in the outward continuity of the tradition which the Reformers had lived through. The various concepts are historically dated. Does this not mean that each generation must discover the concept of unity which is appropriate for its own times? Does it not also mean that we shall never arrive at the concept which must guide all the churches simply by adding all their concepts of unity together, but rather by finding a common response to the needs of the time?

c. *The importance of the bonds not referred to in the official concepts*

Another challenge to the validity of the concepts of unity is the growing conviction of the churches that there are other bonds which in fact hold the Church together. Psychological and sociological studies have demonstrated that other factors besides the concepts of unity play an important role. A shared history, shared experiences, a common spirituality, common interests, and so on, are of great importance in this sense. These factors can unite churches in positive as well as in negative fashion. In combination they can create a common ground on which real communication is possible, a communication which touches the deepest springs of feeling. At the same time, they can serve to obstruct the achievement of unity; they can imprison a church in its own identity, making it impossible for it to find the way to renewal. These factors have their own dynamic, one which is largely independent of the formal concepts of unity and their theoretical bases and demands. Only when these often still not consciously recognized bonds are taken into account can the way be opened up to fellowship.

III

Models of union

By 'concepts of unity' is thus meant the understanding of unity which each church brings with it into the ecumenical movement. But how can churches with different concepts hope to achieve unity? Has the encounter between the churches in the ecumenical movement brought to light any general solutions? In other words, are there any models of union? Here are a few:

One general type consists of *interconfessional movements*, ranging from the Evangelical Alliance to Christian socialism, from the Taizé brotherhood to the Sjaloom movement. Here, Christians from different churches — individually or in groups — come together to pursue a common goal in obedience to Christ. The emphasis is not on the union of the divided churches as such but an effective unity in witness, service, fellowship for the sake of the goal. This unity has to be manifested in ever new ways as new goals are perceived in each new situation. Another consists of *federations or councils of churches*, in which divided churches as such agree to cooperate in certain tasks. The fellowship that results may be more or less binding, more or less effective in engaging the life of the churches. In some cases the extent of mutual commitment is such that the distinct identities of the separate churches begin to take second place. But the special feature of this type is that the member churches retain their independent doctrines and practices and are always in principle at liberty to decide how far they will go along with each other.

Much closer is that unity which is achieved when two churches accord each other *full mutual recognition*: the Anglican Communion and the Old Catholic Church, for example, or the proposed church fellowship between Lutheran and Reformed Churches in Europe. Here the partners view one another unreservedly as the Church of Jesus Christ, can share the eucharist together, can accept each other's ministers, and so forth. The requirements laid down for recognition will vary in each church. Yet change in the historical forms of the churches involved is not in principle involved. It is, however, in the model of *organic union*. Here divided churches come together to form a new fellowship with its own, new identity. This normally involves agreement on a new confession of faith, on sacraments and ministry, on an organizational structure by which they can act as a single body. A new name is a potent symbol. The inherited experiences of the divided churches

are shared as they begin in earnest to live a common tradition. This is the model that has underlain most union negotiations, however different the precise issues in each case⁵. The goal is clearly the achievement of *one* united church.

The list of possible models could be extended. But these four do in fact represent the most important, the models of union which have been and still are dominant in the ecumenical movement. The question now arises: how are these models to be evaluated? How far do they do justice to the call to unity which Christ addresses to His disciples today? Can any *one* of them be described as *the* model for the ecumenical movement? We should not be too hasty to answer. While it may not seem difficult to choose between them, we must remember that none of the four models can be accepted as *the* model of union by *all* the partners in the ecumenical dialogue. The various partners prefer different models of union in accordance with their different concepts of unity. This is surely an indication that here too we need more light and must be prepared for new insights. As the churches achieve unity in accordance with this model or that, they will gradually see more clearly the form which the unity of *all* Christians must take.

Organic union remains the first option

The four models differ, in the first place, in the measure of visible unity achieved in each case. Whereas in one case the historic churches continue their separate existence within the new fellowship, organic union seeks a fellowship in which these historic divisions are left behind and it becomes not only possible but also obligatory to cross the barriers in the interests of common witness and service. Does a loose type of fellowship do justice to Christ's prayer for unity? Or is a more complete, mutual interpenetration necessary? The answer is not in doubt. Unity must be established in such a way that every individual Christian knows him or herself to be a member of the one Church. Historical ties must not be permitted to hinder the achievement of common witness. The Church must be able to tackle the tasks confronting it at any given moment with freedom and openness, especially today when fresh tasks present themselves in swift succession. The only model which fits the bill is the model of organic union. The statements of the New Delhi and Uppsala Assemblies point in the same direction. The 'fully committed fellow-

⁵ See the article by G. F. MOEDE, below p. 246.

ship' for which New Delhi pleaded can only be achieved by the organic union of Christians 'in each place'. The catholicity described by the Uppsala Assembly, the catholicity which effectively breaks through the barriers dividing people from each other, presupposes this 'fully committed fellowship'. The other models of union — movement, federation, mutual recognition — cannot achieve this degree of fellowship.

But this is still not the whole story. The reason for the widespread hesitancy over the model of organic union today is not merely that the 'fully committed fellowship' is so difficult to achieve, nor simply an expression of despair in face of a task exceeding the capacities and resources of the churches. Its roots go much deeper. Does organic unity, at least as generally defined today, really provide the kind of unity required? Does it not rather create an institution in which fellowship is the one thing which cannot find spontaneous expression? More than ever these days the Church needs to be capable of bearing controversy and of taking all sorts of new initiatives. Can organic union ensure this? Is not this model of union still too strongly moulded in the image of the confessions as they have existed up to now? Must not union provide a form of unity which allows a much greater degree of flexibility? It is still essential that the churches should travel far enough along the road to unity to make it possible to speak of genuine reconciliation and union. But this makes it all the more important to give deeper thought to just what we mean by organic union.

Unity at different levels

When we talk of a model of union, we usually fail to distinguish sufficiently between the different levels of church life. The arguments for and against federation, for example, differ somewhat at the local, the regional and the world level. It is arguable that this model, while inadequate at the local level, is the right one for the world level. Similar considerations also apply to the model of organic union. At each level there will be specific conditions which must be taken into account. Up to now our thinking about union at the world level has not carried us very far. When we speak of organic union we tend automatically to think of union at the national level. But the situation has begun to change in recent years. The many bilateral conversations at the world level force us to ask how the churches can form a universal fellowship. It is obvious from this that we are dealing here with a quite separate question. The tension between bilateral conversations and union nego-

tiations is not primarily a tension between two different general models but between two different levels. Our expectations in discussions at the world level cannot be the same as those at other levels. Most churches have no clear concept of universal unity. When they encounter other churches, therefore, there are no ready-made concepts for them to draw on. These concepts have still to be worked out. Once this is done, our thinking about models of union is considerably broadened. It is no longer a matter of weighing up the pros and cons of this or that model in general, but of working out precise models for union at each different level.

Unity in different regions

An even more pertinent question is whether the same model should be the basis of the realization of union in every continent and in every country. Do all united churches need to have united in the same way? Or is it arguable that different models of union can be appropriate in different situations? May it not be that different models are required in continents where the churches have a long history behind them and in those where their history has been shorter? The explicit cancellation of earlier condemnations may be more important in the former situation than in the latter. A different form of unity is needed for a number of widely scattered, small congregations than for a church whose congregations are in daily contact with each other. A small minority in a country whose inhabitants are mostly adherents of some other religion needs structures different from those of a church which embraces most of the population and which consequently has a variety of cultural and social responsibilities. Ethnic and linguistic differences can sometimes be surmounted by integration within a single organization, but sometimes also by separate organizations. We cannot exclude the possibility that the way to unity in different areas may involve different models of union.

IV

The achievement of unity

It has already become clear that union is not achieved simply by reaching agreement at the level of concepts but is, on the contrary, a complex process taking place simultaneously at different levels. We need, therefore, to give some consideration to the ideal conditions for

the achievement of unity. What are the factors we must watch out for? In what way can the whole ecumenical movement best be promoted by specific, limited projects of union?

An active consensus

Efforts to achieve a consensus are part and parcel of every attempt to unite divided churches. It is essential that the churches be in a position to state what unites them. What they have in common must be brought into the open. In the long run, the fellowship will endure only if it shares certain elements of verbal expression. Communication and agreement are not really possible unless this is the case. If this common ground is not expressed in a common confession of faith, it must be expressed in other ways. In any case it is essential to try to reach an agreement which makes fellowship possible. The importance of conscientious work on a consensus, and a verbal consensus at that, must not be underestimated.

It is however important here to consider precisely what the consensus is about. The natural tendency is to aim at agreement on the issues which have divided the churches in the past. Once the arguments repeatedly used to justify division have been disposed of, it is said, surely unity must follow. Now this work is undoubtedly necessary. A conscious act of reconciliation is necessary in order to overcome differences which in the course of time have acquired credal status and have become, given the inherent power of creeds, obstacles to unity. But this act is not in itself enough for unity to be established. In one sense a consensus about the inherited divisive questions between the churches is a 'negative consensus'. It shows that the differences of the past are no longer a valid ground for division. It gives the green light for union and makes it possible to go forward with a good conscience. But it does not in itself provide the common basis on which we can build the fellowship required today. Time has moved on since the moment of separation. There is no exact correspondence between the causes of separation and the conditions of union. Other questions have meanwhile come to the fore. The consensus must therefore be concerned with what the Church needs today for its fellowship.

This does not mean that a positive consensus must necessarily take the form of a detailed confession of faith. Provided it is related to the circumstances of the present time, it can consist simply of a few fundamental statements. Indeed today it is perhaps more important than ever

to understand any consensus not as something formulated for all time but as something which the Church has constantly to try to reformulate. What we need for unity is not so much a consensus already achieved but rather the capacity to achieve consensus again and again in constantly new ways.

True identity

Union in one Church presupposes a willingness on the part of the individual churches to allow their historical identities to be challenged, a readiness to set them in the wider context of a new and more inclusive identity. But this step is fraught with serious difficulties. It is essential, therefore, that churches which really wish to participate in the ecumenical movement should prepare themselves for these difficulties in good time. If this is not done, unexpected obstacles can easily appear on the very threshold of unity. The reason why a church finds this step so difficult is because it seems to involve a breach with the past and therefore with itself. This seems at first sight a demand which is intellectually and emotionally impossible. How can I cease to be myself? A church can only enter into the new unity if it does not have to break the link with its own past. So great is this difficulty that it can sap the churches' commitment. They participate in the ecumenical movement hoping always that this ultimate consequence will be spared them. They do not undertake their ecumenical activities with any expectation that a new and more inclusive historical identity will be given them in their fellowship with other churches. On the contrary, they use these activities in order to reinforce their old identity in new ways. They replace the church's confessional image with an 'ecumenical' image. But then the ecumenical efforts of the churches cannot really make any advance. They amount to no more than a ceaseless — more or less skilful — dance around the given identities of the churches.

Our preparation for unity must therefore include reflection about true identity. The churches must be so permeated by the prayer for unity that the surrender and rediscovery of this true identity becomes part of the very rhythm of their life. The difficulty is of a general nature. But identity is expressed more intensely at certain points than at others and discussion of the surrender or continuity of identity will therefore concentrate on these 'symbols' of identity. Certain doctrinal formulae, liturgical forms or organic structures can have symbolic significance of this kind. One very important test is the surrender of the name. Union

plans have come to grief at this hurdle. On the one hand, the name is the sign of identity. It must therefore be preserved. On the other hand, the name is a reminder that the Church was called into existence by God's action. But because God acts He is the true guardian of genuine continuity. The new name can thus be the sign that in the last analysis there is no real breach in continuity.

Need for planning

In entering into negotiations, it is essential that the partners should undertake a serious examination of themselves and of their situation. Who are we? What is our situation? Where do we want to get to? Where can we get to under present circumstances? A certain naive enthusiasm marks many negotiations. It is hoped that as progress is made concrete solutions will appear. In many respects this is a proper approach. The road to unity is a journey into the unknown. Only when the first steps have been taken will the next stage become clear. The ecumenical movement is not inaptly likened to the journey of Abraham. But this does not mean that analysis and planning are improper. Many of the problems can be foreseen; it is always to some extent possible to determine which objectives are realistic and which are not. Many obstacles can be much more easily dealt with if we are fully aware of them.

Planning must also include consideration of the timetable of decisions to be made. The will to make decisions can easily be sapped if negotiations are allowed to drag on without any decisions being made. A certain indifference can easily set in if negotiations are opened in a blaze of publicity but then disappear from view. Negotiations between churches must begin with a sober assessment of what progress is possible. If expectations are pitched too high, disappointments are almost inevitable. Decisions must succeed each other in a regular rhythm.

Union negotiations must also be planned so as to ensure that they are not isolated from the rest of the church's life. While negotiations are in progress, the negotiating churches must move more or less in the same direction. They should study similar themes and consult together in the matter of public pronouncements. Those conducting negotiations should not have contacts exclusively in the specific field of church unity but must cultivate regular exchanges on all questions touching the life of the church. When the moment of decision is reached, fellowship between the churches concerned must already be deep enough for the

decisive step not to appear too great. If negotiations are conducted without such preparation, the plan for union will either be rejected or, even if accepted, will have no real impact on the life of the churches.

The decision for union must be a decision taken by the church. It cannot be taken by a handful of individuals but only by the whole church. At the appropriate time, therefore, the congregations must have the opportunity of considering the proposed plan of union. This is essential for the real backing of the churches as a whole. This does not mean that negotiations have to be conducted from the beginning in continuous consultation with the congregations. It is possible to overburden congregations with questions. Many questions can be discussed and settled in relatively small groups. Above all, it must first be established whether union is possible at all and if so in what ways. Only if union can be proposed as a practical possibility is it right to involve the congregations, always assuming of course that the ecumenical idea is not something quite novel to them.

Is the effort involved justified? Are the benefits of union commensurate with the energy expended in achieving it? It is important not to ignore this question in the planning stage. Controversy over a plan of union can reduce the participant churches to a state of exhaustion. Whether they then accept or reject the plan, the gain is in either case questionable. If a plan of union seems likely to have this outcome it should be abandoned, at least for the time being. The participant churches are being asked too much and the time is not yet ripe for union. Union must be allowed to happen in such a way that the result is a fellowship which is spiritually free and able to engage in further encounters in the ecumenical movement. As a rule, of course, planning for unity is over-cautious rather than over-bold. We tend to underestimate the readiness of the churches to advance towards unity. The plans proposed are often too cautious. Negotiations often fail because too little is asked of the churches. Being realistic does not necessarily mean being modest in what we ask; it sometimes means being bold in our expectations of the future.

Need for a common strategy

The more the ecumenical movement advances the more pressing becomes the problem of coordinating the various efforts into a coherent whole. The situation has become a good deal more complex in this respect in recent years. The list of negotiations has lengthened. A number of bilateral conversations have led to important agreements.

Negotiations continue at the national level. Even if they are not all destined to succeed, several further unions can be expected and the number of united churches has already grown to such proportions that the question of their mutual relationship is beginning to be raised. How are all these efforts to be concerted? In the view of some, no special consideration and effort is needed here. Indeed, it might be even dangerous to tamper with the spontaneity of the ecumenical movement. Left to develop freely, it is argued, this will lead in due time to the goal appointed and willed by God. True; but that does not settle the matter. Does not our obedience in the ecumenical movement include a refusal to dissipate our energies in unplanned activity? In all our efforts as churches must there not be a steady concentration on the goal of the ecumenical movement as a whole? For instance:

a. Churches engaged in a particular conversation or set of negotiations should ask themselves how this particular project fits into the ecumenical movement as a whole. The end of this particular dialogue does not mean the completion of the ecumenical task. Further steps will be required. Strictly speaking, union negotiations cannot result in a united church but only in a church engaged in uniting. The church concerned has to ask itself therefore whether this particular project on which it is now engaged promotes or hinders the total ecumenical process. A union can isolate a church in the ecumenical movement. The united church must be so fashioned that it is able to take further pioneering steps.

b. One essential element in realistic planning is the setting of priorities by the churches. Many churches are engaged in several sets of conversations simultaneously. Their various commitments can make it impossible to reach any decisions. If, for example, the Lutheran Churches in Europe establish church fellowship with the Reformed Churches, will this endanger their relations with the Roman Catholic Church? Or if the Orthodox Churches achieve union with the Oriental (Non-Chalcedonian) Orthodox Churches, will this merely deepen the gulf between them and the West? Yet certain commitments must be given priority over others. As a general rule, ought not priority be given to the cultivation of negotiations which offer the surest prospect of concrete results?

c. The fact that a church is related to different partners at different levels may complicate the ecumenical situation. Progress at one level

may represent a threat to progress at another. Is it not essential, therefore, that the conversations at the various levels should correspond? For example, the Anglican Communion is involved in many union negotiations at the national level. Its partners here are Protestant churches, mainly Methodist and Presbyterian. Yet at the world level, the Anglican Communion is also engaged in conversations with the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Lutheran churches, precisely the ones with which it is not in fact contemplating union at the national level. Would it not be helpful, precisely for the negotiations at national level, if conversations were to be held at world level also between the Anglican Communion and the World Methodist Council?

Illustrations could be multiplied. It seems vital that the churches should become much more aware of their place within the ecumenical movement as a whole. The first period of the ecumenical movement is over. The churches are already in close relationship with each other. The thoughts about unity to which they were led at the beginning of the ecumenical movement are no longer adequate. The churches must wrestle with the questions which spring from the fellowship which they already in fact enjoy.

V

The common goal

Can anything be said about the unity which the churches in the ecumenical movement have to achieve today? A complete answer is still beyond our reach, of course. Most churches are so deeply set in their divisions that they are unable even to agree on the goal. But is it not at least possible to indicate its main outlines? Even a description amounting to no more than a rough sketch could help the movement forward.

The churches united in the ecumenical movement have often tried to agree on a definition of unity. The declaration of the New Delhi Assembly is perhaps the best known attempt. In this the emphasis is on the unity which must be achieved in each locality and a list is given of the characteristics of the one 'fully committed fellowship'⁶.

The Fourth Assembly at Uppsala further developed certain aspects of this description⁷. It tried to define more precisely the unity we seek by making use of the concept of catholicity. We speak in the creed of

⁶ See *The New Delhi Report*, London : SCM Press, and New York : Harper and Row, 1961, pp. 116 ff.

⁷ See *The Uppsala '68 Report*, Geneva : WCC, 1968, pp. 11 ff.

the 'one catholic' Church, and the Church can therefore only be one if at the same time it is catholic. The goal of unity will therefore become clearer when the churches succeed in reaching a common understanding of the catholicity of the Church. The Uppsala Assembly emphasized that the Church is catholic when it is one with Christ *and* by its being and its life witnesses to the reconciliation of the whole world accomplished by Christ. Grounded in Christ and directed to the whole of mankind ! To be catholic, therefore, the Church must live in the fullness of truth and love and, at the same time, continually be advancing into ever new areas of human life. Since God's love embraces all people, the Church must become the sign which makes this love credible to all people. At the same time, the Church must become visible to mankind as *one* fellowship united in God's love — His Body, His Bride, His Temple — and in a constantly changing form do justice to the infinite variety of situations. It must break down the barriers which divide people from one another. It must not merely preach freedom to the oppressed and the despised, to those who are of no value in the world's sight, but it must also offer them its fellowship. It must challenge the power of the powerful without abandoning the powerful themselves. It must prove itself to be the leaven of reconciliation wherever people confront one another in irreconcilable opposition. It is catholic when it is able to adapt itself to all these tasks as a sign of God's love.

Much more might be said concerning the discussion since the Fourth Assembly. Two points deserve special attention.

a. *The Church as 'sign'*

When we speak, as Uppsala did,⁸ of the Church as a 'sign' which reflects the love of God, what does this imply for unity ? It implies, firstly, that unity does not consist in outward structures but is a quality to be displayed by the Church in each given situation. The Church can only truly be known to be one when it is this sign. Above all, this concept of the Church as sign makes it clear that unity is never established once and for all. It is not so much a state, but rather the constantly new outcome of a movement initiated by Jesus Christ. By His coming He has opened up a new possibility of fellowship among human beings. Every unity which has ever been or ever will be achieved in His name is rooted in Him and anticipated in Him. But what was once given in Him has to be unfolded and striven for and achieved in history.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

God's revelation in Christ is — in the literal sense of the word — the fundamental mystery. It is *the* sacrament. Christ's dealing with His disciples and with the early Christian community shows us what this fellowship is which He has made possible. Anyone who has really come into contact with Him knows his own lost condition. 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man !' Still more, however, he knows the love which is stronger than all his lostness, the power of the Spirit which gives his life a future. Unity is the result of this twofold experience.

In the New Testament we are given an account of how the fellowship was made a reality in the earliest period. The New Testament provides no systematic doctrine of the unity of the Church ; what it offers us is a series of glimpses into different stages in the history of the fellowship ; this history is marked by a profound tension, the tension between the vision of fellowship born of the encounter with Christ and the actual life of the Christian communities. The story of Pentecost illustrates this. In a visionary experience, the disciples see what the fellowship is which Christ calls into being ; a charismatic fellowship in which each member has received the gift of the Spirit. The separation into nations, languages, generations is overcome. All live under the activity of the Holy Spirit and their differences become complementary gifts. But this vision now had to be tested amid the tensions of history itself ; indeed we are driven to recognize that only as these tensions were wrestled with could the meaning of the fellowship created by Christ really become clear. Did it mean fellowship with the Samaritans ? Did it also include the Gentiles ? It is quite clear from the New Testament that the answers to these questions were far from obvious to the infant church, and although in the end the vision proved viable, the history recounted in the New Testament is certainly filled with mistakes, compromises, rivalries, conflicts between leaders and so on. Again and again unity had to be striven for.

Does not this struggle continue throughout the centuries in ever changing forms ? It is not so much a case of maintaining a unity established once and for all but rather of the Church finding itself set within the continuation of that same movement which appeared in paradigmatic form in these first years. Just as the Church then was a mysterious sign for Christ and an instrument of His Gospel amid the tensions of history, so must it also be now in the very different circumstances of today. God has promised the Church that it can always become such a sign and instrument again and again. The Church must therefore live

and struggle in the constant expectancy that this promise can be fulfilled anew.

b. *Conciliar fellowship of churches*

Discussions on the unity of the Church since the Fourth Assembly have above all brought into the forefront of discussion the concepts of conciliarity and conciliar fellowship. Is it possible perhaps to describe the one Church we seek to achieve as a fellowship which is able to answer and solve the problems which face it by means of genuinely conciliar consultation?

Even before the Fourth Assembly this question was already being discussed in the Faith and Order Commission. In 1966 a commission which included strong Orthodox representation produced a report on 'Councils and the Ecumenical Movement'⁹. The findings of this study were adopted by the Fourth Assembly and they have left their mark on the following recommendations:

'Some real experience of universality is provided by establishing regional and international confessional fellowships. ... The ecumenical movement helps to enlarge this experience of universality, and its regional councils and its World Council may be regarded as a transitional opportunity for eventually actualizing a truly universal, ecumenical, *conciliar form of common life and witness*.'

'The members of the World Council of Churches, committed to each other, should work for the time when *a genuinely universal council* may once more speak for all Christians, and lead the way into the future.'¹⁰

How are these two statements to be interpreted? In which direction can they be further developed? A few suggestions may clarify this¹¹.

(i) Insufficient care and precision in the use of terms often makes the discussion more difficult, especially when it is conducted in English. The term 'conciliar fellowship' refers to the conciliar fellowship which existed in the early centuries, rather than to the councils existing today at local, regional and world levels. Conciliar fellowship is a much closer association than the somewhat loose fellowship established in ecumenical structures so far. Conciliar fellowship presupposes complete mutual

⁹ Geneva: WCC, 1968.

¹⁰ *The Uppsala '68 Report*, op. cit., p. 17.

¹¹ See also the recent, thorough Study by an interconfessional group in the German Federal Republic, 'Conciliarity and Council': original in *Ökumenische Rundschau*, 1974, English translation in *Study Encounter*, Vol. X No. 2, 1974, SE/57.

recognition. It is unity. Today's councils of churches are associations which make it possible for still divided churches to seek unity. They are not *concilia* but *consilia*; not conciliar but pre-conciliar.

(ii) The distinction which the Fourth Assembly makes between conciliar fellowship and a universal council is significant. The Church does not become conciliar only when it holds a universal council. On the contrary it is conciliar when it constantly lives in conciliar relationships at all levels. A universal council is an exceptional event which cannot be counted on in advance. It meets when historical circumstances require it. It is a gift of the Spirit. But it can only become an event when the Church is capable of receiving the gift, i.e. when the Church lives in genuine conciliar fellowship. The goal of the ecumenical movement, therefore, is not primarily the calling of a universal council but the achievement of conciliar fellowship.

(iii) Conciliar fellowship is fellowship in the truth of the Gospel. This truth is the basis of the Church's life; only if it remains in this truth is the Church the Church. But it can preserve this truth only by exposing itself to serious discussion. Conciliar fellowship means that not only the individual members but also the local communities in each place realize their mutual responsibility. They are not free to ignore one another. The conciliar fellowship requires them to answer to one another for themselves and their understanding of the Gospel. This mutual accountability is especially important in a period in which situations change rapidly and new problems are constantly arising. It is no accident that the practice of conciliar relationships has been especially intensive in periods of upheaval in church history.

(iv) Because what is sought in conciliar relationships is a common apprehension of the truth, their goal is the unity of the Church. They will not always be able to achieve this goal, not simply because we are insufficiently prepared for it but for the deeper reason that our commitment to the Gospel requires us to test the spirits and may on occasion lead us into division. But the conciliar fellowship will always be characterized by the will to unity. It seeks to maintain unity and to restore it where it is in danger or has already disintegrated. It will face up to tensions which have arisen; it will also seek to deal with them by conciliar methods even when they are still not fully realized and have not yet crystallized into rival positions, especially if the tension cannot be

openly expressed because of the the way power is distributed. The conciliar fellowship must give priority to those who are otherwise condemned to silence in the world.

(v) What is the connection between conciliar fellowship and organic unity? It is often assumed that there is a contradiction between these two concepts. But full mutual commitment is just as much a condition of conciliar fellowship as it is of organic unity. The difference is that unity is thought of not so much as a static state but rather as a task which all concerned must constantly be trying to fulfil. The task can only be carried out if the fellowship can start from the common ground which has been given to it. It must be in a position to appeal to this common ground, especially when unity is in danger. Conciliar fellowship must therefore be, above all, eucharistic fellowship; it can never accept the fragmentation of the common celebration of the eucharist.

(vi) Conciliar fellowship is also, therefore, a most suitable description of the one Church we are seeking to achieve, because it includes a dynamic concept of diversity in the Church. Unity does not exclude diversity. On the contrary, it is essential that the Gospel should find expression in different cultures and situations. But this essential diversity is only legitimate when these different expressions of the Gospel continue to be mutually related in common responsibility for the Gospel. Unity is reconciled diversity or diversity on the way to reconciliation. The same applies to the different levels of church life. Conciliar fellowship can only endure if it is realized simultaneously at all levels. To describe the goal of the ecumenical movement in this way means that the struggle for unity is not restricted to one level only but keeps in view all levels at one and the same time.

(vii) Surely, then, it makes sense for the still divided churches to work towards this goal. They already enjoy a measure of fellowship. What needs to be done now is to fill this preconciliar fellowship with conciliar content, step by step, each church individually and all the churches together. They must already anticipate here and now that conciliar fellowship which they seek. Even though they have not yet overcome their divisions, they must bear the witness required of them. The barriers that still hold them back must be broken down. The churches must go out beyond these barriers so that in the end the day of full fellowship between them can dawn.

WHAT SORT OF UNITY?

The Decree on Ecumenism Ten Years Later — A Roman Catholic View

RENÉ BEAUPÈRE ¹

In the first part of this essay I shall consider five basic themes of the *Decree on Ecumenism* which seem to me still relevant today. In the second I shall develop two lines of thought which, while not lacking a basis in the *Decree on Ecumenism*, have been prompted more by the development of the ecumenical movement since 1964.²

I

1. *Christ is the centre*

a) The centre of ecclesial communion is Christ Himself. In § 20 of the Decree, Christ is described as *fons et centrum communionis ecclesiasticae*. The Roman 'claim' to be a centre is here relativized, or, more precisely, placed in its true, christological context.

The Catholic Church *qua* institution is not an end in itself. It desires to be a sign of Christ. As I see it, this was the significance of Paul VI's symbolic gesture at Epiphany 1964 when he left Rome to go to Jerusalem to meet Patriarch Athenagoras. By this journey the Pope focused attention on this unique historical and geographical centre, this Judaean hill where one springtime the Son of God died and rose from the dead to gather in *Himself* the scattered children of God. The Pope's pilgrimage was an invitation to the whole body of Christ to recentre itself on its Head. At the same time it drew attention to the eschatological dimensions: we look for the Jerusalem which comes *from above*. In other words, there is in Catholicism itself a tension between what has 'already' been given by the Messiah's first coming and what has 'not yet' been given, the final realities of the Kingdom which the Lord will bring with Him when He comes.³

¹ FATHER BEAUPÈRE, o.p., is Director of the Centre Saint-Irénée in Lyons, France. This article, translated from the French by the WCC Language Service, is adapted from an address to the Salamanca Consultation on Concepts of Unity and Models of Union in September 1973. The original will be published in *Istina*.

² I have no intention of supplying a bibliography here but wish simply to indicate that I have drawn upon — and occasionally borrowed some sentences *verbatim* from — a commentary on the *Decree on Ecumenism* which Father Dumont and I published some time ago as an article in a special number of *Istina* (1964 No. 4): 'The Conciliar Decree on Ecumenism'.

³ Cf. R. BEAUPÈRE, 'Le Saint Esprit et le bercail' ('The Holy Spirit and the Sheepfold') in *Lumière et Vie*, No. 67, 1964, pp. 47-64.

b) Have all the ecclesiological consequences of this movement of the Church of Rome away from itself as centre and its recentering on Jesus Christ and the Kingdom been understood? Let me mention just a few of them.

The Catholic Church recognizes and wishes to treat the Orthodox Church as a 'sister Church' (in the fullest sense of the term) with which it is in 'almost complete communion'.⁴

It also acknowledges the ecclesial character of the confessions springing from the Reformation, recognizing that these confessions participate in the mystery of the Church. Yet it declares that these communities suffer from 'defects' (§ 3) and that the mystery of the Church is therefore not fully realized and signified in them. This is why its communion with them is imperfect.⁵ This cannot be understood as a 'judgment' passed on other churches by a Catholic Church which regards itself as the 'central point of reference'. Consider the restraint of the Decree's authors (§ 19): they confess that it is very difficult to describe, let alone define, the non-Catholic churches and ecclesial communities (the Orthodox Church is not under consideration here), and they refrain from any attempt to do so. The Council, or the Roman Church, or even simply members of this church, do not occupy a central and sovereign position from which it would be possible for them to distribute certificates to the other churches. Once again, the only possible reference, the only possible centre, is the Lord Jesus Christ to whom the Roman Church is subjected as are the other churches.

c) Speaking to the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches in August 1973, Mgr Moeller, Secretary of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, dealt briefly with relations between Catholicism and the World Council of Churches. In substance he said he was more than ever convinced of the 'centrality' of the World Council of Churches within the ecumenical movement. He added that the

⁴ See especially *Tomos Agapes, Vatican-Phanar 1958-1970*, Rome-Istanbul, 1971; and more recent declarations by Paul VI.

⁵ Decree on Ecumenism, § 3 *Hi enim qui in Christo credunt et baptismum rite receperunt, in quadam cum Ecclesia catholica communione, etsi non perfecta, constituuntur* ('for men who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are brought into a certain, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church'). The Declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae* improves on this text by making it refer more directly to the ecclesial communities (and not simply to the baptized) and by suppressing the *quadam* ('a certain') which weakens its force: ... *in Ecclesiis vel communitatibus ecclesialibus: quae imperfecta communione cum Ecclesia catholica conjunguntur* ('in churches or ecclesial communities which are joined together with the Catholic Church in imperfect communion').

Catholic Church, while attaching great importance to bilateral conversations between churches, realized that these bilateral talks could be no substitute for the multilateral dialogue taking place within the World Council itself. He also emphasized that the ecumenical movement is indivisible and that the World Council of Churches is the place best suited to express this indivisibility.

Understood in this sense, Geneva does indeed constitute a 'centre of initiative' whose purpose is not to 'centralize' ecumenical efforts by making them converge upon itself but to coordinate these efforts. Acting in this way it makes no claim to 'judge' these ecumenical efforts, still less the churches or groups which sponsor them, but tries to ensure a creative interaction between them.

2. *A dialogue between equals*

a) The ecumenical dialogue ought to be conducted on a footing of equality (*par cum pari* § 9). This equality is all the more indispensable where the partners in dialogue are, on the face of it, of unequal weight or where their situation is not purely and simply reciprocal.

b) A distinction must be made between the psychological and practical level and the theological or, rather, ecclesiological level. The World Council has always made it quite clear that its intention is to respect the ecclesiological convictions of its member churches and of other churches with which it cooperates. Two statements, in particular, are so well known as hardly to need citation. The Toronto Declaration of the Central Committee in 1950 stated that 'membership of the World Council does not imply the acceptance of a specific doctrine concerning the nature of Church unity . . . There are room and space in the World Council for the ecclesiology of every church which is ready to participate in the ecumenical conversation.' The Odessa Declaration of the Executive Committee in 1964 declared: 'It is essential that the right of every Church to hold and develop its own particular attitude to the problem of church unity should be fully recognized and respected.'

These declarations are important because in the field of ecclesiology there is no 'equality' between the Catholic Church (or the Orthodox Church) and the Churches of the Reformation. What we have rather is asymmetry and an absence of reciprocity. In an article discussing the Roman Catholic Declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (of June 1973) and

the Encyclical of the Orthodox Church in America (of March 1973) on the subject of ecumenism, Father Lanne has given ecumenists this friendly warning: 'They must', he said, 'take very seriously and accept — or continue to accept — the fact that the Catholic and the Orthodox Church are churches apart and cannot be treated in the same way as other churches and Christian communities. The distinctive thing about them is in fact their claim to be the Church in its fulness, whatever ecclesial character they are ready to recognize in other churches.' Or again, 'Even though in the ecumenical "game" the Catholic and Orthodox Churches are treated and act in a brotherly spirit as equal partners *par cum pari agentes*, with all the inevitable practical consequences this entails, it must nevertheless be clearly understood that theologically they cannot be treated in the same way as the others.'⁶ One conclusion Lanne draws from this is that it is easier for other churches to be bold in the field of church union than it is for the Orthodox or Catholic traditions.

c) I endorse these comments (though see further under point 4). But to my mind they present Catholicism with an important counter-question. I am myself convinced, and have been for some time, that if this asymmetry in ecclesiology is to be accepted in a brotherly spirit and not to become a source of serious tension, the Catholic Church must have the courage to apply for membership of the World Council of Churches. I am aware of the obstacles.⁷ What Paul VI said in Geneva in June 1969 is still true — there are theological and pastoral difficulties on both sides. Neither in Rome nor in Geneva, however, is there any question of it being impossible, except in the mind of the fainthearted. Until this forward step has been taken humbly and hopefully on both sides, a vital condition for dialogue *par cum pari* will remain unfulfilled. Nor will the problem be solved by increasing the number of 'foot-bridges' in the shape of joint working groups and other forms of organized cooperation. This will, on the contrary, only make it all the more urgent to move judiciously towards a positive solution in order to rescue ourselves from a patchwork situation which is rapidly becoming one of complete deadlock. Catholics will not be able to continue having their ecclesiological 'claims' tolerated much longer unless they commit

⁶ *Irenikon*, Vol. XLVI, 1973, pp. 340-1.

⁷ Cf. the report published in *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. XXIV No. 3, July 1972, pp. 247-288.

themselves to an equal ecumenical partnership, resolutely excluding all thought of retreat. If I speak strongly it is simply because I am convinced that this is true. A human and spiritual factor is involved here which cannot be ignored. I am not dramatizing the situation: the President of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity himself recently wrote that relations between the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches 'have entered a critical stage'.⁸

3. *The end and the means*

a) 'For Catholicism the goal of the ecumenical movement is clear. To formulate this goal I take up and develop comments made to the Secretariat for Unity by representatives of the national ecumenical committees throughout the Catholic Church.'⁹ Unity between all the Christian communions has not been wholly lost but has always to be rediscovered and completed. The end in view cannot be other than unity in the faith, expressed in a variety of forms; communion in one eucharist within an organic body comprising a diversity of organizational patterns. This diversity in unity must be for the sake of Christian witness and service in the world, in order that liberation in Jesus Christ may be proclaimed effectively to mankind. The only possible way of achieving this unity — which in any case will be the Lord's doing — is by a gradual resumption of communion between the churches.

b) While the end in view may be clear, the means of reaching it are not. Taught by the Abbé Couturier we have for many years prayed for unity 'by the ways which the Lord wills'. Frequent repetition of this formula must not be permitted to reduce it to a pious hope devoid of all substance. 'By the ways which the Lord wills' does not mean by the ways we ourselves choose. Indeed it quite clearly implies that we are ignorant of these ways. We know where the Lord is directing us to go, but the roads to it are not signposted. We do not know, we Catholics any more than others, the paths along which the Lord will see fit to direct us.

This must not be taken as an admission of weakness, still less as a disfigurement of our faith. It is, rather, respect for the mystery of God at work in those who believe and among His people, a joyful submission

⁸ 'Œcuménisme 1972', in *Documentation Catholique*, 1973, p. 766.

⁹ Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, *Information Service*, No. 20, April 1973.

to the action of the Holy Spirit. Has it not been clearly revealed to us that 'My ways are not your ways'?

c) This being so, we must organize and carefully prepare the times and spaces of the dialogue between Christians and churches. This is in fact the stage we are now at. It is undoubtedly proper to mark out this time and space with a certain number of provisional buoys, destined in turn to be removed and replaced by new ones, if possible better and clearer ones. It is in the light of this tentative step-by-step advance (for it seems to me that our Lord illuminates our way step by step and depending on how faithful we are to the grace already received) that I view the New Delhi statement on the unity we seek, a statement filled out and corrected at Uppsala (by the reference to both catholicity and conciliarity). Perhaps the Jakarta Assembly will be led to round off this description yet again by adding some new point now missing or by clarifying this or that element.

Although the now rapidly increasing number of bilateral agreements are on a different level, they too can be interpreted in the light of this advancing succession of steps. The basis for this approach can be found, I believe, in the *Decree on Ecumenism* in § 19, where the Council fathers say that the considerations they propose are meant to serve as a stimulus, a 'basis and motivation', for dialogue.

d) I should like to add one further comment on the consensus texts just mentioned. It often happens that they are criticized in a manner which I am inclined to label 'nominalist'. Wearing their denominational spectacles, readers are astonished not to find in these documents the whole body of doctrine professed in their own churches, formulated in the language and pattern they are accustomed to using.¹⁰ These documents can, of course, be compared with the received dogmas of our own traditions but to do so is inevitably to allow their true value to escape us. Really to understand them we must read them from the standpoint of *research, movement, advance*. None of the steps marking out the ecumenical way is final. This applies also to published documents. We should not be surprised, therefore, to find in these documents statements which are somewhat imprecise and ambiguous. This is only to be expected in documents of this kind. It is not that their authors prefer

¹⁰ For a fairly typical example see the long article published by Father C. J. Dumont on the consensus documents published by the Groupe des Dombes, in *Istina*, 1973, pp. 155-229.

dubious compromises or like using imprecise language. The fact is that such documents must not only register increasingly substantial agreements but also respect the differences which remain. The only way their authors can proceed is by successive advances, patiently seeking to extend the area of understanding at the expense of the areas still insufficiently explored.

4. *Ecclesial conversion indispensable*

a). What was said earlier (under 2 b)) about the Catholic 'claim' to a distinctive ecclesiological situation would be intolerable if it were not completed and balanced by the affirmation that this 'claim' cannot in any sense mean that unity must be reconstituted by the 'return' of the non-Catholic communions to the Catholic Church, by their reintegration in the Catholic Church. In fact it is not a matter of looking backwards — to some historical situation or other — but of looking forwards. The reconciled Church lies beyond all existing ecclesial realities, including, of course, the ecclesial reality represented by the Catholic Church. Unity will be reconstituted not by absorption but by the resumption of communion.

For us all, not least for the Catholic Church, this presupposes not only humility but a genuine *metanoia*, a conversion which implies in certain respects a relative loss of identity to the extent that this identity has been marked by various forms of confessional onesidedness and rigidity. The *Decree on Ecumenism* is quite explicit about this. Not only does it call for a 'change of heart' on the part of Christians (§ 7); it also insists that 'Christ summons the Church, as she goes her pilgrim way, to that continual reformation of which she always has need, in so far as she is an institution of men here on earth' (§ 6). The Decree also includes (§ 6) an invitation to make 'correction and due restoration' wherever any 'carelessness has occurred': firstly, *in moribus* (in moral behaviour or teaching); secondly, *in ecclesiastica disciplina* (in the exercise of church government, i.e. in the application of discipline but also in the formulation of the rules governing the life of the Church); and finally, *in doctrinae enuntiandae modo* (in the formulation of doctrine). Although the Decree also declares that renewal in the Church always consists essentially 'in an increase of fidelity to her own calling' (§ 6), it should be noticed that the term 'calling' (*vocatio*) does not imply

any 'canonization' of historical forms but is an invitation constantly to hear afresh God's original call to 'leave one's country' in order to be sent into the world.

b) The dynamic of this permanent reform derives from the emphatic eschatological perspective of the *Decree on Ecumenism*. The Decree repeatedly describes the Catholic Church as on the march, journeying towards the heavenly country 'as she makes her pilgrim way in hope towards her goal, the fatherland above' (§ 2). 'During its pilgrimage on earth, this People ... is growing in Christ ... until it happily arrives at the fulness of eternal glory in the heavenly Jerusalem' (§ 3). 'So that the Church ... may daily be more purified and renewed against the day when Christ will present her to Himself in all her glory, without spot or wrinkle' (§ 4).

c) This march towards the Kingdom implies that the 'marks' of the Church are also capable of ever fuller realization. Unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity are values which are to be progressively unfurled (see especially § 4 and § 5).

d) To facilitate the ecumenical dialogue the Catholic Church would do well to explain more clearly what it means by some of the affirmations to which reference has just been made. How can the Catholic Church affirm an imperfect communion between itself and other Christian communions (cf. 1 b)) and at the same time apparently refuse to admit that all these separated communions still retain some unity? ¹¹ What meaning can attach in that case to the 'common heritage' (§ 4 towards the end)? The different uses of the term 'plenitude' or its equivalents are also perplexing. On the one hand 'it is through Christ's Catholic Church alone, which is the all-embracing means of salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained' (§ 3) and this Church 'has been endowed with all divinely revealed truth and with all means of grace' (§ 4); yet on the other hand it is admitted that other Christian communions are endowed with means of grace and that the Catholic Church itself is on the way to a plenitude which it does not yet live,

¹¹ Cf. *Mysterium Ecclesiae*: a) passage cited above in note 4; b) '*Quare christifidelibus sibi fingere non licet Ecclesiam Christi nihil aliud esse quam summam quamdam divisam quidem, sed adhuc aliquantulum unam — Ecclesiarum et communitatum ecclesialium.*'

to a 'full completion of eternal glory' (§ 3 *ad totam . . . plenitudinem*, note the pleonasm !). In short, it would be very helpful if the Catholic Church would give a fuller, more explicit account of the meaning, extension and content of the 'Church' today.¹²

e) One of the most important elements in the dynamic approach just referred to is found in the last paragraph of the *Decree on Ecumenism*. Here the document envisages further advances on its own position, or rather leaves room for a further updating of its statements in the interests of greater fidelity to its spirit. 'This most sacred Synod urgently desires that the initiatives of the sons of the Catholic Church, joined with those of the separated brethren, go forward without obstructing the ways of divine Providence and without prejudging the future inspiration of the Holy Spirit' (§ 24).

A few lines earlier the Decree does indeed exhort the faithful 'to abstain from any superficiality or imprudent zeal, for these can cause harm to true progress towards unity' (§ 24). But it nevertheless *ardently* hopes that the *initiatives* of Catholics will *go forward* (joined with those of other Christians — be it noted in passing that this exorcizes the spectre of division among the disciples of Christ at the very heart of ecumenical endeavour). The Council fathers stress the need to leave room for divine Providence and to be open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Could there be a more explicit recognition that the Decree is not a terminus but a departure point? Simply to quote it *verbatim* is to risk emptying it of its dynamism and prophetic spirit and thereby betraying it by failing to recognize the advances being made as evidence of the working of the Holy Spirit and by spurning the gifts which the Lord bestows on His Church.

5. *A Church which restates and gives account of its faith before the world*

a) One aspect of the Church's 'conversion' is its statements of the faith. The Decree includes two important affirmations relating to this. Firstly, it makes a distinction between the 'deposit of faith' and the

¹² I do not think the declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae* meets this requirement, because of its static approach. For a more dynamic concept of the Church cf. *inter alia* K. McDonnell, 'The Concept of "Church" in the documents of Vatican II as applied to the Protestant denominations', in *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue*, IV, *Eucharist and Ministry*, 1970; B. Sesboué, 'L'accord eucharistique des Dombes', in *Istina*, 1973, pp. 225-228.

'formulation of doctrine' (§ 6). Secondly, it reminds us that 'there exists an order or "hierarchy" of truths in Catholic teaching, since they vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith' (§ 11).

The Decree itself does not develop either of these points. The Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity has meanwhile commented on the second point, however, on two occasions : firstly, in the second part of the *Ecumenical Directory* (1970, ch. 2 : 5) and again in a document entitled *Reflections and Suggestions Concerning Dialogue* (1970, IV 4 b). Both points were also taken up in *Mysterium Ecclesiae*.¹³

These two affirmations provide a firm foundation for restating the Christian faith and relating it to our times.

b) The attempt to restate the faith seems to me to include two stages. To achieve union it is necessary first of all, whatever some people may say, to establish agreements. These doctrinal agreements, which are sometimes labelled 'negative' but which I would rather describe as necessary preliminaries, are needed in order to remove obstacles and to show that certain historical controversies and conflicts are no longer relevant today, and that advance is therefore possible. Most of the bilateral agreements published in recent years seem to me to fall in this category.

The criticism is often made that these documents are old-fashioned and irrelevant, cutting no ice with people today because of the language used and the approach adopted to the problems. This is not always the case. To cite just one example, all the more impressive in view of the desultory state of ecumenical publishing in France today : the Eucharistic Agreement published by the Groupe des Dombes has enjoyed a very wide circulation which proves that some documents of this kind can arouse the interest of a large Christian public. It is, however, true that such documents cannot take the place of another category of texts which, while not claiming to replace the historic confessions, try to 'give an account of the hope that is in us' in a language and style which our contemporaries can really understand, the kind of document which registers what some call a 'positive' consensus. These joint statements can only be produced by Christians who, while not having yet recovered their full

¹³ The two texts of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity appeared in its *Information Service*, No. 10 (June 1970) and No. 12 (December 1970); *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, §§ 4 and 5.

unity, nevertheless find themselves sufficiently at one with each other to be able to proclaim together their faith, their hope and their love.

Documents belonging to the first of these categories, documents which settle some issue in dispute, do not normally require constant revision, although they can and should, of course, be improved in the light of criticism. But the second type of document should constantly be taken back to the drawing board for adaptation to varied and changing conditions in the world. The first type of document can also serve as a starting point for the drafting of a document of the second category. The excellent eucharistic 'confession of faith' produced by the Groupe des Dombes has already fulfilled this role in one or two instances.

c) These attempts to restate the faith are closely related to attempts to reorganize it. The horizons opened to view by the acceptance of the 'hierarchy of truths' should be particularly fruitful here. So far they have not been explored or exploited enough. All revealed truths must, of course, be believed with the same faith. But they do not all occupy the same place in the mystery of salvation. They are all related more or less intimately and directly to the Christ in whom the Triune God is revealed, i.e. to the foundation of our faith. Some of these truths concern the final goal of the Christian life; others simply the means of attaining that goal. It would be helpful, it seems to me, to give more serious thought to the avenues opened up by the Decree here, without lapsing into the dubious distinction between 'fundamental' and 'secondary' articles of faith. In addition to the avenues already indicated, we should also investigate the difference which obviously exists between the hierarchy of truths established by the theologians and that which governs the lives of ordinary Christians. The two are far from identical. We should also press on more vigorously with the study which has already begun in some quarters on the apparent connection between the hierarchy of truths and the central kernel which some believe to be contained within the Gospel and which provides a key to the interpretation of the Gospel as a whole. These efforts should eventually lead to a reorganization of the Christian faith, both in theory and in practice (i.e. putting it once more in working order so that it makes a real impact on our everyday Christian life). The experiments in interconfessional instruction in the Christian faith (catechesis) which are now being made with, by and on behalf of mixed households (see below under 6) would provide an excellent testing ground for this new ecumenical work.

6. *From comradeship to communion*

At the end of its chapter on the Orthodox Church, the *Decree on Ecumenism* speaks of the Council's 'urgent desire that every effort should henceforth be made towards the gradual (*paulatim*) realization of this goal' (sc. of unity) 'in the various organizations and living activities of the Church' (§ 18).

Full communion is to be achieved gradually, by successive stages. The whole movement which 'gradually' led to the estrangement between the Western world and the Eastern world is to be reversed. Advance will be made by gradually removing obstacles, gradually establishing communion in thought and action. Clearly we are already seriously engaged in this process.

The Decree did not mention an analogous process for relations between Catholicism and the Reformation Churches. In fact, this process seems to be unfolding before us. Between the Christian communions, a sort of connective tissue is gradually being created — a tissue which serves to reknit other tissues and in due course to repair wounds by healing over them. This living tissue consists of all those men and women who devote their time and energy to the cause of unity and constantly seek to create, maintain and deepen fraternal ties. Among them are certain theologians, ecumenists, church leaders, members of local parishes or various interconfessional groups. But the best example and the most striking embodiment of this development is provided by the mixed households, the marriages between people of different churches.

The bond which unites a married couple differs in kind and in depth from that which can exist between members of a dialogue group or action group. For the married couple the union is intended to be complete: it involves the commitment of the whole person and it is 'for keeps', for life.

For these reasons the mixed households are the connective tissue *par excellence* between the Christian communions. They are committed to live ecumenism to the full and to devote themselves to it completely. Their love for one another leads them to practise the golden rule of ecumenism: to do everything together which they can in conscience do together. They are to one another 'those who have been joined together', *conjuncti*, and no longer *fratres sejuncti*, 'separated brethren', the term used in the Decree to designate non-Catholic Christians.

The very unexpectedness of this phenomenon justifies us in stressing its importance. Only a few years ago churchmen (and some couples) regarded mixed marriages simply as a cross to be borne, and for many it is still that. But now, thank God, mixed marriages are becoming a joy and a privilege, a sign of the Risen Lord who casts down the barriers of our divisions. Here and there it is already possible to see the progress which groups formed by a number of mixed households have enabled the communities to which they belong to make — not without difficulties, of course.

Mixed households have long been warned against the temptation to create a 'Third Church', one which would, for example, be neither Catholic nor Protestant. The thoughtful among them understand this danger and have no intention of creating any such 'Third Church'. They are quite clear and firm in their intention to remain in the churches of which they became members by baptism and instruction. But while each partner remains strongly rooted in his or her own communion the couple as such constitutes a new reality, an *ecclesiola* which in practice shares two ecclesial traditions. And, as a rule, the children of such households are enriched by this mingling of traditions.

This new phenomenon (rapidly increasing in some countries at least) admittedly presents problems. But this is no reason for ignoring it or rejecting it. I myself find it impossible to view it other than with profound hope as a genuine gift from God. Clearly there is more here than simple companionship or comradeship, more than fellowship in the ecumenical journey. We approach here the *koinonia*, the communion which the New Testament describes as the fundamental reality of the Church's unity and which reaches a much deeper level than anything which verbal descriptions or definitions of church unity can convey.¹⁴

It is natural therefore that the partners in a 'mixed' marriage should wish to express and reinforce their human and spiritual communion by a life shared together as fully as possible in every respect, not excluding

¹⁴ Cf. the preparatory document by the Faith and Order Secretariat for the Salamanca Consultation: *Concepts of Unity and Models of Union*, p. 5: 'Not that too much importance should be attached to explicit concepts' which a Church may have formed. 'Not everything which really constitutes a Church's unity is expressed in its concept of unity. Fellowship is cemented by many other bonds . . . Ultimately the unity of the Church consists not in the Church's concept but in the fellowship it experiences and practises.' The one Church and its unity are not to be expressed in words only but to be lived. The *Decree on Ecumenism* is therefore right to stress (§19) the positive value of the communion lived for fifteen centuries between Catholics and those who later became Protestants. If we begin from the conceptualization of the conditions of unity we shall only set Protestantism and Catholicism in opposition. In the light of our actual experience today and yesterday, it will be clear that what unites us matters more than what separates us.

the sacramental life : marriage services with ministers of both communions participating, 'ecumenical baptisms', joint religious instruction of children, 'intercommunion'. Where such acts are requested and practised intelligently they are neither the fruit nor the cause of disorderliness but are on the contrary the fabric of the unity which is being recreated. Above all, their joint participation in the sacrament of the eucharist is both *thanksgiving* for the degree of unity already bestowed on them by God and also a *means of grace* enabling them to enter more fully into this unity.

Because of the situation just described, these *ecclesiolae* also eagerly welcome the spiritual reinforcement provided by the growing number of pastoral and doctrinal agreements about baptism, marriage, the eucharist, ministries and so on. These mixed households are undoubtedly one of the most receptive soils for agreements of this kind ; they are the first to recognize the relevance of such agreements and to put them into practice. This makes them all the more astonished at the slowness of the ecclesiastical machinery to reap the harvest of such agreements by ratifying them.

It would be a mistake, however, to imagine that this is only a one-way relationship and to think of the mixed households as content simply to gather up the manna deposited by the theologians. The movement in the reverse direction is just as strong. Reflection is profoundly enriched by the life and experience of these inter-church marriages. These new cells of the Church are also places where theology is created. (Do these groups composed of mixed households constitute a new and original 'model of unity' ?) This would at least be my own personal testimony, on the basis of a long and fascinating first-hand acquaintance with this area.

7. *The encouragement of local churches*

a) From what has just been said we can realize the growing importance of the local churches in ecumenism. It is in fact clear that most of the cells of connective tissue I have just spoken of are local in character. Progress towards unity today is in many respects more in evidence at the local than at the world level. Nor do I think that we can expect any particularly vigorous initiatives at the summit level at present, for these summits are now passing through crises of paralysis and hesitation, even of rejection.

Is not the local church the place where in future we may expect forward-looking and trend-setting steps to be possible even though the

time is not yet ripe for such steps at a wider level? The decision taken in December 1972 by the Bishop of Strasbourg to allow reciprocal eucharistic hospitality in carefully defined special circumstances for the partners in mixed marriages and the positive response which the Reformation churches have made to this initiative are encouraging examples of such freedom.¹⁵ Advances of this kind are likely to become more and more numerous. It seems to be the case, for example, that thanks especially to mixed households we are already beginning to witness a certain *de facto* reconciliation between Catholic and Protestant ministries in certain areas: priests and pastors are mutually recognizing each other's ministry, in great measure, when they cooperate in providing pastoral care for these couples; in some cases this even extends to their occasionally standing in for one another. Is not the way opening up for at least a partial *de jure* reconciliation along the lines suggested by the Groupe des Dombes in its *Eléments d'accord* of September 1972: 'Where serious ecumenical work at the level of ministries and congregations may have issued in a clear basic agreement in matters of faith which would make reconciliation possible without any risk of ambiguity, the reconciliation of ministries could be envisaged in certain cases. This would be possible on the basis of the legitimate initiative and acknowledged discernment of local churches (i.e. on the Catholic side, the dioceses, and on the Protestant side, the ecclesiastical regions. An initiative can only be legitimate if accompanied by respect for the discipline of one's own communion)'.¹⁶

b) The encouragement of the local churches inevitably leads to a greater respect for diversity in unity. The *Decree on Ecumenism* frequently refers to a threefold plurality: 1) at the level of spiritual and liturgical life; 2) at the level of church organization; and 3) at the level of the way in which the Church expresses its faith (§ 4 and for the Orthodox Church §§ 15-17). All that is said here could be summed up in the modern word 'culture'. Since the churches do not exist somewhere outside the world, it is clearly impossible for them not to reflect in their ways of living and thinking something of the human values of the cultures through which they pass in time and space; impossible, that is, if they are not to betray the very principle of incarnation; and to the

¹⁵ *Documentation Catholique*, 1973, p. 161 ff. The Lutheran Church replied in detail in December 1973. The Reformed Church did so more briefly a little later.

¹⁶ Groupe des Dombes, *Pour une reconciliation des ministères, Eléments d'accord entre catholiques et protestants*, Les Presses de Taizé, 1973, p. 32 (No. 48).

extent that this reflection does not bring them into conflict with the Gospel of Jesus Christ or wrap them in an opaque screen which isolates them from real encounter with other local churches.

A great deal has still to be done then if these legitimate diversities are to be given their proper place in the Catholic Church. Yet a real movement has begun to take place in this direction. To mention only one recent example, at the level of the expression of the Church's faith : it is interesting to note that when Paul VI and the Coptic Patriarch Shenouda recently met in Rome, an effort was made to express the common faith in Christ as true God and true man in terms which avoided the 'snares' of the Council of Chalcedon.¹⁷

But the question is really much more complex than the classic approach just mentioned would suggest. The diversity today embraces not only harmonious and fruitful complementarities ; it also includes tensions. 'Tension ... is an essential element of living fellowship.'¹⁸ These tensions can be seen in all the churches : tension between innovators and traditionalists ; between 'verticalists' and 'horizontalists' ; between the champions of witness in the world and the champions of ecclesiastical unity ; between those who stress action and those who stress contemplation ; between the 'right' and the 'left', and so on. Vital forces can neutralize one another and this is precisely what often happens today. The authorities of the churches are more or less helpless spectators at 'drawn games' and this only serves to confirm their paralysis.

But forces in tension can also be harnessed together in such a way that it is possible for them to cooperate. All that is needed — difficult though this may be — is that the partisans of each should agree to engage in dialogue. The structural changes in the World Council of Churches since the Addis Ababa meeting of the Central Committee and efforts being made in many churches show that experiments are being made in this direction. If we ask if these efforts are convincing, the answer is apparently not, to judge by the constant criticisms levelled at them. Should we be discouraged ? Certainly not. But we certainly need to work hard to find a concept of communion capable of holding these tensions together in a creative way. Reconciliation requires neither uniformity nor the elimination of all differences, nor the peace of the graveyard.

¹⁷ *Documentation Catholique*, 1973, pp. 515-516. This is not an isolated case.

¹⁸ *Concepts of Unity and Models of Union*, p. 2.

c) There is another question : how far does acceptance of diversity go ? In theory the answer is simple : it goes as far as Scripture and sound ecclesial tradition allow. In this respect, I fear that certain forms of contemporary exegesis — current in the World Council for several years now, more precisely, since Professor Ernst Käsemann's famous address at the Montreal Faith and Order Conference in 1963 — are at least in part open to question. More exactly, the ecclesiological and ecumenical conclusions which certain people draw from such exegesis are questionable. I readily admit and rejoice that the New Testament contains different facets and various emphases in its descriptions of the Church and its unity, and that because this is so we must not exclude Paul or Acts or John or the Epistles, or prefer this view rather than that. On the other hand, I am profoundly convinced that these different conceptions are not contradictory or wholly disparate but rather complementary, and for my own part I take very seriously the warning given by Dr Visser 't Hooft in his last report as General Secretary at the Geneva Central Committee meeting in 1966. Criticizing the tendency to regard the Bible as 'a collection of miscellaneous christologies and ecclesiologies', Dr Visser 't Hooft expressed concern at this challenge to one of the central convictions of the ecumenical movement and concluded: 'To deny the unity of the Bible is to deny the necessity of the unity of the Church.'

d) It need hardly be added that the recognition within the Catholic Church today of the individuality of each local church ought to be seen as an approach which could lead to the recognition of the Christian confessions in their distinctiveness, to the extent that this diversity is not incompatible with fundamental unity in the faith. But we have still a long road to travel.

e) When we talk of diversity we must at once go on to talk about unity. To promote diversity is only positive and helpful if at the same time we set great store by unity and the ways whereby we can live in unity. If the unity of the whole Church consists in the communion between local churches, we must take care to maintain and strengthen the bonds of this communion. At this point Catholics will point to the responsibility of the Church of Rome presided over by its Bishop who is the successor of Peter. Other Christians opposed to this geographical 'centralism' will prefer to speak only of a sign of unity which could be conciliar in character. What we should all be agreed on is the urgent

need for common reflection on the ministry of unity in the Church, at the universal level as well as at the local level (the two levels moreover being inter-related, for Catholics, through the intermediary of the episcopate). This task is all the more urgent since 'most churches have no clear idea of the nature of unity at the world level'.¹⁹

III

In conclusion

If, as I have just tried to show, we still need to try to describe with increasing precision and completeness the unity towards which we are moving, as the way ahead becomes clearer through our dialogues and studies and also through cultural developments, we need to make just as vigorous an effort to ensure that the already considerable inter-confessional consensus is realized within the life of our churches.

The *Decree on Ecumenism* and similar statements by other churches and by the World Council of Churches are still too little known and above all too little implemented. Many Christians, loyal and responsible Christians, have no idea of what it means to live ecumenism seriously nor, above all, of the radical *metanoia* which ecumenism necessarily involves for both individuals and communities.

Even quite substantial theological agreements apparently produce very few changes in ordinary parish life. Countless opportunities of interconfessional cooperation are missed every day while on the other hand the number of parallel efforts and costly duplications increases.

Certainly unity is not made to order, and joint action — even when it is not confined to the social and political level — is not enough to create unity. Unity is something to be received, but actively not passively. The Holy Spirit presents us with propitious moments, *kairoi* : a few months hence the Catholic Synod will be considering the theme of 'evangelism' ; a year hence the Holy Year will have 'reconciliation' as its theme and the Jakarta Assembly will remind us that 'Jesus Christ Frees and Unites'. Shall we be able to profit by these convergences ? How can we cooperate with one another in these projects, how can we coordinate them and ensure their fruitful interaction ? Shall we prove ourselves capable this time of demonstrating more effectively that it is

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

not just confessional or transconfessional groups of Christians who are Christ's witnesses but that it is *the Church* on the move towards its full unity which is a *sign* or *sacrament* of salvation, liberty and reconciliation in the world ?

This task cannot be the exclusive business of specialist organizations such as the World Council of Churches or the Secretariat for Unity. Handicapped as they are by their institutional and worldwide character (the institutional element is heavy and the worldwide element tends to become abstract), these organizations desperately need the local and particular churches to take up the baton ; they appeal to every member of the People of God to take the initiative.

In this context, the charismatic renewal taking place in all communions today and transcending the confessional barriers is a timely reminder of the dynamic and liberating role of the Holy Spirit and the indispensable place of prayer in the quest for unity. In that direction paths open up to us which are at once familiar yet new. If only we can find the courage to pursue them together wherever they may lead us !

A LATIN AMERICAN ATTEMPT TO LOCATE THE QUESTION OF UNITY

JOSÉ MÍGUEZ BONINO ¹

My first request is that the title of this article — which may or may not coincide with what was asked from me — be taken literally. I am not trying to take the quest for unity as a general problem. In a sense, I am stepping aside from the current ecumenical discussion and restricting myself to a very particular perspective, namely the one provided by my participation in the life and quest of my own church and society. I am very much aware of many inconsistencies and imprecisions. I trust that it may nevertheless convey the attempt to locate the problem of division and unity as it presents itself for those of us who strive to become aware of what it means to be God's people in the time of suffering and hope in which our people are living. It is, in any case, the only contribution I have.

The facts

It is, I think, becoming increasingly clear that we do not have a general, abstract conception of unity which can be articulated in a programme and implemented by means of an adequate strategy and tactics. As the staff paper prior to the Salamanca Consultation put it, the various concepts of unity, while they are 'attempts to describe the unity of the Church confessed in the Creed', are 'themselves historically conditioned'.² The only way to avoid sacralizing such historically conditioned concepts and models (with the resulting frustration or self-deception in the attempt to apply them) is to start from the concrete historical situation, to assess it and clarify it by means of whatever analytical means are at our disposal and to try to understand it theologically in such a way that we may 'offer it a future' (Metz). It is impossible to attempt to do this in this brief paper, but I shall try to indicate some lines in relation to the question of unity in our Latin American situation.

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² *Concepts of unity and models of union*, preparatory document by the Faith and Order secretariat for the Salamanca Consultation (FO/72 : 20), p. 8.

Some facts seem to be evident. One is that the various attempts to initiate conversations towards organic unity undertaken in several places and by several churches during the last twenty years have died or at best continue a shadowy existence among general indifference. Why is it that churches which have a long history of cooperation and friendship, which are not separated by serious doctrinal or structural differences, whose leaders are intimately related among themselves and which would profit institutionally and economically from such a union, do not have the energy and persistence to carry through a plan of union ?

Conciliar and confessional attempts fare no better. Protestant councils or federations of churches were constituted in the twenties and thirties mostly under the impulse of the international missionary conferences and cooperation. They fulfilled some significant functions in mitigating the scandal of missionary competition, creating relations among the young churches and cooperating in the defence of religious liberty. At present, nevertheless, they are mostly purely formal organizations, unable to exercise any significant influence on the life of the churches or to speak any relevant word in society. The attempts to gather confessional families continentally (Lutherans, Reformed, Methodists) prosper only to the extent that they are promoted and financed from international confessional headquarters but have no life and dynamics of their own. When, on the other hand, any such body attempts to wrestle with some of the burning issues in the life of the churches or society, it immediately runs the risk of disruption and has to retreat or (whether formally or not) breaks up.

The interest in the 'ecumenical movement' (whether as the WCC or in world confessional families) is restricted to a few leaders in some churches. It is true that sometimes a particular department, programme or study of the WCC or one of the confessional bodies awakens interest, but it is in relation to some local issue or need and the interest is usually restricted to its potential value in relation to that need. The clear fact that Faith and Order which, as the central locus in the WCC for the question of unity, ought to test a church's commitment to the ecumenical movement, is the least known and interesting for our churches is in itself very telling !

Parallel to this lack of interest and dynamics in the classical models of ecumenical relation, there is the birth and growth of a number of transconfessional groups and movements gathered around certain experiences, programmes and goals or, more properly, drawn together

by a common engagement in a *mission* which is understood as *the* mission of the Church at the present juncture in history. I am not here speaking only of small community groups but also of the significant movements of Roman Catholic clergy, for instance, in most Latin American countries, which sometimes count as many as 10 to 20 % of the total clergy or to the charismatic renewal sweeping across most traditional Protestant churches. In general terms, it is possible to say that the centres around which these movements are gathered are a personal and communal experience of the immediacy of the Spirit or a commitment to the struggle for liberation in socio-political as well as religious terms.

I am aware that these facts are not exclusively Latin American. They are reported from the USA and Europe as well. But the fact that the ecumenical movement had already gathered some strength and momentum in these areas may perhaps conceal for a time — or seriously alter — the radical character of the problem. The questions raised by these facts, particularly by the appearance of these transconfessional movements and groups deserve, I think, much more serious attention than they have yet received from Faith and Order. There are interesting and indispensable sociological insights which ought to be brought to bear on the analysis of these problems. My interest at this point, nevertheless, is directed to the theological and pastoral questions thrown up by this situation.

An ecclesiological crisis

The classical ecclesiological questions : who belongs in the Church ? where is the Church ? what are the limits of the Church ? what are the 'signs' or 'marks' of the Church ? take for us a new and more radical form : *What is the Church for ?* One may say that this question was implicit in the others. If so, it has become explicit and urgent. In certain ways, it has been the ecumenical movement itself which, by relativizing through mutual confrontation the exclusive and self-justifying claims of the different churches, has opened the way for this total and more fundamental question for the reason of the churches' existence. We must look at some consequences of this new way of posing the ecclesiological question, at least as we see it in our continent.

For one thing, the existence of different denominations, however regrettable it may be, is not the great scandal that it once was. Negatively it can be said that the merger of the denominations would not

remove the scandal. Competition among the churches (at least among the major confessions) has mostly been removed. There are no great and public breaches of courtesy and even of fellowship. For the great public, the peaceful coexistence and eventual union of the Christian churches is already taken for granted. What is more difficult to understand is the fact of the growing polarization within each Church and across Christianity as a whole concerning the meaning of the Christian faith, its place and significance in our historical situation, the proper function and stance of the Church.

The point may be illustrated in the experience of a Puerto Rican theology professor thrown in prison for his participation in a protest against US military operations in his country. As he was trying to explain to his (non-Christian) fellow prisoners why he had, as a Christian, taken that action, one of them interrupted : 'Look here, what you say makes no sense because you took this action as Christian obedience, and those who threw you in prison did the same. What is the meaning of a Christian truth that can equally issue in revolutionary action or reactionary repression ?'

This is the real scandal that we face and no distinction of principle and application, of dogmatics and ethics, of corporate neutrality and personal commitment can help us at this point. We are up against conflicting and mutually exclusive understandings of what it means to be a Christian in Latin America in the last third of the twentieth century !

The old discussion between spiritual and organic unity has been left behind : we are well aware of the concrete and historical character of all our so-called 'spiritual' relations. Confessional debate, on the other hand, is in our continent mostly artificial. When either a spiritual conception of unity or confessional differences are invoked for justifying separation it soon turns out that these things really cover other reasons which are related to the basic terms of the debate (it is because Argentine Methodists are left-wing, or Brazilian Presbyterians are conservative, or the Chilean Roman Catholic hierarchy is 'reformist'). Perhaps the only real confessional distinction which still makes sense for Latin Americans is that between Catholics and Protestants, and even this is slowly losing an identifiable content and being replaced by transconfessional distinctions and groupings.

One should say, in fact, that our churches were never confessional except formally or to the extent that they were externally shaped by their national (transplanted communities) or missionary origin. Their con-

fessional consciousness was closely related to — if not totally coincident with — their ‘foreignness’. The more they become a part of their own societies, the more they lose these characteristics which, in any case, had never been really introjected because they had their historical matrix in a different and intransferable situation. We shall have to take up this question later on in another context. At the present point it is enough to realize that the historical ecumenical movement, built on the basis of the existence and significance of different confessional traditions and aiming at the discussion, *rapprochement* and eventual union of them, becomes largely irrelevant for our own problem. It can only be interesting for a few leaders who have assumed the questions and conditions of the ecumenical centres and who, at this point at least, become estranged from the congregations for which such a problematic has no basis in reality.

What we are witnessing in Latin America is a re-grouping of the Christian community. It may or may not mean the break-up of ecclesiastical structures. But in any case it brackets out the confessional question and draws different lines of unity and separation. We can thus speak of ‘families’ of Christians, drawn together by a common answer to the question : what is the Church for ? People and groups in each of these ‘families’ may be organically connected, loosely related, or ignorant of each other. But they speak a common language, they instantly recognize each other and they draw similar lines of separation from other ‘families’.

There is the ‘charismatic’ family for which the Church is the gathering in which they experience a common immediacy of the Spirit, a liberating and transforming experience opening a new realm of existence, ‘the life in the Spirit’ characterized by joy, freedom and love. There is among them the expectancy of the miracle — tongues, healing, prophecy — and the communal signs of solidarity — mutual help, care of the needy — but these are not so much anticipations of the coming Kingdom, much less signs of a reality which has to be extended to the whole society ; rather they are the external *rayonnement* of the spiritual life. The Church is the realm where this life becomes available and consequently the invitation to participate in the fellowship is the most significant form of service. This is what the Church is for !

There is the ‘revolutionary’ family which hears the Gospel as a call for justice which has to be understood in terms of the historical conditions of neocolonial and capitalist oppression and dependence in which

we live. The answer of faith must therefore take the nature of a historical commitment to the struggle for liberation. The Church cannot therefore claim to be the impartial bearer of a neutral Word which hovers above concrete options. It is always *already* committed — whether unwittingly or not ! To make the right commitment, the option which corresponds to God's liberating purpose at a given time is the call and function of the Church. This is certainly not denying that the liberation offered in the Gospel is not exhausted in economic and political terms. But it claims that this deeper dimension can only be historically articulated from within the socio-political struggle. This is what the Church is for !

There is the 'conservative' family, in which the option seems less defined because it claims to be simply the continuing embodiment and depositary of the 'normative' Christian faith, the 'real' Church over against sect, group and movement. Whatever our theological judgment may be, though, from an empirical point of view this is also a distinctive 'family' easily recognizable in its conception of the Church as a socially stable and structured religious body charged with the preservation and transmission of a religious tradition, usually associated with a cultural and frequently also with an ideological heritage and conception. The militant character of this option becomes more evident as that heritage — both in its cultural-ideological and in its religio-theological aspects — is challenged. It defines itself more evidently in its pathological form in groups such as 'Tradition, family and property', or 'Christians concerned', but it is present in every ecclesiastical body and dominant in many.

I have used the nicknames for these families on purpose, and drawn what may look as caricatures of their positions. Nicknames and caricatures are used in polemics and conflicts. Christian literature of the great confessing periods (the early centuries, the times of the Reformation) is full of them. Since the beginning of the 'liberal era' and particularly in the 'ecumenical age' we have carefully avoided nicknames and caricatures and attempted balanced and objective pictures of the 'other' (whom we refused to call 'adversary'). It seemed to be beyond doubt that this was a more Christian attitude. Was that really the case or was it rather that the sociological uniting force of the liberal ideology was much stronger than confessional differences which were originated in answer to conditions definitively left behind, which could therefore be objectively and courteously debated ? It is at least instructive that the new lines of confession and separation are not so irenically debated

but elicit the language and attitudes characteristic of confessing and polemical times. Even the fact that so many people and churches refuse to face the problem as a legitimately confessional one by refusing to grant the dissenting 'families' ecclesiological dignity is a clear indication of our situation. We face a true 'confessional conflict' in this new (and old) sense of a concrete missiological definition. As in other times in history, the quest for the true unity is at the same time the struggle for the true division.

Theological reconsideration

In view of our conflicts, the old question: Where is the Church? becomes again a crucial one. The matter could be easily settled if we could answer that institutional continuity by itself decides where the Church is. But not even a secular judge would settle a case of institutional division solely on the basis of formal continuity. He would have to enquire about the continuation of purposes and functions. Theologically, hardly anybody would claim that a missiologically empty institutional continuity is enough.

Therefore we must move beyond this purely formal level and ask where, in the Christian 'families' in Latin America, do we find a living Word, a word which is no mere transmission and explanation but also proclamation and convocation. Where do we find a community of purpose and of intention (*sympneou*)? The answer is: we find these things only in the transconfessional 'families'. The roots of our problems are this divorce between institutional continuity and the transmission of the heritage on the one hand and a missionary community and a living Word on the other. The problem of unity does not consist for us in bringing the two things together in theory or in theological statements but historically and in reality. The ecumenical question is for us the struggle for a reconstitution of the Church.

In this struggle we discover the decisive weight of the sociological and ideological disguises and the need for unmasking them. The ecumenical movement has known for a long time the existence of 'non-theological factors' and its weight in the question of unity. It has also been said that the expression 'non-theological' is not adequate because these factors belong to the sphere of creation, or are related to God's general activity in history. But it seems that the real significance of these factors is not taken seriously unless we take at least two more steps.

First, we must recognize that they are no mere isolated 'factors', ingredients that we can bracket out in order to survey and understand the situation as it would be without them. These so-called factors are really the socio-historical matrix of our churches and of the ecumenical movement. We are structurally, administratively, liturgically, theologically shaped and institutionalized by and within a certain socio-political-economic system. Secondly, these systems have their own ideologies, their particular ways of understanding and representing reality and of projecting themselves into the future. In other words, there are only historically and ideologically 'datable' churches. There is no possibility of even theoretically abstracting ourselves from them in order to pose a pure model which we could then adapt historically. In our case (but is it only ours ?) we know a 'colonial Church', the Church of the Iberian colonization which began its crisis in the nineteenth century, and 'neo-colonial churches', both Catholic and Protestant, which are now meeting the crisis created by the Latin American effort to overcome its neo-colonial age. The different 'families' are defined by the way in which they place themselves in relation to this effort. There is no possibility of being 'Church' — or of being anything, for that matter — in today's world without making an option concerning the struggle for a post-capitalist, post-neocolonial society. It is only natural that a discussion of unity which refuses to face this fact can excite no interest and inspire no lasting determination.

This line of analysis has to be pursued also concerning the models of unity, and particularly of organic union and of conciliar relation that have become familiar during the last half century. Is it not true that the concepts of negotiation, representation, procedure as we use them bear the imprint of the liberal ideology and the democratic parliamentary system of the age of Anglosaxon domination in which it was born ? Do we not become irritated when Orthodox or (to some extent) Roman Catholics fail to see the 'logical' and 'natural' universal validity of this model ? Could we not understand better much of the struggle in the Roman Catholic Church at the time of the Council and since then, particularly in Europe and North America, as the painful effort to re-institutionalize the Roman Catholic Church in this modern, liberal world ?

It is not my intent to decry or deny the value of the impulse towards unity and the concrete possibilities to achieve it generated by the liberal-parliamentary model. I am only pleading for the recognition of the

historical and ideological matrix of this — and all — concepts and models of unity. This means, on the other hand, that our present situation, the struggle for overcoming the capitalist neocolonial age and the projects for a new society can also become an impulse for unity and provide models for its realization. Confessional families, for instance, have clearly been shaped historically by the colonial and neocolonial structure. The attempt to achieve unity without radically changing its forms of representation, financing, deliberation and operation becomes a clear option for the continuation of the colonial past and has to be resisted and rejected by those churches and groups which are trying to overcome this past. Their opposition may seem unreasonable to those who have not perceived the ideological determination of their own model. Perhaps just as unreasonable as Luther's insistence that, in his time, a legitimate Christian Council to deal with the problem of unity could only be held 'on German territory' !

The same kind of analysis can be applied to the idea of an ecumenical Council which has been debated in ecumenical centres during the last few years. It is interesting that the problems raised — to my knowledge — have been confined almost totally to juridical claims of the world confessions. It has been taken for granted that, if the question of legitimate convocation and representation in terms of the ecclesiastical bodies could be settled, the road would be expedite for 'a genuine Christian Council'. What would happen if we were to take seriously the fact that world relationships are today determined by the pattern of domination/dependence and that the same pattern determines the relation of centre/periphery in the great confessional bodies ? What is the adequate translation of Luther's demand of a council 'on German territory' for this situation ? The determination to attempt such an enterprise, to free the quest for unity from the control of the liberal-democratic ideology, could become a real challenge, an anticipation of the future in an age of social revolution.

In order to break out of the socio-ideological straitjacket and to open the ground for the reconstitution of the Church in the struggle of the 'confessing' families as we have them today, one more theological step is necessary. It is necessary to become aware of the fact that 'church' and 'unity' are not univocal but analogous and critical concepts. It is true that, to a certain extent, we have always recognized that 'church' has that analogous character as applied to a local congregation, a confession and the mystical Body of Christ. But one would have to carry

this recognition one step further by giving up the attempt to erect one of the existing ecclesial entities as 'the full measure' of ecclesial reality against which one could measure the 'ecclesial density' of the rest. This is indeed a bold step : it means to admit the 'struggle for the Church' as the ecclesiology for unity. In other words, towards the end of the twentieth century we are caught in the din and confusion of the struggle for a new organization of human life and society. The churches, sociologically and ideologically shaped, united and divided by previous systems, are also in crisis as new forms of articulation of Christian life, of the Christian message, of theology and organization begin to emerge. Shall we persist in abstracting the quest for unity from this situation and continue to proceed as if the lines of unity and division of a previous time were still relevant? Or shall we dare to take seriously the lines of division and the signs of unity that begin to emerge, not as curious additions to the old and trusted patterns but as the basic reference for our discussion of unity? For us, at least, the search for unity is the struggle for the Church as it strives to take shape in the quest for a new kind of human life in a new society.

Tasks in the struggle

Is it possible to say anything more concrete about the tasks to be undertaken and the possible steps to take in this struggle? This is certainly the critical point. Furthermore, we shall only discover these tasks and directions as we resolutely embark on this course, and we are far from having done so. Nevertheless, a few preliminary points can be ventured as an invitation for a more careful study and a richer imagination.

(a) There is urgent need to clarify both theologically and ideologically what is at stake in the struggle of the different 'families' we have mentioned. To what extent, for instance, are the 'charismatic' and the 'revolutionary' families really antagonistic? Their opposition is not infrequently overcome in actual practice. But we need to account also theoretically both for their difference and their possible unity. This means, I think, on the one hand, to uncover the conservative ideology smuggled into the charismatic family through its historical origin and connection. On the other hand, it means opening up the old discussion of generic vs. individual man, of the relation of structure and subjectivity,

as it is posed by the search for a new man in a new society. Theologically, it also means to discuss in a new context the relation of being and acting, of the active and the passive meaning of justice, of law and gospel in their integrity and interpenetration. A host of other theological and pastoral concepts which have been 'received' in the liberal-bourgeois ideological form have to be liberated for a new day and a new efficacy: the idea of reconciliation, the relation of love/conflict, the identification so common in European theology of the eschatological proviso with (liberal) critical freedom. These are for us 'Faith and Order issues' if we want to face our true divisions and our true unity.

(b) There is a wealth of words and signs expressing the Christian identity of the new 'confessing families' which must be incorporated as germinal nuclei for the reconstitution of a Christian identity and presence in the new society. Such words and gestures are not without roots in the past, but their continuity with it is not purely a lineal one; it has more of the character of a free transposition and can only be seen from within the new world of meaning and interpretation in which the new words and signs are articulated.

(c) One of the main concerns in a situation such as ours is to keep open the possibilities for encounter and communication between the different families. This is particularly difficult in the case of the relation between the traditional institutional churches and the new ecclesial realities. At the same time, the latter are more and more aware that they need to relate to the tradition and are readier to maintain a critical and conflictive but also listening and positive relationship. It is more difficult for the former, inasmuch as they conceive of themselves as normative, to admit this critical relation. In view of the future reconstitution of a new ecclesial configuration, the relation must be kept. This is the way in which the problem of order is posed for us.

(d) It seems to me that we urgently need an ecumenical discussion of the nature of proclamation. Perhaps it is not only a piece of Reformation theology to claim that the proclaimed Word — the *viva vox evangelii* — is the ultimate power for unity and division, the discriminating power that gathers and scatters, that draws and rejects. This theological assertion undoubtedly sounds phenomenologically incredible in relation to most ecclesiastical preaching and proclamation today. The almost total substitution of academic for 'spiritual' discernment of the Word and the ideological flight from concreteness have robbed proclamation

of all convoking and discriminating efficacy. We are faced with two questions. One, a reconsideration of the nature of proclamation. The other, a pastoral one, the exposure of the Christian community to the missionary appeal of a challenging word. This is the only way in which the concern for the Church — and therefore for its true unity — may cease to be the exclusive concern of a minority which has been initiated into a 'specialized' problematic and become the life and death struggle of all those who respond to the Gospel.

(e) There is scarcely any need to underline the significance of common projects and action undertaken either in the field of social or pastoral service, sometimes on the basis of a very minimum consensus, either theological or ideological. The value of such projects, nevertheless, cannot be judged merely in terms of their 'jointness'. This would be inverting again the missiological priority. Rather (i) when the action is left to develop its own intrinsic dynamics, it leads to greater definition and therefore poses the question of unity and division at a deeper level ; (ii) this pattern of relation engenders a theological reflection which is born in action and turns critically on it — the sterile opposition of orthodoxy and orthopraxis can only be overcome in this type of reflection ; (iii) action should not, therefore, be judged as a 'consequence' of faith, but as 'the obedience that faith is' (if I may so translate Rom. 1 : 5) — certainly an obedience that finds words and signs for giving an account of itself but which is not something different or separable from faith itself.

(f) The crisis in the celebration of the Eucharist and the growing uneasiness about baptism demands a frontal consideration. What is at stake is the relation of the traditional signs of Christian identity to the different and conflicting confessional and transconfessional Christian communities existing in the present. It is not a merely theoretical problem, but an increasingly urgent pastoral one. There is little wisdom in claiming that things which do not fit our traditional categories and models do not exist ! Can Christian sacraments remain the significant and efficacious bond of unity and continuity of the Christian Church throughout history and at the same time be liberated to become significant and efficacious signs of a post-colonial, post-liberal Christianity ? ³.

³ Here I can only point out the only attempt I know to undertake this task. I refer to the book of the Uruguayan Jesuit J.-L. Segundo, *Los Sacramentos hoy* (Sacraments today), (Buenos Aires : Carlos Lohlé, 1971).

A REACTION

GÜNTHER GASSMANN ⁴

1. Míguez Bonino has done much more than give a purely descriptive presentation of the Latin American situation concerning the problem of Christian unity. He has raised some basic questions of historical interpretation and ecclesiological reflexion. This makes his paper highly stimulating and provocative. It evokes a critical reaction. Because it has to be limited to a short space, my reaction will be in danger of being even more one-sided than Míguez Bonino's paper seems to be in certain sections.

2. Throughout the paper the impression is conveyed that the only ecclesiological realities in Latin America which have to be taken seriously are the new 'transconfessional families'. They alone are truly 'confessional'. If I compare that with other voices from that sub-continent his picture seems to be one-sided. It may be true for certain areas and churches but not for the whole spectrum.

3. The only criterion for interpreting and analysing the traditional churches and the emergence of the ecumenical movement, with its methods, its goals and models of unity seems to be ideology-criticism. Certainly, the deep influence of historical, cultural and socio-political factors in these ecclesiological matters has to be acknowledged and must be part of any analysis. Yet I doubt seriously whether they can be shown as the pre-eminent formative factors in all cases. Was it just the 'liberal ideology' which created and shaped the ecumenical movement? Were the models of unity, the structures of world confessional bodies, the vision and concept of 'a genuinely universal council' so exclusively shaped by liberal, colonial and neocolonial structures as the author wants us to believe? Do they not contain elements and impulses which reach much further back into the Christian tradition? Do they not exhibit genuinely new insights, reached by a confrontation of the biblical witness with certain historical demands and, of course, certain historical conditions in the sense that Míguez Bonino overstresses them?

4. Míguez Bonino pleads that we liberate all our structures and concepts from their socio-ideological straitjacket. Liberate for what?

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'A new kind of human life in a new society', 'a new day'. What kind of new structures, new models and concepts of unity would that imply? One would have been grateful for at least some hints. But so far one can only express the feeling that no more than one new socio-ideological straitjacket could be the result. Certainly, there can be no abstract models of unity to be applied to history. But is there not a more fundamental criterion than the ideological one: the biblical witness which provides certain basic structures for the church, its task and its unity? These basic structures, taken seriously, have to be correlated constantly with historical reality and should allow neither an illusory escapism from actual historical situations nor a conscious or unconscious captivity of the church to any patterns and ideologies, those of liberal/colonial/neocolonial era no more than those of any 'new society'. In addition, such basic structures and convictions provide a universal link, and mutual criteria for the correction of all Christians and churches despite their very different situations. They thus prevent the whole People of God, in our mutual inter-dependence in a world-wide ecumenical family, from deteriorating into a conglomeration of isolated continental, regional and national entities.

5. We can be grateful to Míguez Bonino that he has emphasized the fact that the quest for unity and models of union can no longer ignore the new transconfessional polarizations. It is important, too, that he has alerted us to their 'confessional' quality. It is true that behind this problem the basic question of the identity of the Christian faith and of the church is at stake. Only a common reconsideration of the identity of our faith and of the nature and task of the church today — undertaken within and across the historic 'confessional' churches and the new 'confessing' families — on the basis of the common biblical witness, yet taking seriously both the different confessional traditions and our present historical contexts and demands, can lead us closer to exhibiting that unity which is God's gift and task for us. Míguez Bonino rightly criticizes a too narrow, traditional view of the ecumenical adventure. He helps us to see the necessity for a 'both...and' approach which should be more than one of those suspiciously easy compromises.

LIVING IN THE ONE TRADITION

An Orthodox contribution to the question of unity

ION BRIA ¹

I

The Faith and Order Commission, in the hope of further articulating the common vision and goal of the ecumenical movement, decided at its last meeting to undertake a study entitled 'Concepts of unity and models of union'. This is designed to examine, compare and test the actual concepts and models which different churches in practice affirm.

Prior to the Salamanca consultation on this theme, opportunity was given to a group of Orthodox theologians to meet for two days in Geneva and consider what our tradition could contribute to the study. In the first place, a warm welcome was given to the initiative to look into this question. 'The Unity of the Church is the central concern of the ecumenical movement. The Orthodox can only welcome the fact that a fresh effort is being made (...) They hope that the theme will be prominent on the agenda of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches.' ²

Most of the time was spent in working on a formulation of the Orthodox understanding of unity. The staff working paper on the question had implicitly classified Orthodoxy in the category of those who insisted on 'organic union'. True enough, but we felt that such a phrase needed considerable interpretation and precision. We arrived at the following :

'Unity is preserved by the Holy Tradition (T) alive in the Church from the very beginning. The faith, hope and love of the apostolic community becomes a reality and is perpetuated in history in the Church by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is by this living Tradition, which is the form taken by Christ's "economy" through the Spirit for the salvation of the world, that the Church is *one*.

The witness borne by the Church is the same as that of the first apostolic community and finds supreme expression in the Liturgy. The Church has a ministry which continues the apostolic ministry, and the whole of its life is constantly related to the experience of the Saints of all ages.

¹ The Rev. Prof. ION BRIA, Rumanian Orthodox Church, is a staff member of the WCC Commission on World Mission and Evangelism. This article is a revised and expanded version of an address to the Salamanca consultation.

² This and subsequent quotations come from the report of the meeting mentioned above, published in *Minutes of Faith and Order Working Committee*, Zagorsk 1973, Geneva : WCC, 1973, pp. 46-9.

The prayer for the presence of the Spirit in the celebration of the Eucharist is an expression of the assurance that God continually renews the community in a continuity which is historical. Divided Christians can therefore rediscover their full communion in the one Body of Christ as they are led to rediscover one another in this living Tradition.'

Four points in this deserve to be especially highlighted for the continuing debate.

a. *The identification of the one, undivided Church in its sacramental and historical reality*

In all ecumenical debate, Orthodox will 'emphasize the God-given, ontological and indivisible unity of the Body of Christ, realized and preserved in history. They believe that this unity has existed continuously and without interruption in the Orthodox Church, its doctrine, its sacraments and its essential order — even if its members, either as individuals or as a historic fellowship, fail to realize and manifest the implications of this divine gift'. Of course we know that other churches will 'find it difficult to accept this claim'. Here we have the essence of the ecumenical dilemma.

At the very least we need an agreed 'working methodology which gives full credit to all the positions and suggests to all the right questions to be asked from one another'. For us Orthodox, the common search for unity is condemned to be an endless and hopeless effort if all involved cannot become convinced that the undivided Church has existed in the past and still does today, a fellowship with a common faith and sacramental life that link us to the first apostolic community of Christians. To put it in an extreme way, no Orthodox will ever accept the statement: 'The Church can never exist in history as one Church, but only as a multiplicity of different confessions.'

b. *The ecclesial status of non-Orthodox Christians and churches*

The very simplicity of the Orthodox claim leads others to ask: 'what is the relationship between the given unity to which you witness and the life of the other churches? What is its relationship to the fellowship of love with other Christians into which you have entered?' To be able to answer these would be to have found some permanent and visible criterion of membership in the one Church of Christ, in the same communion of apostolic faith. In fact, Orthodoxy does not have any precise ecclesiol-

ogical definition of other churches ; we prefer to avoid being pressed into *a priori* answers 'not because (Orthodox) are indifferent to doctrinal matters but because they feel that the consequences for salvation of heresy and/or schism should be left to the judgment of God'. It is hardly up to us to penetrate into the mystery of the *oikonomia* of the Holy Spirit in the life of those Christians who are outside the canonical limits of Orthodoxy.

The important thing for us is to bear positive witness to the Truth for which we have been made responsible. Depending on whom we find ourselves talking to, this will throw up various types of questions. In face of Protestants generally we find ourselves asking what sort of ontological unity and identity can possibly be made manifest without a permanent criterion of unity, considering the infinite variations, even contradictions, in creed and in church structures that result from historical change.

This does not mean, however, that we refuse even to consider the possibility of some sort of mutual recognition with non-Orthodox churches. What is essential for that is no more than a proper understanding all round of the canonical limits of Orthodoxy.

c. The distinction between legitimate diversity and sinful division

For Orthodox, unity means unity in truth. That is not for us a constricting principle, certainly not one that identifies the totality of the truth with certain verbal formulae. The catholicity of the Christian faith, an essential complement of unity, implies a wide scope for an authentic diversity of expressions of truth. But such diversity cannot be conveniently identified with those contradictory differences in teaching and those deliberate breaches of fellowship which have given rise to disunity and which still take place as a painful and all too visible reality among Christians today.

Still less can we follow the suggestion occasionally heard nowadays that there is some correspondence between the different approaches to certain questions among the New Testament writers and the doctrinal or structural divisions among the churches. This sounds like no more than self-justification. Even if the biblical writers, with their individual thought-forms and out of the particular controversies to which they were addressing themselves, wrote with notable differences these cannot have any independent authority after the adoption by the Church of the canon as a whole.

At the same time we accept that 'there is need to determine what really belongs to the unchangeable essentials of Church life, as distinct from the changeable forms' that are subject to historical circumstances. For instance, if there is a necessary continuity (succession) in the episcopal office, how legitimate are the changes in the actual exercise of that office between the second, the fourth and the twentieth centuries? This is the kind of question which we quite realize we have to work at among ourselves and with others.

d. *Presuppositions of a Council : the unity and catholicity of the Church*

In this new study, as in many other contexts since the Uppsala Assembly, there is talk of 'conciliar fellowship' and of the possibility that the ecumenical movement can so help the churches into mutual understanding that it will eventually be possible to convene 'a genuinely universal Council'. No objection so far. But it must be clear that 'the Orthodox believe that a Council presupposes and expresses the unity and the catholicity of the Church. A Council can only be held if all its members fully recognize each other as belonging to the same Church of Christ, guided by the same Spirit. A Council is an assembly representing local churches, each possessing in unity with the others the fulness of catholicity, witnessing to the same truth, aiming at maintaining unity when it is threatened and also admitting where necessary that some do not belong to the *koinonia* of the Church.'

Thus for us 'the ecumenical movement should be seen as an effort towards making a Council (of the now still divided Christians) possible and as a service to the whole pre-conciliar process which allows an approach to mutual recognition as well as the painful discovery of persisting differences'.

II

Promise and limits of a historical approach

Thus far the preliminary meeting of Orthodox. The ensuing Salamanca Consultation, as can be seen in its report (below, p. 291) adopted a historical rather than a static approach. Unity is seen as a dynamic reality, the Church itself, in line with Uppsala, being understood as a sign of the unity God wills for creation as a whole. This does not of course commit the World Council of Churches as such; according to the Toronto declaration of 1950 the Council has no business to adopt or

promote any one, normative understanding of unity but can provide occasions for the exploration and articulation of various approaches to the question. Yet this Salamanca emphasis on the dynamic nature of unity is a valuable contribution. It calls the churches not only to make the most of their traditional, confessional links but also to adventure beyond these into wider relationships and into the structures that can give them appropriate, growing expression.

Yet in doing this the Salamanca Consultation may create the impression that those who are presently engaged in the ecumenical debate about unity are obsessed by the need to find — almost at any cost — a new terminology for the debate, and a terminology which starts from the fact that traditional concepts are called into question by changes in the contemporary situation. As a result, one of the basic presuppositions of the discussion was that no criteria for establishing unity can be fixed in advance ; each new situation produces a somewhat new understanding of unity and calls for new forms by which to realize it. Now, to be sure, each generation has the inescapable task of articulating the concept of unity appropriate to the times and thus of giving ever-new expression to the unity of the Church. I am not doubting that the Church lives out and preserves its unity as it communicates the faith in each new historical situation, nor that Christians are called to face up to their disunity and overcome it within the precise contours of their particular situation. But the imperative of unity is not a matter of terminology ; it has to do with living persons and their relationships. Again, to say that unity has to be seen freshly in each new situation must not become to ignore or to deny the ontological reality of the Church in its unbroken continuity behind all historical changes. Can it be legitimate to seek the restoration of unity solely in terms of current history and its demands, leaving quite out of account the existence in the past of the one, undivided Church ?

In discussing 'Concepts of unity and models of union' it was suggested that union negotiations are to be seen as a sign that a new kind of unity can be found in each different situation in history. Certainly, given the various conceptions of unity in the various churches there will be all sorts of experimental ways that can be imagined for moving towards unity. One notable example has been the way in which certain churches in the West have been recently agreeing to practise 'eucharistic hospitality', provisional communion in the sacraments, before having reached a full and permanent consensus in faith. Yet what kind of unity is it when

churches agree to share in the sacrament while retaining their own, separate and contradictory doctrines? Is it not rather a sign of doctrinal indifference or relativism? This provisional or experimental ecumenism can only seem something normal where the churches are primarily aware of seeking, in today's context, to witness together to the one Tradition and only secondarily of being faithful to that Tradition as Tradition. Even while we may, given the circumstances of the West, have some sympathy for that, we Orthodox can only resist the practice of occasional intercommunion. For us it could destroy the very reality of the Church as a communion in faith.

The wider horizons of the Holy Spirit

All the emphases in recent Orthodox writing on the Church underline the significance of understanding Church unity within the wider horizons of the *oikonomia* of the Holy Spirit: whether the 'ecclesiology of Sobornost' as discussed by Boulgakoff, Zernov or Florovsky,³ the 'eucharistic ecclesiology' of Afanasieff,⁴ the 'ecclesiology of open sobornost' of Staniloae,⁵ the 'pneumatological ecclesiology' of Nissiotis,⁶ or the 'ecclesiology of communion' of Clément.⁷

In particular, two vital elements of ecclesiology must be fully taken into account in any ecumenical discussion that claims to involve the Orthodox understanding of unity:

First, that there is an organic link between the spirituality of the Church and the experience of salvation, between, if you will, ecclesiology and soteriology. This is not the place to go at length into the way in which the doctrine of the Church implies a distinctive doctrine of salvation and *vice versa*; suffice it to say that each specific confessional understanding of the Church and of spirituality demonstrably implies a particular understanding of the substance of salvation. Ecclesiology is the expression of the experience of salvation, of the spirituality of the Christian community. There is one Church because there is one saving

³ See: S. BOULGAKOFF, *L'Orthodoxie*, Paris, 1932; N. ZERNOV, *Eastern Christendom*, London, 1964; G. FLOROVSKY, 'Sobornost: the Catholicity of the Church', in *The Church of God*, edited by E. C. Mascal.

⁴ N. AFANASIEFF, 'Una Sancta', *Irénikon* 1963, No. 4.

⁵ D. STANILOAE, 'The Holy Spirit and the Catholicity of the Church', *Orthodoxia*, 19 (1967), No. 1.

⁶ N. NISSIOTIS, 'Types and Problems of Ecumenical Dialogue', *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. XVIII, No. 1, 1966.

⁷ O. CLÉMENT, 'L'ecclésiologie orthodoxe comme ecclésiologie de communion', *Contacts*, XX, 1968, No. 61.

act of the one Saviour, Jesus Christ, and one Spirit who unites us here and now with that salvation. Whatever the various personal and social contexts in which we experience this salvation it is precisely the same, the single salvation because it is the same Spirit conveying the same grace. Orthodox will therefore be extremely reluctant to accept the legitimacy of differing 'ecclesiologies' — especially if their sponsors claim to find origins for them in the New Testament — since these can only imply the acceptance of distortions in the one reality of salvation in Jesus Christ. Authentic ecclesiology will certainly leave room for diversities of the persons and situations in which salvation takes place, but will be shaped primarily by the reality of the one Spirit introducing us into the one mystery of Jesus Christ. To recover the unity of the Church is to recover the single, distinctive reality of the Spirit throughout all the diversities of the ways by which men apprehend and express the salvation He conveys.

Second, that unity is the expression of the identity of the Church, given in its very being and thus essentially indivisible. There is a real danger that the ecumenical movement will be reduced to seeking unity in terms of the mutual acceptance, recognition, even accountability of two or more separated groups rather than as a growing together into the fulness of a single identity in Christ. Mutual understanding and reconciliation are certainly to be welcomed, but are not enough to restore, beyond the experience of separation, a real grasp of the one Church at the local and universal levels. The indivisible unity of the Body of Christ, given and preserved within human history, risks becoming a forgotten matter. Of course one must be sympathetic to the many ways in which the divisions and separations we have been through in history make it difficult for us to see the restoration of unity as having to do with our identity in Christ and condition us to limit the ecumenical process to being the mutual recognition of the separate parts of the present totality of Christians. Yet we must continue to plead not just for a unity of reciprocity but for a *unity of continuity*, in which presently divided churches can move into the fulness of that unity in Christ which was given us in the beginning. It is not a matter of any personal judgment of superiority, but Orthodox — to whom it has been given to preserve that continuity — must maintain that by division and separation other churches have inevitably lost something of great importance in the fulness of the apostolic tradition which is the permanent basis of the Church. They have abandoned something of the real substance of the apostolic faith, which cannot but

mean a distortion of their spirituality, of their grasp of salvation and of their understanding of that communion in faith which is the Church.

Two fundamental questions

This notion of the *unity of continuity* raises at least two fundamental questions for the ecumenical debate. If we consider the Church as a communion in faith, what is the meaning of tradition for the search for visible unity? What does the existence of the non-Orthodox churches imply for the fulness of our own catholicity?

If the unity of the Church is not grounded in the witness of the apostles and if the Church does not live by the apostolic Tradition, then its identity is radically falsified. The Tradition is the only way by which the Church can remain in Christ, can find its permanent continuity in Him and with Him. It is the Holy Spirit who gives life to this unity of continuity through the Tradition. Thus it is not simply a matter of transmitting a heritage, of preserving outward customs and appearances, but of a living communion in faith by the same Spirit as was at work among the first apostles. Tradition is far more than the structures of institutional continuity; it is a living reality, the unifying power by which the Holy Spirit quickens the entire existence in history, past and present, of the Body of Christ. We cannot therefore but acknowledge the authority for faith of the Orthodox Tradition. We cannot expect to advance along the way to visible unity without a full and common commitment to the same reality of the one, universal Church as is given in the apostolic Tradition.

As I have mentioned, it is sometimes difficult for Orthodox to recognize other groups of Christians as churches. We are thus well aware that Orthodox participation in the fellowship of the World Council of Churches comes far from naturally or easily to us. It is a standing challenge, which implies a good deal of tension, of internal struggle, of critical decisions. But we cannot, on the other hand, simply deny the existence of other churches outside the Orthodox family. Thus our implicit recognition, by being members of the WCC, of a certain historical and sacramental reality of the non-Orthodox churches is not a matter of sheer ecumenical goodwill, still less of tactics. It is an essential part of our theological involvement in the ecumenical movement.

This ecumenical paradox (cf. Nissiotis' phrase 'the contradictory reality of the Church existing as churches'⁸) urgently needs careful and

⁸ From a staff paper to be published later this year in *Study Encounter*.

serious interpretation among us Orthodox. To mention only a few of its implications :

- we cannot expect to develop today a living sense of the Church, one of the main spiritual features of Orthodoxy, without *a living sense of the oikoumene*, i.e. without a sense for all those catholic dimensions of Christian life which go well beyond the canonical limits of the Orthodox Church ;
- we must prepare to recognize the considerable responsibility that the Orthodox Church bears for the historical divisions in the Body of Christ ;
- we must discover the proper freedom of the Church to adapt to the various social and political situations of today and so come to an adequate recognition of the place of diversity within the basic unity of Christian faith and life.

III

Three more practical conclusions

1. Whether we like it or not, the situation in which we are having to look for a new vision of the *koinonia* of the churches is one of division and separation. The whole question of reunion depends on a tension between unity and division. We must do our best to accept the tension and continue, together, along the way to the visible unity in which it will finally be overcome.

2. The unity of the Church has been lost. Our task is not to create a new Church but to restore the one Church in its unbroken continuity and its sacramental fullness. The time for defining the final form which the one Church, once restored, would take, is not yet here. Meanwhile, although any of us can no doubt imagine all sorts of new forms of fellowship, it is premature and unrealistic to spend our time drawing ideal pictures of the future Church. That must wait until we have genuine possibilities of moving beyond our present state of separation.

3. The World Council of Churches, let it not be forgotten, was created at a very critical time. In an atmosphere of lack of confidence in human history, the result of the second world war, it raised the existential question : 'How can the churches move beyond division and isolation and enter into a new relationship with one another ?' Since then the Council has inspired a rich series of actions and experiences which have

largely shaped the ecumenical movement : bilateral conversations, practical cooperation, spiritual sharing, reconciliation over political divisions, theological research and dialogue, union negotiations, etc. Today, however, the churches are undergoing a process of secularization or desacralization which is striking deeply, not least at the unity of the Church. This is of course due in part to the churches' accepting the spiritual challenges of today's world. The WCC therefore has a vital new task in helping the churches to move out of this spiritual crisis. Can the Jakarta Assembly find the courage to address a historic message to the churches, calling them to a new confidence in the Holy Spirit, the mover and recreator of human history ?

CHURCH UNION AS VISION AND EXPERIENCE

PAUL A. CROW¹

'The Plan of Union is dead ! Long live church union !' That crypto-Shakespearean proclamation was recently uttered after the failure of the Anglican-Methodist negotiations by an English theologian who believes that the union of Christ's Church will be achieved beyond momentary delays and defeats. It is a testimony of faith in the future of organic union which reveals the irony of progress amid apparent setbacks. It is also something of a summary of the present situation of the Consultation on Church Union in the USA.

The amazing fact is that our quest for a united church has just survived a year of severe discouragement and has manifested renewed resilience and confidence. The Consultation on Church Union has undergone several difficulties, including the withdrawal and return of the United Presbyterian Church — the church which first issued the call for these union conversations — and will no doubt suffer again in the future. But the pessimistic climate of the recent past is gone. Battered and beleaguered church union advocates have confessed their sins of commission and omission, have accepted God's forgiveness (and the churches' modest but sincere participation), and now are celebrating the flowering buds of new beginnings. COCU is showing the ability to relate to a changing world situation. Evidence even continues to mount that, whilst the participating churches would not yet vote in favour of union, far more people are becoming convinced that a Church of Christ Uniting will surely come about.

I

COCU's credibility is to be found not in its statistical achievements or programmatic impact, but in the fact that it is bringing before the churches' consciousness, however dimly, some of the life-or-death issues. Church union is one place where the issues which threaten to tear our society apart are at stake. Christian identity, the nature of authority, institutional structures, the place of women and youth, diversity in unity — these and other questions on the COCU agenda lie

¹ The Rev. Dr PAUL A. CROW, Jr, after six years as General Secretary of the Consultation on Church Union, becomes in June 1974 President of the Council on Christian Unity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), USA.

at the heart of the challenge facing the churches in the 1970s and beyond.

This point can be illustrated by three particular issues where COCU is the harbinger of creative discussion, even perhaps a catalyst for institutions which seem committed only to self-survival. This is not a claim of triumphalism. Nor are these the sustaining issues of all classical union negotiations. Not that these issues have been fully resolved; nevertheless, they are now being confronted by the COCU churches.

1. *Crisis of faith and structures of meaning*

American Christians, like all others affected by secularization, are experiencing a decisive spiritual anomie and restlessness. Familiar faith formulae seem not to inspire. Traditional structures and practices are viewed by many with scepticism. Activism by itself fails to bring salvation. Yet, viewed positively, this condition is engaging Christians in America in a deep spiritual quest.

At this very moment of crisis, the churches in the Consultation on Church Union have been able to see their search for a united church as worth the effort because they have been led to deal with the substantive issues of faith. This determination came at the 1971 plenary at Denver, Colorado. That plenary laid bare the poverty of a church bent merely on relevance or salvation by actions. The faithful church, the church that will bring faith and meaning, will rather lead its people to hear and tell 'the old, old story' of the Gospel with such freshness that its implications for the crisis of faith and culture will be clearly seen.

The Salamanca Consultation on Concepts of Unity and Models of Union sensed this new emphasis on faith: 'In union negotiations the churches are rediscovering both what Jesus Christ means for our time and how the community which bears His name witnesses to this faith.'² The late George Beazley, a dynamic and devoted ecumenist, knew that such is the experience of the Consultation on Church Union: it 'is something far more than an attempt to unite nine churches though it never has lost, and presumably never will lose, sight of a goal of union as inclusive as possible. It is wrestling with the proper shape of the church in our age to enable the Gospel to have the maximum power to change human lives and societies. It is the quest for an expression of faith that is so comprehensive as to enable the church to transcend the

² below, p. 296.

definitions of that faith which have been institutionalized in the divided churches so that in a divided church the total Tradition is unavailable to anyone.’³ If this be true, the process of union could result in a church which can give a vital account of its faith to a world of uncertainty and turmoil.

2. *Church property and the locus of Christian identity*

In most American denominations the local congregations hold title to the land and buildings. Even among churches with a connexional polity, congregations presume a sense of ownership and determination in the use of resources. Yet one of the unique proposals in the draft Plan of Union of COCU was a new form of the church local, called the ‘parish’. A ‘parish’ would be composed of several congregations and task groups from different traditions as well as from different racial and socio-economic backgrounds. It was proposed that church membership be held in the parish, that all ministers would serve in a team relationship, and that all resources would be used jointly. Then came the controversy. For many people assumed that such arrangements meant that each individual congregation would no longer have uninhibited control over its own property !

As frequently happens in church debates, the conversations themselves were more revealing than the principles at issue. Countless possessive cries were uttered in defence of ‘my church’, ‘my family’s church’, ‘the church property we’ve owned for 300 years’, and so on. The sacredness of real estate was revealed as the criterion of identity and membership, at least as these are understood by many local churchgoers.

The value of this controversy has been that for the first time a hidden assumption was laid out for discussion and critique. But it was also sensed that the question of church property is not only a matter of economic policy ; it is a theological issue which requires reflection about the nature of the Church, the theology of the congregation, the meaning of stewardship and mission — especially in a world made vividly aware of the hindrances to economic development.

³ GEORGE G. BEAZLEY, Jr, ‘A Personal View of the Consultation on Church Union’, in Paul A. Crow, Jr and William Jerry Boney (eds.) : *Church Union at Midpoint* ; New York : Association Press, 1972, pp. 16-17.

3. *Racial justice and reconciliation*

Where racial discrimination and injustice constitute a primary cancer in society the church union agenda cannot but be influenced. Indeed, the experience of institutional racism is one of the primary barriers to a united church. Thus in North America Christian reconciliation calls for an inclusiveness in which racial distinctions — like all distinctions of class, sex, language, nationality or culture — will lose their power to divide.

The presence of three predominantly black churches — African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, and Christian Methodist Episcopal, each formed in an earlier century in reaction to the racial exclusiveness of the predominantly white churches — has required that COCU conceive and pursue church union with an urgent openness to those usually excluded: the powerless and the poor. This has made our task if anything yet more difficult, punctuated by agonizing debates and times of distrust. Yet it makes the goal of church union far more credible and essential. According to a bishop in one of the black churches, 'COCU is doing a job no other body can do in the American situation'.

At the same time several questions have to be faced. Is the church union movement prepared to accept the full participation of Christians in the black churches, sharing fully with them as responsible partners in reconciliation, guaranteeing their full participation in leadership and decision-making in the union process and in the eventual united church? Equally important — how can the church union process appropriate 'the black experience' in such a way that it is not merely translated into white idioms and practices but shared as rich and distinctive gifts?

COCU has made major beginnings in answering these questions. More important, a measure of trust has developed between black and white churches, and a measure of hope is shared. The value, many believe, is that in the context of church union the churches are doing more than dealing with a problem or issue; they are seeking a new Christian community in which both black and white traditions, renewed, can make their full contribution. The liberation of the entire Church awaits the outcome of this issue.

The facing of these three questions is vital for the health of the Church in the USA. Each arises in a special way in the pilgrimage toward a united church. The wrestling with each — if in different ways —

carries an element of risk. Taizé Prior Roger Schutz's counsel is timely : 'Nothing is more contrary to solidarity than a deceptive ecumenism, an ecumenism which takes no risks.'⁴ Such risk, however, should be readily embraced by those who understand the biblical faith.

II

Recent developments in the Consultation offer an interesting case study. A movement towards organic union has been able to respond to a changing situation in Church and world and to reach for new strategies towards communion and reconciliation. The eleventh plenary of the Consultation on Church Union met at Memphis, Tennessee, in April 1973. During the previous two and a half years, the congregations of the nine participating churches,⁵ representing over one-third of all the Protestants in the USA, had studied *A Plan of Union for the Church of Christ Uniting*, sent to the churches 'for study and response' in April 1970. This prompted the most widespread ecumenical study process in American church history. Over 3,000 responses from congregations, inter-church study groups, denominational theological commissions and executive councils were received. United churches and union negotiations in other countries also sent comments. Over 300 articles on the Plan and the issues it raised were published in theological journals.

The task of the Memphis plenary was to hear a summary of the churches' responses and to shape its future in light of what the churches had said. Its hearing was guided by an Implications Team, which spent nine months analysing and evaluating the responses — a process which itself already communicated to the congregations that they were being heard and that union is not the private preserve of hierarchs and high-ups.

The principal findings of the Implications Team, concurred in by the 350 members of the plenary, were twofold. As the plenary statement, 'The Way Ahead', concluded, the responses showed on the one hand 'a general agreement among the churches on matters of faith, worship, and the basic nature of the ministry'. On the other there was clearly

⁴ ROGER SCHUTZ, *The Power of the Provisional*; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1969, p. 50.

⁵ The nine churches are the African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Christian Methodist Episcopal, Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church in the United States, United Church of Christ, United Methodist Church, and United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

'a general unreadiness to accept the organizational structures proposed for a united church'. Here was a historic consensus and a historic clue — both of which charted the directions for the way ahead. The strategy for COCU laid down at Memphis was to encourage maximum action on the apparent theological consensus and at the same time to give priority to experiments at the local and regional levels from which might be discovered the forms and structural relationships appropriate to a united church. 'Viable proposals for the organization and structure of the Church of Christ Uniting need to be developed out of the experience of living and working together. The Consultation, therefore, sees the next stages of its work as actively involving the churches in working together at the various levels of their life. Growing out of this experience, a full plan of union can be developed for a united church — catholic, evangelical and reformed.'⁶ In essence, the approach towards union was changed from one of *designing* union at the top level of leadership to one of *living* towards union at the local level. The action is now with the people.

Within this new approach — miserably misunderstood by the press as 'shelving the Plan' and 'eclipsing the goal of union for cooperation' — the plenary identified five interim areas in which some gains could be achieved in the immediate future and which are crucial if these nine churches are to move further towards a united church.

Faith, worship and ministry. Consensus is a negative term in some circles today, especially for those who insist on seeing it as a definition of uniformity or who imply that concern for truth has been replaced by mere expediency. True consensus, however, can include a range of legitimate theological diversities. Though not perfect, it can allow, indeed require, a Christian fellowship and shared witness at deeper levels than those yet experienced by the churches. A COCU commission is thus entrusted with the task of testing and revising the perceived theological agreements, as articulated by the responses from the churches, and of offering a revised text on faith, sacraments and ministry which the churches in the Consultation could use as a basis for covenanting towards union.

Admittedly, plans of union reflect the era when they were written. As such, *A Plan of Union for the Church of Christ Uniting* reflects the issues and language of the late 1960s. This may make it a partial or

⁶ 'Digest of the 11th Meeting of COCU', in *Mid-Stream*, Vol. XII, No. 1, 1973.

'preliminary consensus' (René Beaupère), but by no means a sterile one. Greater documents than plans of union have been historically and culturally conditioned, yet have served as vessels of Christian truth.

The extent of this substantial agreement among the participating churches can hardly be overestimated. It strips away the pretended grounds for much of their ecclesial isolation. It reveals as mythical much of the past theological rationale for disunity. Yet the key, as ecumenical history reveals, lies in what churches *do* with their agreements. A consensus can die on the vine or be the source of growth multiplying tenfold and a hundredfold. The churches in COCU are now facing the choice.

Institutional racism. Racism, as I have mentioned, is a major barrier to union in America. The presently divided churches must discover ways to deal effectively with racism in their boards, institutions, and policies. Only then can they deal with the future structures of a united church. Before the vision of a united and uniting church can become trustworthy, especially to those blacks and other minorities who have been excluded and discriminated against, there will need to be evidences now of repentance and a truly shared life — including decision-making, power, resources — on the part of the predominantly white churches.

In 1973 the Consultation committed itself to discovering appropriate strategies of 'compensatory action', by which to achieve racial inclusiveness. A brilliant paper by Dr Yoshio Fukuyama of Pennsylvania State University stressed that compensatory action is a 'two-way street', i.e. it is concerned not only about money from white churches given to black institutions and movements, but also about the contributions and spiritual values the black Christian experience can bring to the whole. Racism is a tragedy beyond socio-economic deprivation; it speaks of the total deprivation of the church today. Hence, compensatory action, as one way forward, seeks to make generally available whatever spiritual insights and Christian experiences God has given to His people, black and white.

Generating communities. Church union conversations remain abstract and alien to the experience of most people unless they bring about a real spiritual encounter among Christians of different traditions at the local level. The Consultation is choosing a limited number of experimental communities, probably not more than thirty, where congregations of Christians will covenant with one another and with COCU as a whole to seek for three years a shared life based on the 'marks of wholeness'

of the Church of Christ Uniting. They are called 'generating communities', i.e. places which will generate the vision and experience of Christ's Church in its fullness.

A covenant, to be signed by the congregations in a generating community, will articulate the marks of wholeness to be sought in that place: commitment to the historic Christian faith and openness to contemporary expressions of the faith; celebration of the eucharist together on a regular basis; common witness and mission in the community; appreciation of the different denominational heritages and openness to other movements of the Spirit and cultural influence; norms of ordered life yet openness to change and diversity; inclusiveness of persons of diverse races, ages, sexes, cultural and economic backgrounds; joint ministry of clergy and laity; wider ecumenical relationships; flexible, developing structures.

These generating communities, we hope, will become living models of the Church of Christ Uniting. At the least, they will be learning centres whose experiences will shape the future of the church union process in this country. All sorts of persons in the congregations involved will discover and experience the unity already given them in Jesus Christ. The later union will therefore be a celebration of what has already begun to happen in their midst.

Interim eucharistic fellowship. This simple proposal asserts that the time is ripe for the COCU churches, and any others who would wish, to take seriously the common celebration of the Lord's Supper on a regular basis, perhaps four or five times a year. Such acts of 'inter-communion' are not to be considered a substitute for full church union, but could be a sign of integrity within our negotiations and a witness to Christian truth.

Most Episcopalians — the namesake of Anglicans in America — are willing to support this eucharistic sharing, though some, not wanting to jeopardize the possible *rapprochement* with the Roman Catholic Church, are determined to resist it. Among the other eight COCU churches, where problems of ministry and definitions of eucharistic presence do not keep us from a common Table, a readiness for 'inter-communion' can in theory be assumed. Yet in fact it is rarely practised. Interim eucharistic fellowship is thus an occasion for spiritual maturing in all traditions. Already many places in the USA are learning that when Christians break bread together for the first time they experience the unity of Christ's Church for the first time. By the same token they

are compelled to be concerned about each other's needs and to identify with the alienation and brokenness of human society.

Local expression of the Church. Much in the emotions and yearnings that have surfaced in these moves towards union has indicated a need to explore the church local. The reactions to the 'parish' concept in *A Plan of Union* revealed the tenacious centrality of the congregation in American church life and its prominence as the locus of Christian identity. But are there forms of the church at the local level which could achieve a broader and more diverse Christian fellowship? What is the theology of the congregation that is consonant with the ecclesiology of the Scriptures and the call to service and witness?

III

It now remains to ask, 'What motifs relevant to the future of organic union have emerged in COCU's experience? Several newly found motifs have renewed our pilgrimage in recent days, though they have not made the task lighter. Maybe our successes and failures can help others achieve a more effective pattern of progress towards union:

1. Church union must necessarily focus on *both a plan and a process*. Both are essential, since together they enable Christians to share a vision and an experience of a uniting church. A plan of union ties the negotiations down to real facts and real pieces of church life. It is the carrier of the consensus, furnishing in its several drafts the landmarks of a pilgrimage of faith in search of a renewed faith community. It gives the negotiations an awareness of being directed towards an end: sooner or later a decision will be required, for or against a united church. Equally crucial is the wider process of engagement and growing together which enables Christians at all levels of the church's life — local, regional, national, international — to experience the genuine unity of Christ's people.⁷

In recent years some ecumenists are tempted to set plan and process over against each other, claiming one or the other as the golden ingredient for progress towards a united church. Any such opposition can only be detrimental. Worst of all, it allows a vagueness of commitment towards the unity Christ wills for His Church and the obedience required of each of us to fulfil that unity in our lives.

⁷ CROW and BONEY (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 229-232.

2. Organic union is a *dynamic, developing model*. Church union is often plagued by archaic concepts and models projected by outsiders and insiders. Undoubtedly leaders in union conversations themselves carry rigid concepts and assumptions about the nature and shape of union which make it difficult for those open to the future to respond favourably. Yet organic union has again and again shown the capacity to respond to new expressions of human need and new demands of the ecumenical movement.

In the Consultation the emerging model of organic union is a dialectic between unity and pluralism, between structures and life. COCU in its recent style has found a new sensitivity to the self-conscious pluralism articulated in the religious experiences of today. The 'protection' of diversity has always been high on the agenda of church union negotiations, but under the demands of this new pluralism a deeper understanding of Christian diversity is being discovered. In like manner, the change has led us to think of union less in terms of institutions and more in terms of relationships.

3. Corporate union becomes a priority only when translated into *the life and goals of local congregations*. This means that a paramount consideration must be local and regional (i.e. diocesan, conference, presbytery) experimentation in union. Such a motif arises from what is already happening. On the American scene, regional and local ecumenism has blossomed spontaneously and in widely diverse shapes. There is often an existential readiness among the congregations for unity and joint mission that does not yet exist at the level of whole denominations.

This local ecumenism is not without its dangers. Sometimes it produces no more than minimal cooperation, without leading to deeper fellowship. Guided primarily by vested interests or survival instincts, it can bring together only similar congregations and fail to involve those of diverse parts of the body of Christ. Again, in some instances those involved have no horizons beyond their local needs or relationships. However, these temptations only point to the need for a wider context for local church union developments, though it should be confessed that links between a national union body and local experiments are not easily achieved. Especially promising in local ecumenical activity is the chance for congregations and church institutions to take seriously the mandate for the unity of 'all in each place'. In villages and neighbourhoods

throughout America Christians are affirming this unity not as the pronouncement of a world ecumenical assembly but as a local reality.

4. For effective Christian reconciliation we must deal not only with the historical and confessional disunities of the past but also with *the new social issues* which are rending the church these days. The churches are most severely divided today by social, political, racial and other 'secular' issues. Sensing the urgency of this situation, COCU's *Plan of Union* pledged that the united church would struggle against 'racism, poverty, environmental blight, war and other problems of the family of man'. Since that time many American Christians have become particularly alarmed at the impact of the American civil religion which does not see any distinction between the Gospel and the cultural norms of the American way of life. Ironically, the very ideology and ethics which support this civil religion also sustain the denominational system of divided churches.

To accept this expansion of the context of church union, from that of divided denominations to the wider context of the divisions of mankind, is, to quote John Deschner's report to the WCC Central Committee at Utrecht (1972), 'not an abandonment of the church unity theme for secular theology ! Precisely the contrary : it is the beginning of a rediscovery of the church unity theme. It arises from an insistence of faith (1) that the mystery of church unity, i.e. the mystery of Christ's love, contains a crucial contribution for the problems which divide mankind, and (2) that this missionary context is the right context for discovering the way forward in our vocation for church unity.'⁸

5. The union of churches — two, nine, or however many or few — does not exclude *the active interest of other churches*. While the participating churches in the Consultation number nine, a wider circle of communions touch and strengthen its work in different ways. Over 20 other American churches, conciliar bodies (including the World Council of Churches), and church union commissions from other countries are represented at its plenaries. The Roman Catholic, Lutheran and American Baptist churches work particularly closely with many of its theological and liturgical projects.

6. Finally, the integrity of the church union pilgrimage depends on the ability of the churches to live out *the biblical message of the Cross*. Local pastors, lay people, denominational leaders and church union

⁸ *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. XXIV, No. 4, October 1972, pp. 453 f.

advocates must all engage in suffering love before we can truly understand what it is God wants of us, to incarnate His forgiveness in a forgiving community, before we can discern the shape of a united church which can demonstrate the reality of His reconciling love to the world. Without this suffering love there can be no reconciliation. But to know the Cross, the experience of dying and being raised with Christ, is to be prepared for the visible unity of His Church here on earth, the Church upheld in the fullness of God's purpose.

CHURCH UNION AS A MODEL OF CHRISTIAN UNITY

GERALD F. MOEDE ¹

‘To call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship expressed in worship and in common life in Christ, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe.’ ²

Introduction

‘To call the churches to the goal of visible unity (...) and to advance (...)’ ! It is not the task, or even the right, of the Faith and Order Commission to promote one particular concept of reunion. But the uniting of previously divided and competing churches is one model of unity, one result of a serious taking of this call ; it is the subject of this paper.

Organic union is being questioned on all sides as a model of unity. People have long been asking : Does it bring about a kind of unity that is desirable ? Are not the theological agreements colourless compromises satisfying no one ? Is a ‘united’ witness important, or even possible ? In the last decade, however, more profound questions have been posed. If the Church is a sign that all human beings are called to live in one family, must not unity be concerned first with uniting persons, not structures ?

Will not the exterior, structured unity which union attains suppress the search for authentic diversity ? Does not the New Testament point us toward a less ‘organized’ but just as committed fellowship ?

What precisely, then, do we mean by church union ? By the use of the term ‘union’ (to which might be added ‘organic’ or ‘corporate’) we imply both an act and a state of being, much akin to marriage, by which bodies previously regarding themselves as separate entities enter into a new covenant and join together into a new corporate relationship. The Limuru Church Union Conference listed the necessary conditions of corporate union in this way :

¹ The Rev. Dr G. F. MOEDE, United Methodist Church USA, is a member of the Secretariat of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order. This article is a revision of a working paper for the Salamanca consultation.

² *Minutes and Reports of the Twenty-Fifth Meeting of the Central Committee, Utrecht ; Geneva : WCC 1972, p. 220.*

'A common basis of faith ; a common name ; full commitment to one another, including the readiness to give up separate identity ; the possibility of taking decisions together, and of carrying out the missionary task as circumstances require.'³

This article will attempt to re-state the imperatives for union with those conditions, as negotiating and united churches express them, looking at the phenomenon from within, while remembering that it is only one type of unity among others. We shall first discuss what union sets out to accomplish, its advantages and strengths, and then point to some of the problems it leaves unresolved.

I

The strengths of the union model

No normative attempt could be made to delineate the unity of the Church nor its possible ingredients in the early years of the WCC ; the ecumenical fellowship had first to become a place where various concepts could interact dynamically. The Toronto Statement of 1950 specifically attempted to maintain this ecclesiological neutrality ; membership in the WCC did not imply the acceptance of any particular doctrine concerning the nature of church unity.

Yet already in 1955 Dr Visser 't Hooft could draw on past statements of ecumenical organs to describe what would constitute desirable unity :

- a) That the unity of the Church is a *given* unity, in that it has its essential reality in Jesus Christ Himself. (*Amsterdam Report*, p. 51 ; *Evanston Speaks*, p. 18 ; *Lund Report*, p. 20, etc.)
- b) That this unity must be made manifest to the world. (*Evanston Speaks*, p. 19 ; Toronto Statement IV : 2.)
- c) That full church unity must be based on a large measure of agreement in doctrine (*Amsterdam*, p. 55 ; 'Christ, Hope of the World', p. 20 ; *Edinburgh Report*, p. 253.)
- d) That sacramental communion is a necessary part of full church unity. (*Lund Report*, p. 49.)
- e) That a ministry acknowledged by every part of the Church (*Lund Report*, p. 26) and some permanent organ of conference and counsel (*Edinburgh Report*, p. 253) are required, but that a rigid uniformity of

³ 'Notes from the Limuru Discussion', *Mid-Stream*, Conference on Church Union Negotiations, April 1970, IX, 2-3, p. 22.

governmental structure (*Lund*, p. 34) or a structure dominated by a centralized administrative authority (*Amsterdam*, p. 127) are to be avoided.

- f) That the unity of the Church depends on the renewal of the Church. (*Lund*, p. 21 ; *Evanston Speaks*, p. 23.)
- g) That this unity is not to be sought for its own sake only, but for the sake of the world in which the Church performs its mission of evangelism (*Evanston Speaks*, p. 20, etc.).⁴

By the time of the New Delhi Assembly in 1961 the churches could agree on at least a skeleton outline of the points where agreement had to be sought if the unity of the Church were to become visible :

‘We believe that the unity which is both God’s will and His gift to His Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess Him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls His people’.⁵

This statement and the discussion behind it clearly stimulated the efforts to bring churches together locally. Between the New Delhi and Uppsala Assemblies no fewer than twenty-two unions were consummated. Most of these were built around the very elements of unity included in that description, and can thus provide us by now with experience of their effect in practice.

Although the styles employed differ, all the attempts at union under consideration here are aiming at organic or corporate union, to bring into existence one Church where two or more previously existed. They all spring from the conviction that the unity among Christians for which Christ prayed was intended to be a unity in faith, worship and witness ; that it should be, in fact, a unity which is not merely spiritually experienced by believers, but a manifest reality, apprehensible even by those who are not Christians at all.

We shall not have to spend time on a defence against those who decry church union because it takes institutions seriously ; as the Faith

⁴ W. A. VISSER 'T HOOFT, ‘Various Meanings of Unity’, *Ecumenical Review*, Vol. VIII No. 1, p. 22.

⁵ *New Delhi Report*, W. A. VISSER 'T HOOFT (ed.), London : SCM Press, 1962, p. 116.

and Order Commission has pointed out, 'Church structure itself is not an anachronism. The Church is body and spirit; it needs a visible form through which men may see what God has done in Christ. Any given model of a large, centralized organization is open to question, but the need remains for a 'fully committed fellowship' of witness, mutual responsibility, and sacramental action, such as is adumbrated in the New Delhi statement.'⁶

In the following paragraphs we shall use several of the New Delhi guidelines to describe and discuss the strengths of the union model.

All in each place — one fully committed fellowship

One of the compelling factors in the uniting of churches in recent decades has been the conscious attempt to obey the biblical injunction to be one at the place where such unity will be visible — at the local level. Among many churches, especially in the Third World, the conviction has matured that the spiritual unity which binds Christians together must be explicitly visible where they gather together, that God calls His people into a visibly single worshipping community.

When the New Testament speaks of individual churches, it refers primarily to the gathering of Christians in a certain place :

'The stress on local unity also has theological significance. The Church is always a concrete fellowship. It exists wherever the Gospel is proclaimed and men have felt themselves called, wherever they celebrate the eucharist, and are sanctified as a fellowship and as individuals. It always exists in particular places.'⁷

Although the basis of the oneness of all in Christ *is* spiritual, no Docetic separation of body and spirit can be accepted; this unity has never been and can never be exclusively spiritual. Part of the offensiveness of the Incarnation has always been its particularity, its actual historical visibility.

The oneness of the People of God requires expression in structures of relationship and service.

Thus the question of the reunion of the Church finds its primary significance at the level of the congregation and the parish. It is there that the tests of reconciliation, new life in Christ, and involvement in

⁶ *Faith and Order, Louvain 1971*, Geneva : WCC, 1971, p. 231.

⁷ LUKAS VISCHER, 'The Church — One People in Many Places', *What Unity Implies*, R. Groscurth (ed.), Geneva : WCC, 1969, p. 68.

mission are passed — or failed. If the presence of Christ, breaking down all social, economic, and racial barriers, cannot be detected in the local gathering, any more universal forms of fellowship are seriously called into question. The ecclesiological implications of such 'localized unity' can be drawn in many directions, but two are primary :

1. *'Breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer' : the worshipping community*

As long as churches live apart (even if they belong to the same Council of Churches or are in full communion with one another) sacramental sharing continues to be the exception rather than the rule ; the mutual forgiveness and renewed fellowship that stem from the week-by-week gathering of the people around word and sacrament simply do not occur.

Cooperation at all levels among churches is a very positive development, but in so far as it leaves untouched the basic realities by which the Church lives its life (faith, worship, sacraments, congregational fellowship and mission) it can neither solve the basic problems existing between the churches nor fulfil their potential. The question of structure is vital. Dr Günther Gassmann, in discussing the suggestion of 'altar and pulpit fellowship' as a goal of Lutheran-Reformed conversations in Europe, points out that, although they leave open the question of structure, they do imply the possibility of organic union.⁸

Common worship at the local level is central to the whole enterprise of union, for it incorporates the dimension of the reconciliation of persons (and not only institutions) to one another. A 'fully committed fellowship' without at least the *possibility* of regular sacramental sharing is difficult to envisage by New Testament standards. For fellowship to live and develop, some kind of form and structure becomes necessary. The mutual recognition of ministers and members that is inherent in all union schemes plays a crucial role here.

Union at the local level has the further benefit of making possible the reconciliation of human diversity and social pluralism in face-to-face encounter, which is undoubtedly one of the effects of genuine worship. The Church of South India has made this point very clearly. By its explicit decision to bring together into single congregations the various

⁸ G. GASSMANN, 'Kirchenunion — Eine unausweichliche Herausforderung?', *Kirchenunionen und Kirchengemeinschaft*, R. Groscurth (ed.), Frankfurt: Verlag O. Lembeck, 1971, p. 72.

economic, racial, intellectual and even caste strata, it made vividly clear that redemption in Christ is, by itself, enough to reconcile into a fruitful fellowship men previously divided at all levels. Union recognizes the validity of the fact that there are theological and social questions which are decisively shaped by, and can only be settled in, the context in which churches live and encounter one another locally.

2. 'Having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service' : mission in the world

One of the themes of the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910 was that the world mission of the Church could not be accomplished by a divided Church. The intervening sixty years have but confirmed the inseparability of mission and unity. Witness the Limuru report :

'Unity and mission are indeed very closely linked, but it should not be overlooked that the achievement of union is in itself a witness to Christ. Uniting churches, while negotiating, should always seek not only unity in the given place, but unity in all places ; the efforts toward union should not be limited to the negotiating churches but the unity of all Christians in a world-wide fellowship should be kept in mind. Even organic union is a penultimate, not an ultimate form. It must constantly be transcended ; the Church must remember that it is *in via*.'⁹

Councils of Churches have provided significant opportunities for joint action for mission in many parts of the world. Elsewhere consortia of particular boards and agencies of individual churches have created even more adventurous possibilities for mutual assistance on particular projects, usually short-term in nature. But there is an indivisible connection between worship and the planning and implementation of mission, between *koinonia* and *diakonia*, which will sooner or later call into question the adequacy of the sharing of personnel, funds or property, while continuing 'business as usual' in separated eucharistic and preaching services.

Union, involving a full integration of structure and planning, is an 'expensive', long-term commitment. It provides no easy escape-hatch if problems arise. On the other hand, a united church enables effective common action and increases the options available to particular task

⁹ *Mid-Stream*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

forces. 'Certainly the alternatives (to union) at hand require no long-term commitment and do little or nothing to counteract the bias to compete inherent in the denominational systems.'¹⁰ New ventures in mission carried on in a united church can rely on a deeper continuity; they are not so dependent upon individuals, nor as prone to be victims of short-term enthusiasm and commitment as consortia or councils of churches.

The vital element is that the structure, whether administrative, ministerial or liturgical, succeed in reflecting the basic nature of the church, that it express the truth of the *source* of Christian unity, and encourage and strengthen Christians to live their daily lives *within* that larger unity, in relation both to God and to their fellow man.

The experience of united churches bears witness to their greater freedom in mission. Thus, in commemoration of the founding of the Church of South India twenty-five years ago, Lesslie Newbigin has written: 'The most obvious advantage of unity has been its ability to tackle new issues quickly and with concentration (. . .) The new problems and opportunities could never have been tackled by a lot of competing denominations.'¹¹

Not least in importance is the matter of stewardship of resources. Church union results in countless amounts of time, energy and money being freed by the simple avoidance of duplication and competition, whether in education, evangelism, institutions or social service.

But the heart of organic union is not a highly centralized administrative type of organization, as the loose diocesan structure of the CSI makes clear, but rather a fully shared experience of inter-connected life. True organic unity is present when a single stream of life flows through all parts of a church and no part of it is shut off from any aspect of the common experience. The various types of united churches have shown that different types of organization can provide for this.

3. 'Holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel'

Against this strand in the New Delhi statement it is often objected that union involves a regrettable compromising of doctrine, a watering-down of confessionally distinctive positions. What is to be said to this?

¹⁰ JOHN W. GRANT, 'Church Union and the Up-To-Date Ecumenist', *The Ecumenist*, X, 6, September-October, 1972, p. 82.

¹¹ L. NEWBIGIN, '25 Years with the Church of South India', *The Christian Advocate*, 21 December 1972, XVI, 23, p. 14.

Individual confessions have evolved in particular theological and cultural contexts, usually with the intent of at least correcting the one-sidedness or inadequacies of an 'opposing' version of Christian doctrine. But the confessional separatism which has resulted has served to obscure the catholicity of the Church. When each different theological insight is made the basis of a separate ecclesiastical organization the result is merely the familiar struggle of rival groups which the Apostle Paul had to reprove in the Corinthian Church.

According to the experience of those who have already united, on the other hand, as by the faith and expectation of those who are negotiating, that which the churches share in their doctrine and life is more basic and decisive than what divides them. More light will be thrown upon their own original positions and a fuller apprehension of the truth will be found by consultation, worship and life together with Christians of other traditions than by continuing separate existence in confessional enclaves.

Every Christian body continues to bear the marks of the metaphors of community and government that were current at the time and place of its foundation. These are deeply embedded in the different understandings of Christian truth and order. But how are the confessions to be re-interpreted when the theological and social situations in which they were rooted have changed? What is the rationale for retaining confessional identities and structures, nationally or internationally, when agreements can be reached that go beyond the traditional sources of disagreement, that reconcile the quarrels which in the past gave the families of churches their *raison d'être*?¹²

Union negotiators have discovered that their various confessions can best be understood and apprehended, without caricature and in faithfulness to their original intention, within a community of people who are working toward a common goal, and who have committed themselves to one another. Most bases of union remain intentionally modest theologically, building on the insight that deeper theological agreement can only be reached *within* a united church, after a period of common life, as indeed was the case in the primitive Church. This is so because Christian community is primary; when such community exists, the quest for wider unity and deeper doctrinal elaboration can progress, built on mutual recognition in communion in Christ. In this

¹² G. MOEDE, 'Kirchenunionen in den siebziger Jahren', *Kirchenunionen und Kirchengemeinschaft*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

sense, a 'mutually committed fellowship' can best grow within a basis of commitment. The search for mutual theological understanding and synthesis cannot be seen as something to be completed before any reform of local church life is begun. 'The danger of which all who are taking part in the work of the Faith and Order movement are conscious is that the process of theological synthesis should become a matter of the study and the conference-room, divorced from the actual life of the congregation and the parish. The two processes — the search for theological synthesis and the effort to bring the actual (local) life of the Church into conformity with its true nature — must proceed together, reinforcing and illuminating one another.' ¹³

Nor is this insight confined to those who have traditionally set less store by confessions. A Lutheran theologian, for example, can write :

'Today it is possible to say that the traditional principle "doctrinal conversation and doctrinal agreement first, and only then church fellowship" has, even on the Lutheran side, been recognized as too rigidly one-sided and has therefore been considerably modified (...) It is the end product that counts (...) it is recognized that there is a clear inter-relation, a sort of "circle" between the fact of living and experiencing fellowship on the one hand, and explicit agreement on faith and doctrine on the other.' ¹⁴

Perhaps even more important, when community in Christ is accepted as primary, there can be greater freedom for a wide variety of opinions on non-essentials (to use a Methodist phrase), which is one of the ingredients of the true conciliar nature of the Church. 'Only a Church which was not afraid of "tensions" and which was able to discern without prejudice the "wholeness" of the revelation in Christ, would have dared to set side by side four differing Gospels, the Epistles of St Paul and St James, the apostolic history of Acts and the eschatology of the Apocalypse, and to acclaim them all as normative.' ¹⁵

The Scheme of Union of the Church of South India 'deliberately stated that room was to be made in the united church for widely different, and even mutually contradictory opinions within the framework of a firm adherence to "the fundamentals of the faith and order of the Church Universal" '. It is not as if confessional truths have no validity or that

¹³ L. NEWBIGIN, *The Reunion of the Church*, London : SCM Press, 1960, pp. 182-183.

¹⁴ HARDING MEYER, 'The Lutheran World Federation and its Role in the Ecumenical Movement', *Lutheran World*, Vol. XX No. 1, 1973, p. 22.

¹⁵ 'Catholicity : A Report to His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury', Dacre Press, 1947, p. 15.

'the wholeness of the Christian pattern can be achieved by tying the broken pieces together by the merely external bands of a new organization'. Rather, it is that the unity of the Church is a reality more deeply founded than the unanimity of a theological school, and 'that, amid all that is arguable and uncertain, the central and simple fact of redemption into Christ makes outward division intolerable'.¹⁶

This is not to endorse a 'least-common-denominator' approach to church unity. United churches, to be genuine, are resurrections from the death of their parents — a break in outward identity is involved. It is to say that each tradition has a gift to bring as well as a hull to be left behind, that a new, more catholic, visible form may emerge in a local congregation's life which gathers up unto itself more of the full and many-sided richness of the whole Christian tradition.

Preparation for union gives not only the stimulus, but the necessity to rethink, to take cognizance of the truths the other(s) has preserved, to set new priorities, to discard outmoded policies or phraseologies, and to work out, perhaps painfully, a new articulation of faith as well as the structures to implement this understanding in the world. It offers the possibility of sharing with others a denominational treasure and insight, as well as gaining by integrating what someone else has preserved into one's own. Uniting churches are forced to re-articulate their faith in terms comprehensible in their contemporary context, and as they adapt their previous structures to one another are forced to the realization that structure is subservient to unity.

The unity of the Church — The unity of mankind

So far we have not taken any account of a whole new range of questions. Should the churches not also, indeed primarily, seek their unity through solidarity with those forces in modern life, such as the struggle for racial equality, which are drawing men and women closer together (and, in some cases, pulling them apart)? Is there not a real relationship to be pursued between the visible unity of Christians and the unity of mankind in other respects? Thinking on such questions was already visible in Vatican II, where, in the *De Ecclesia* (§ 1), it was said that 'the Church exists in Christ as a sacrament or instrumental sign of intimate union with God and of unity for the whole human race'.

Preparation for union can allow, even force, such questions to be faced, as the Plan of the Consultation on Church Union makes clear:

¹⁶ NEWBIGIN, *The Reunion of the Church*, op. cit., p. 186.

'We open ourselves individually and corporately to renewal from the Holy Spirit, struggle against racism, poverty, environmental blight, war and other problems of the family of man, minister to the deep yearning of the human spirit for fullness of life.'¹⁷

Plans of Union have been more sensitive to such questions in the last decade. Will the practices of the united church allow and encourage the finding of full identity by members of all races involved in it? What is its concern for the creation of just structures in its society, for the full development of peoples beyond its borders, or for the quality of the physical environment in which its people live? Indeed, the Faith and Order Commission has listed this confrontation as one of the characteristics of union negotiations: 'Union negotiations, so far from permitting an evasion of the issues which threaten humanity, in practice compel the churches to face them more honestly. The overcoming of its own divisions is part of the Church's inescapable obligation to work, as the forgiven and forgiving community, for the healing of the nations and the unity of mankind.'¹⁸

Furthermore, union negotiations which take seriously the dimension of personal reconciliation are providing multilateral 'encounters' in the preparation of union schemes; intentionally built into such encounters is consideration of such questions as race, environment and justice. In these the new unity can already be experienced and old animosities and misunderstandings be reconciled.

But how is true community established and maintained? Certainly the freedom to discover and express identity is essential, as is a framework in which the reconciliation of differences can take place. In an anguished world where so many have felt a sense of isolation caused by the alienation of social groups, by the immense complexity of organizations which structure society, or by ever-present competition, it may well be that the building of community is one of the primary contributions a church has to make to society. 'The communion of persons at its highest level is an interpenetration of existences achieved beyond the range of language. This is the protean source of energy that makes human society both human and possible (...) A recovered sense of communion among Christians should lead to the increased awareness that the corporate life of Christians as one people is but a manifestation of the participation

¹⁷ *A Plan of Union for the Church of Christ Uniting*, Princeton, N J: Consultation on Church Union, 1970.

¹⁸ *Faith and Order*, Louvain, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

by individual Christians in the communion of *persons* who *themselves* are *one* and who have drawn us into their inexhaustible life.' ¹⁹

In this context, the consummation of union can provide the incentive for a new church to commit itself to demonstrate a broadened inclusiveness of race and class, with equitable participation of all minorities at all levels of life and mission, manifesting in its own life that wholeness of humanity which demonstrates the divine hope and promise for mankind.

II

Limitations of union as a model

We have been discussing several of the ways by which organic union can fulfil the imperative of Christian unity. But there are further dimensions of that call for which union schemes have not yet come up with adequate solutions.

1. *Local — universal*

While union convincingly dramatizes the call for churches to be 'one in each place', its necessary preoccupation with the local does not address the question how relationships within the world-wide community of the Church are to be structured. 'If this effort for the universal dimension, i.e. the dimension of the Christian faith which transcends and intersects the secular dividing lines of this world, is neglected it could happen that we indeed leave behind the confessional divisions of Christianity, but exchange them for national, regional, racial and cultural separations, which might be deadlier for the reconciling ministry of the Church in the world than all confessional divergencies.' ²⁰ National isolation will always be a danger in national unions, but it must be said that most negotiations are aware of the pitfalls :

'The bonds now existing between the uniting churches and other Christian bodies (confessional, conciliar and the like) should be preserved. The unity of Christ's body is indivisible. To manifest it in the local community without expressing it in a broader area would be as defeating of ecumenical purpose as is preoccupation with world denominational or confessional unity without attention to other ecumenical options (...) We recognize the dangers in a church organized solely on a national basis, as nationalistic attitudes may pervert or silence the prophetic voice of the church.'²¹

¹⁹ JOHN F. HOTCHKIN, 'COCU and the Wider Reality of Ecumenism', *Church Union at Mid-Point*, Crow and Boney (eds.), New York : Association Press, 1972, p. 220.

²⁰ H. MEYER, 'The Gospel and our Union', *Lutheran World*, Vol. XIX, No. 3, 1972, p. 246.

²¹ COCU *Plan of Union*, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13.

Just as all Christians in each place should be bound together in a common life of worship, witness and service, so the Church as a whole must be ordered in such ways that each local fellowship is recognizably one with other Christians throughout the world. We all agree in principle, but the forms which would effectively secure Christian unity at continental, regional or world levels still need to be agreed.

Here again, a central question will be precisely what we mean by organic unity. Will it suffice to express unity at the international level by the evolution of 'full communion' through the historic episcopate, or must the united church also be structurally integrated, so as to enable common decisions and joint action? A distinction is often made between *communion* and *organization*. Does the goal of the ecumenical movement include both, or only the former? The universal Church could become one communion without becoming a single *organization* — it appears that the apostolic church and the church of the Fathers would fit such a description. But how would a world communion be structurally expressed? 'The objective is to find a way, starting from the divided state in which we find ourselves, to that pattern of inter-church life, local, regional and international, which will express the truth about the (nature of the) Church in the fullest and clearest way.'²²

As mankind becomes more and more aware of inhabiting a 'global village' there will be an increasing number of tasks which can be fulfilled only by a cooperation which transcends the local level. 'If the church is to fulfil any function, e.g. in the field of development or race, close collaboration of Christians at all levels is called for (...) The consciousness of belonging everywhere to one and the same people must grow. The Church must be able to get engaged in action as a universal fellowship (...) Only a new appreciation of the relationship between the local and the universal Church can lead further.'²³

Recently the 'world confessional families' have developed as channels through which the 'universal' considerations of the Church can flow and be appropriated. To the extent that may they have discouraged local efforts at union, or encouraged confessional solidarity 'till the end of

²² J. PACKER, *Organic Unity?*, an unpublished MS of the British Council of Churches, January 1972, p. 2.

²³ LUKAS VISCHER, *Mid-Stream*, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

²⁴ See H. MEYER, 'Relations between United Churches and World Confessional Families', *Mid-Stream*, *op. cit.*, p. 109; he quotes the Evian Report (1970): 'Statement Concerning the Attitudes of the Lutheran World Federation to Churches in Union Negotiations'.

time' they have also acted as a braking force. Nevertheless, it must be said that these families have gradually, increasingly recognized the place of union, and begun to articulate this recognition.²⁴

The universal dimension of unity poses a problem to united churches as well as to non-united. When six denominations unite to form a new church (as in North India), should the united church retain relationships with the six 'parent' world families? Or should the constantly growing number of united churches form a world body of their own? And if they do, how can relationships be fostered with other families?

2. *Identity*

We have already referred to the problem posed by the 'loss of identity' which union involves; both Lukas Vischer (above, p. 166) and the Salamanca report (below, p. 291) go into it. Here, then, no more than a few points in passing.

Although there are 'riches to be gained' by entering into the identity of others, the loss or change of one's own always poses a threat, primarily emotional in nature. It is therefore understandable that churches are willing to unite only when they believe that some kind of continuity with the past is being maintained. At the very least, it is vital that uniting churches ascertain that the truths for which the reforming churches originally fought be integrated into the new constitution or confession of faith. Any attempt to overrule distinctive and particular confessional embodiments of Christian faith will only arouse resistance.

Stephen Neill articulates the problem well:

'The final and terrible difficulty is that churches cannot unite unless they are willing to die. In a truly united church, there would be no more Anglicans or Lutherans or Presbyterians or Methodists. But the disappearance from the world of those great and honoured names is the very thing that many loyal churchmen are not prepared to face.'²⁵

The New Delhi Statement on Unity was followed by these two sentences:

'The achievement of unity will involve nothing less than a death and rebirth of many forms of church life as we have known them. We believe that nothing less costly can finally suffice.'

²⁵ S. NEILL, 'Plans of Union and Reunion', *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, R. Rouse and S. Neill (eds.), London: SPCK, 1954, p. 495.

Patrick Rodger has cogently commented :

‘I am not sure what weight we should give to that little word “finally”, but it is certain that the way of Cross and Ressurrection, the way of Christ Himself, is one which we see quite clearly and one from which our human weakness shrinks again and again. Frantic appeals are still heard to some inviolable national or confessional tradition ; wearisome denunciations are directed against some imagined threat of “uniformity” ; and the unspoken prayer of many is “O Lord, make us one, but not yet”. For this adversary there is surely no remedy even in the very best kind of theological argument. “This sort goes out but by prayer and fasting.” ’²⁶

3. *Education and participation — leaders and followers*

All too many negotiations, and even unions, have been clergy dominated and implemented, with little, or at best insufficient, attention paid to the members of the church ! Although at many points the final plan will inevitably be prepared by specialists, a failure to bring the constituency along with the developing conversation will cripple the entire undertaking at crucial points, and gravely weaken the possibility for genuine renewal which preparations for union can provide.

Opportunities should be provided from the very start for doctrinal and other questions to be answered, fears to be voiced and misunderstandings to be cleared. Apprehensions regarding loss of identity or the disappearance of confessional traditions and principles in a united church can often be removed by bringing the members of one church into direct contact with those of the other churches involved. Any negative statements and accusations made should be promptly and forthrightly answered, preferably at the level on which they originate.

In most negotiations there is simply a gap in interpretation — ‘What is this plan, why is it being prepared, how will it affect us ?’

At the Bossey and Limuru consultations the needs for education, information-sharing and personal encounter at all levels were continually stressed.²⁷ In recent years many negotiating committees have begun to give more attention to the *process of preparing for union*, focussing primarily upon the local communities and their needs, rather than on the regional or national structures. But no adequate way has yet been

²⁶ PATRICK RODGER, ‘Unity : A Wide Door and Many Adversaries’, *Ecumenical Review*, Vol. XVII No. 2, p. 215.

²⁷ See, for example, the address by Paul Crow : ‘Education for Church Union — A Plea for Encounter’, in the Limuru *Mid-Stream*, pp. 82-100 .

found to relate the disparate local elements with one another to everyone's satisfaction. Indeed, the great difficulty of this task was one of the primary factors in the recent 'localizing' of active union plans in the Consultation on Church Union in the United States.

4. *Pluralism, diversity and conciliarity*

The phenomenon which most sharply challenges organic union as a desirable or feasible model of unity is probably that of diversity. For years people have insisted that unity does not mean uniformity, but today there is in many quarters a renewed appreciation of the value of varied approaches and varied habits, not least in religious matters.

Of course, in every social institution or community, including the Church, the affirmation of freedom and diversity also raises the issue of the appropriate degree of order and integrity. 'The same apostle who extolled the diverse gifts of the Spirit and the varieties of ministries also insisted that those were intended to build up the whole Church, the body of Christ (...) There is no question then, that a church body must have a certain consistency of organization and polity, as well as doctrine, even while these do not constitute a restrictive and stifling uniformity.' ²⁸

What is essential, however, as attempts continue to work out a 'truly universal conciliar form of life' (Uppsala), is that every person in a church be represented at some level, that everyone have opportunity to make his voice heard, to make his contribution. 'To accept conciliarity as the direction in which we must move means deepening our mutual commitment at all levels. This does not mean movement in the direction of uniformity (...) If the unity of the Church is to serve the unity of mankind, it must provide room both for a wide variety of forms, and for differences and even conflicts. The conciliarity of the Church requires the involvement of the entire lay membership, including as it should every segment of mankind.' ²⁹

Can a united church, as a form of unity, creatively embody the distinctive elements in the religious experience of minority groups or fruitfully embrace the wave of experimentation in new forms of worship and styles of community life? This question has been exercising many negotiating committees, especially since 1970. In many places it is

²⁸ J. ROBERT NELSON, 'The Critics and the Union We Seek', *Church Union at Mid-Point*, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

²⁹ *Faith and Order*, Louvain 1971, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

feared that a national or even sub-national organization will tend to hamper authentic local expressions of faith and unity, homogenizing valid diversity. Such concerns have recently prompted the Consultation on Church Union in the United States to shift its strategy in the direction of encouraging a large variety of local experiments and experiences, with the hope that local unity growing out of such testing grounds (joint action in mission, common worship, education) would make more clear the kind of structure necessary for the united church.

Although Councils of Churches have, to some extent, succeeded, united churches have had difficulty in 'structuring' the possibility of conflict into their decision-making processes in order that genuine conciliarity may develop. 'The typical church-meeting format does not allow effective decision-making in such a diverse situation. Therefore it is necessary to invent procedures by which a conflict of interest can result in a unified but differentiated programme operation.'³⁰

In the same context, it has not yet become clear why, in many united churches, after 'theological consensus' has been achieved, the 'structures' envisaged for life together in the church provide so many problems. Is this to be attributed to a *lack* in the theological consensus — that is to say, that the spiritual hunger and search for community felt by so many have not become living realities in the Plan? If this is true, it points to the continuing failure in providing true encounter in the years before union.

It must also be admitted that, in spite of provision for unity within diversity in the plans, there is generally an expectation of a *confluence*, of a sharing of certain patterns in all places, in the coming united church. Union planners today need rather to devote their imagination to suggesting structures of government and order that will support rather than suppress innovation.³¹

For as yet there is no certainty that church union (at least in an administratively centralized form) can effectively *relate* diverse styles of life and thought into a workable whole without stifling the necessary freedom and initiative. Nor has the specific historical and cultural experience of the negotiating churches, let alone the particular missionary context in which they are set, been sufficiently allowed to inform the resulting plan. The *Eglise du Christ au Zaïre* is in this respect an important

³⁰ T. ERICKSON, 'Parish Plan and Perspective', *Church Union at Mid-Point*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

³¹ GRANT, *loc. cit.*, p. 83.

sign : here for once is a church discovering its unity in a consciously African style.

The union model does effectively demonstrate that the individual church is primarily a 'gathering' ; it thus offers a partial solution to the 'parish mentality' which developed after entire regions were assumed to have been 'christianized' and a parochial division by districts seemed reasonable. But the union model has not yet solved the dilemma posed by the fact that these 'gatherings' can (and perhaps must) appear in different sociological forms.³²

III

Conclusion : The risk of church union

The union of churches should not be idealized. Union and preparation for union creates many new problems. It is always an adventure in faith. It offers no easy or cheap solution. In fact, the planning and execution of union cannot guarantee any benefit — neither renewal, nor greater theological integrity, nor even pragmatic efficiency. The upheavals necessitated by union can divert attention and energy from mission ; the inevitable, temporary introversion can all too easily become a permanent life-style.

What union *does* guarantee is opportunity and stimulus for a re-study of the past and an openness to the future. The Church of South India has set a good example in its ruthlessly self-critical *Renewal and Advance*.³³

New problems which emerge in the preparation for union range from the creative bringing together of complementary doctrinal viewpoints to the re-writing of constitutions and the merging of institutions.

The very struggle to overcome the new problems can have a salutary welding effect on the new church. Then too, the setting up of new structures forces institutional realignment and overhaul. Although the problems regarding persons are great (and threatening), almost invariably 'bureaucratic dead-weight' is found which can be re-deployed more effectively elsewhere.

³² A further theme which might have deserved some pages here, and to which both the Limuru and Salamanca consultations gave some time, is that of the legal questions over which so many union negotiations have stumbled. Faith and Order has convened a special meeting on these at the end of March 1974.

³³ Report of the Church of South India Commission on Integration and Joint Action ; Madras : Christian Literature Society, 1963.

Dying to old ways, to long-established and cherished traditions, is always painful ; not all are willing to take the final risk. No hope of modernization or administrative or practical efficiency is sufficient to motivate churches to undergo the pain and surgery which union involves. The only adequate imperative, as they invariably recognize, is obedience to God's will. The decisive *ex post facto* evidence of the benefits of union must therefore come from the united churches themselves.

Of the sixty-three major church unions consummated since 1925, with the innumerable problems and people involved (including those which were 'united' by governmental order), not one has disintegrated or subsequently foundered. Of the one hundred and twenty-five churches now negotiating toward union in thirty-four negotiations, more than a third are already united churches ; twenty-four negotiations are inter-confessional.

'Time has shown many imperfections in their work, and much revision of the original ideas of union has had to be carried through. But those who have had experience of life in these united churches are almost unanimous in affirming that, though union may have brought loss in certain directions and though some hopes may have been unfulfilled, it is impossible that they should ever consider going back to their earlier state of division. To do so would seem to manifest a betrayal of the cause of Christ.' ³⁴

When one notes the great risk involved in such undertakings, and then remembers the startling fact that not a single union has subsequently disintegrated (as so many business mergers do) one is forced to conclude that their oft-alluded-to dependence upon God is a genuine and decisive element in the uniting of churches. In spite of — even because of — all the human problems involved, the Holy Spirit has indeed been leading them into fuller truth and deeper commitment. A wider experience of catholicity has commended itself ; the openness to the future which made union possible is deepened and broadened still further ; the united church is not an end, but has become a step on the way to the fuller unity.³⁵

³⁴ NEILL, *op. cit.*, p. 491.

³⁵ MOEDE, *loc. cit.*, p. 23.

THE WORLD CONFESSIONAL FAMILIES IN THE SERVICE OF UNITY

NILS EHRENSTRÖM¹

Are the World Confessional Families ecumenical? The answer to this ambiguous question is partly a matter of semantics. But it also reflects a sentiment of perplexity in face of developments in world Christianity which many times appear contradictory and dismaying. While notable advances have been made in mutual acceptance, co-operation and even union, all this is still a mere beginning. The old ecumenical battle cry, 'God wills it and the world's need demands it!', has lost nothing of its imperative urgency.

The rise of the modern ecumenical movement has gone hand in hand with a resurgence and world-wide consolidation of confessional self-consciousness. In the past decade in particular, a change has become noticeable in the relations between the 'confessional' and the 'ecumenical' bodies, which is mirrored in a seemingly trifling shift of language. Not long ago, it was customary to speak of 'the WCFs *and* the ecumenical movement'. Today it is becoming equally natural to use the formulation 'the WCFs *in* the ecumenical movement'. The conjunction 'and' covers as usual a multitude of ambiguities. At one extreme, it suggests an identification: the WCFs constitute the true ecumenical movement. In the formative days of the World Council of Churches there were those who contended that the Council ought to be built not on individual churches but on 'confessional pillars'. Conversely, the WCFs are often branded as unecumenical on various grounds. For anti-doctrinal, anti-institutional and 'instant' ecumenists, the claims of confessional families appear reactionary and arrogant. For 'secular' ecumenists, what counts is rather the common struggle of Christians and others for bread, justice and peace for all, not the irrelevant game of unifying divided churches. For many Christian leaders in the Third World, the missionary and financial policies of WCFs, perpetuating western divisions, are the main obstacle to the united witness of a united Church.

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Such extreme positions are now increasingly being superseded by a more inclusive view, expressed in the second formulation, 'the WCFs in the ecumenical movement'. Behind this shift lies a double conviction — that the ecumenical movement is one, and that the WCFs themselves form part of it. However much tension and conflict still exists among confessional families and between them and other forms of the unity movement, they are all bound together and responsible for each other. Everyone is ecumenical — though some, of course, are more ecumenical than others.

The complexity and magnitude of the matter becomes vividly manifest when one considers the partners involved: the Anglican Communion, the Baptist World Alliance, Friends World Committee for Consultation, the Lutheran World Federation, the Mennonite World Conference, the Old Catholic Churches, the Pentecostal World Conference, the Roman Catholic Church, the Salvation Army, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the World Convention of the Churches of Christ (Disciples), the World Methodist Council². What have these groupings in common apart from the Christian name? They stand for widely divergent positions on fundamental matters, and what is legitimate diversity to some, is to others a perversion or secession. While most of them are associations of churches or communities, some are in effect transnational churches, like the Orthodox, Roman Catholics and Seventh-day Adventists. They range from a world church with a solid global structure and an estimated membership of over 700 million people to 'societies of Friends' totalling some 200,000 people and represented by nothing more binding than a consultative committee.

Because of their extreme heterogeneity, the difficulty of defining common characteristics arises already with respect to nomenclature. Such term as 'confessions', 'communions', 'denominations', while congenial to some, are uncongenial to others. In 1957 an annual Conference of Secretaries of World Confessional Families was initiated in Geneva to serve as an informal forum for exchange of information and for discussion of common concerns. The Conference adopted in 1967 a description, still in use, which seeks to embrace Protestant and Anglican world bodies as well as Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches:

² HAROLD E. FEY gives a succinct account of them up to 1968 in his essay, 'Confessional Families and the Ecumenical Movement' in *The Ecumenical Advance: A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, Vol. 2, 1948-1968, pp. 115-142.

'The term "World Confessional Families" is used here for the various Christian traditions taken as a whole. Each World Confessional Family consists of churches belonging to the same tradition and held together by this common heritage ; they are conscious of living in the same universal fellowship and give to this consciousness at least some structural expression.'

Behind this difficulty of finding a common nomenclature reside, obviously, far more serious problems of substance. Is it at all possible to make any material statements representative of all the Families as a whole? Existing statements, presumed to be inclusive, are in fact usually applicable only to certain Families — mostly the Protestant ones, thus attesting the Protestant predominance in the discussions around the WCFs and their ecumenical role. Thereby the impression is unwittingly created of a wider agreement than actually exists, tending to deflect attention from the deep-seated divergences that must be squarely faced in any Protestant-Orthodox-Roman Catholic dialogue. A genuine dialogue of this kind on fundamentals of the faith has hardly yet begun. In the realm of cooperation, a similar situation prevails.

Given the circumstances, it is at present in the field of bilateral (and not omnilateral) relations between particular Families that some real advance is being made. We shall therefore take a look firstly at current bilateral dialogues and their contribution to the search for unity, and then return to the broader question of the ecumenical role of the WCFs generally.

I. The bilateral dialogues

Bilateral dialogues — in the sense of 'theological conversations undertaken by officially appointed representatives of two churches, two traditions, or two confessional families, with purposes ranging from promoting mutual understanding to achieving full fellowship' — are of course no novelty, but since the early 1960s they have seen a remarkable expansion. The list is long and lengthening³. On the world level one finds Anglicans in dialogue with Lutherans, Orthodox and Roman

³ For an account and appraisal see N. EHRENSTRÖM and G. GASSMANN, *Confessions in Dialogue: A Survey of Bilateral Conversations among World Confessional Families 1962-1971*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1972. The reader should also consult JOHN DESCHNER's article, 'Developments in the Field of Church Unity', *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. XXIV No. 4, 1972, pp. 447-458.

Catholics ; Roman Catholics with Lutherans, Methodists, Old Catholics, Pentecostals and Reformed ; Old Catholics with Orthodox ; Eastern with Oriental Orthodox ; and Baptists with Reformed. Several of them have further undertaken deliberate drives to associate with their world conversations a whole network of parallel national and regional conversations. By this method of vertical interaction, the conversations at all levels are gaining in outreach as well as in concreteness and depth. In addition there exist scores of official and unofficial bilaterals involving churches in individual countries — eleven in the USA alone — or in two countries as, for example, the conversations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Evangelical Church in Germany.

Why this unexpected upsurge of bilateral encounters ? In the first place, they have proved to be more effective in resolving the specific problems separating two traditions than are the usual multilateral approaches. When for instance the Roman Catholic Church entered the ecumenical scene at the time of Vatican II, it favoured, and still favours, one-to-one conversations ; these are believed to offer greater possibilities for closer acquaintance and for focussed exploration of controverted issues. Another positive factor is the official and representative character of the groups. Some see this as a drawback, yet it undoubtedly enhances the weight of their findings ; these cannot so easily be dismissed as the phantasies of irresponsible theologians. The authorization of a bilateral inquiry implies on the part of the sponsoring bodies a public commitment, if not to specific results, in any case to the process of seeking a *rapprochement*. Again, even if bilateral consensus statements only rarely obtain explicit ecclesiastical endorsement, the fact that responsible spokesmen are speaking with one voice on gravely divisive issues does exercise a formative influence on theological and public opinion in the churches. The bilaterals are sometimes criticized for being overly preoccupied with divisions inherited from the past. The peril of antiquarianism is real, and many controversial issues have indeed lost their divisive power. But the quest cannot simply be dismissed. Acts of agreement and recognition, which leave unresolved the traumatic conflicts of the past, can only remain a fragile half-measure. The fullness of unity requires a reconciliation with the past and between divided pasts — acts of repentance in which churches accept to bear each other's burdens of disobedience and error. A more serious weakness is the geographical lop-sidedness of most bilaterals. With the exception of some Anglican-Roman Catholic groups, they are regrettably scarce in

the Third World. Is it not cause for alarm that precisely those churches which are in the frontlines of church union endeavours are so seldom involved in the world-wide bilateral explorations ?

The dialogues display a broad variety of aims, subject matter and methods. 'To lead the churches out of isolation into conversation' was the initial objective of the Faith and Order movement. The bilaterals, too, usually begin with an exercise in mutual presentation and interpretation. Sometimes this is not only the beginning but also the modest end of the encounter. Most of them, however, go on to focus on those particular issues — doctrinal, liturgical, structural, ethical — which separate the traditions concerned, probing the religious intentions behind divisive formulations and attitudes and pressing forward to affirmations of shared faith. Beyond this, several dialogues are from the outset deliberately oriented toward some form of church unity.

The bilaterals thus tend to concentrate on classic Faith and Order subjects such as the ministry, eucharist and intercommunion, Scripture and tradition, and on pastoral and canonical problems such as those around mixed marriage. Matters of church and society appear less frequently ; the issues at stake are rarely bilateral, and the contending convictions cut across denominational boundaries.

The inevitable question arises : Do these bilateral conversations show any results ? A distinction must be made here between advances in theological understanding and the responses of leaders and opinion-moulders in the churches (which is a different story). The agreements reached may appear bland and overcautious. Yet measured against the entrenched divisions they are seeking to overcome it becomes clear that several of them have in effect achieved breakthroughs of historic significance.

Ministry and unity in four dialogues

By way of illustration we shall refer here to four dialogues of recent date, whose findings represent the most advanced level of theological inter-penetration : the international Anglican-Lutheran ⁴, Anglican-Roman Catholic ⁵, Lutheran-Roman Catholic ⁶ conversations and further

⁴ 'Report of the Anglican-Lutheran International Conversations 1970-1972', *Lutheran World*, Vol. XIX No. 4, 1972, pp. 387-399 ; *Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue : A Progress Report*, Cincinnati : Forward Movement Publications, 1973.

⁵ *An Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine and Ministry and Ordination : An Agreed Statement on the Doctrine of the Ministry*, London : SPCK, 1972 and 1973 ; *Documents on Anglican/Roman Catholic Relations*, I, 1972 ; II, 1973, Washington, DC : United States Catholic Conference, Publications Office.

⁶ 'Report of the Joint Lutheran/Roman Catholic Study Commission on "The Gospel and the Church"', *Lutheran World*, Vol. XIX No. 3, 1972, pp. 259-273.

the regional Lutheran-Reformed conversations in Europe⁷. Attention will be focussed on their understanding of the ministry and of the kind of unity to be envisaged.

The inability of major Christian traditions to recognize each other's ministerial orders has thus far been one of the most formidable barriers to unity. One needs only to recall the Roman Catholic rejection of the validity of Anglican orders, the Anglican insistence on the historic episcopate in union negotiations with non-episcopal churches, or the Protestant confusion about the nature of the ordained ministry. Yet in this area the bilaterals are making spectacular advances — no doubt as part of a general theological reorientation, but more pointedly and concretely than is the case in multilateral discussions. This is achieved by penetrating behind the points of impasse to the foundations of the faith, reflecting on the Church's ministry in today's world, accenting shared beliefs, and reinterpreting the divisive issues in this new and wider context. Thus the ministry is rethought in the setting of the apostolic mission and ministry of the whole Church to the whole world. Allowance is made for diverse forms of apostolic 'oversight' (*episcopé*) in the Church since New Testament times. The unfortunate polarizations arising in the 16th and 17th centuries between a preaching ministry and a sacramental priesthood are overcome in the recognition that the ordained ministry is a ministry of both the word and the sacraments.

These brief allusions must suffice. Of more immediate interest in the present discussion of the WCFs are the emerging conclusions. Thus the Anglican-Roman Catholic commission records a basic agreement 'on essential matters where it considers that doctrine admits no divergence', thereby offering 'a positive contribution to the reconciliation of our churches and their ministries'. It is now engaged in a restudy of the authority structure of the Church, including the question of primacy. The Anglican-Lutheran partners have gone further in recognizing each other's communions and ministries, although still divided over the shibboleth of the historic episcopate. The Anglican participants cannot foresee full integration of ministries (full communion) apart from the historic episcopate, whereas the Lutherans feel free to accept it where it serves the growing unity of the Church, but insist that it 'should not become a necessary condition for interchurch relations or church union'.

⁷ *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. XXV No. 3, July 1973, pp. 255-259; *Reformed World* 32/6, June 1973, pp. 256-264.

The Lutheran-Roman Catholic commission has taken the astonishingly advanced position of requesting their respective authorities to 'examine seriously' the question of recognizing each other's ministerial office. Whether or not such theological thrusts will be followed some day by ecclesiastical action depends not least on the vigour and wisdom with which the dialogues will come to grips with the ecumenical problem of authority and authorities in the Church. It is now on the agenda of several of these conversations. The Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue in the USA has already spent a number of years on a study of 'Ministry and the Universal Church, with special reference to Papal Primacy', the findings of which are eagerly expected. A background volume on *Peter in the New Testament*, a model of ecumenical cooperation in biblical scholarship, has recently appeared ⁸.

In their approach to unity, these dialogues are not merely after theological clarification: they seek to promote the convergence of the churches by establishing what is the one faith. Hence when they grapple with the classic divisive issues — such as Scripture and tradition, or the synergy of divine grace and human striving in Christian growth, or the eucharistic sacrifice, they do not attempt to resolve them in isolation; the issues are rethought in the organic ecclesial setting in which they function. It is in this manner that misleading antitheses, once forged in the heat of controversy, are corrected, the religious meaning of divergent emphases recovered, and the way paved for genuine convergences.

The quest for full communion provides the common framework, albeit with characteristic differences of interpretation. The Anglican-Roman Catholic conversations are deliberately aimed at preparing the ground for organic unity of the two communions. At a meeting in 1966 between Pope Paul VI and the Archbishop of Canterbury, the two leaders issued a declaration which set the tone by speaking of the inauguration of a 'serious dialogue which, founded on the Gospels and on the ancient common traditions, may lead to that unity in truth for which Christ prayed', and which would remove the obstacles that stand in the way of 'a restoration of complete communion of faith and sacramental life'. A declaration of the common faith, mutual recognition of ministry, a partial eucharistic communion, and an increasing fellowship between the two churches at the parish and other levels, are seen as

⁸ Edited by RAYMOND E. BROWN, KARL P. DONFRIED and JOHN REUMANN, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1973.

interim steps toward the great goal. For the Anglican-Lutheran commission, the unity of the Church can be expressed in a variety of forms, but 'the goal should be full "altar and pulpit fellowship" (full communion), including its acceptance by the individual members of the churches, and structures that will encourage such fellowship and its acceptance'. The Lutheran-Roman Catholic report envisages a theological consensus sufficiently solid and broad to provide a basis for a qualified mutual recognition and occasional reciprocal intercommunion.

While these bilaterals have thus far resulted in a series of theological consensus statements, the so-called Leuenberg Agreement represents a different type. It is a concrete plan for establishing a Europe-wide church fellowship among some 88 Lutheran, Reformed and United Churches and is currently being considered by the churches for ratification by October 1974. Church fellowship, as here used, differs from both an interchurch council and on the other hand a federal or organic union. It means rather that 'on the basis of the consensus they have reached in their understanding of the Gospel, churches with different confessional positions accord each other fellowship in word and sacrament and strive for the fullest possible cooperation in witness and service to the world'. Altar and pulpit fellowship is taken to include mutual recognition of ministry and the freedom to provide for intercelebration. Whether or not such a fellowship may lead on to organic union is left open for the participating churches to decide in light of their own situation.

Looking to the future, five growing concerns deserve particular attention :

1. The simple alternative of bilateral vs. multilateral dialogues is gradually being replaced by more flexible and differentiated views of available options. The same is true of the distinction between bilateral and church union conversations ; some bilaterals do in fact serve as a preparatory step toward church unity.

2. The bilaterals show a partial shift of emphasis from divisive issues of the past to divisive issues of today in church and society. Not that the issues of the past are ignored, but there is a deliberate intent to rethink them in the setting of the Church's task in today's world.

3. There is a noticeable increase of concern with local implementation, participation and experimentation. Sometimes this concern appears to

encourage bold experimentation well beyond established practices. The bilaterals too are beginning to reckon with the fact that, for a rapidly growing number of Christians, the *present* fellowship experienced in the *koinonia* of the Spirit across denominational barriers takes precedence over loyalty to doctrinal and canonical rules which institutionalize *past* experiences of the *koinonia* of the same Spirit in *separated* communities, and which, therefore, are no longer felt to be authoritative.

4. However varied the bilaterals they converge in pointing to ministry as the key problem for years to come — (a) ministry in the Church, and (b) the ministry of the Church to the world. Other pressing questions are those of spirituality and ecumenical dialogue (in what sense is it true, for instance, that ‘the saints always recognize one another’?), or of the utterly complex processes by which different churches learn new truth and reshape their corporate mind.

5. Bilaterals, multilaterals and church union conversations are interdependent and should be properly correlated (a) by adequate cross-representation in membership; (b) by systematic exchange of important documents; (c) by occasional regional and national consultations like that at Salamanca; (d) by cross-conversational studies on the *status questionis* regarding specific problems, so as to provide much-needed overviews of the advancing frontiers of ecumenical theology.

II. The role of the World Confessional Families in the ecumenical movement

Broadening the perspective, we shall now return to the WCFs and consider some proposals for a re-examination of their ecumenical role. This sensitive problem is not a new one, but it has lately assumed fresh urgency and importance. There are a number of factors that, taken together, press for such a scrutiny. Think for example of the remarkable experiences of Christian fellowship in renewal movements of various kinds that sweep across doctrinal, canonical and other boundaries; of the rise of new forms of ecumenism which deny the legitimacy of historic confessional alignments in view of the overriding priority for a united Christian witness on the missionary frontiers of the Gospel everywhere; of the emergence of explosive racial, political and ideological divisions among Christian people; the frustrations caused by the apparently impenetrable complexity and overlapping of confessional and ecumenical structures; and not least of the noteworthy (though still limited) achievements of the bilateral dialogues.

At an informal meeting of WCF representatives at Geneva in June 1973, the possibility of a coordinated approach was considered. It was agreed to submit a proposal to this effect to the Salamanca Consultation and to the annual Conference of Secretaries of WCFs, for referral, if endorsed, to the authorities of the WCFs and the WCC. The proposal envisaged the preparing of a 'joint discussion paper' on ecumenical responsibilities, intended for both the Families and the World Council as they plan for their next assemblies. However varied the ecumenical testimonies of these assemblies might turn out to be, the very fact that they would reflect joint consultation and a common commitment to Jesus Christ and His will for unity would in itself be a challenging symbolic act.

What then would a re-examination of the role of the WCFs in the ecumenical movement imply? Ideally, it would involve an elaboration of the shared beliefs which provide context and criteria for their common search; a realistic self-study of their goals and activities, with special attention to areas of conflict and competition; and a programme of ecumenical education and action expressing their growing fellowship.

The WCFs are related in various ways. They display an increasing convergence in concerns and in ways of functioning. Many of them are represented at the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva, and assemblies and Central Committee meetings of the WCC provide opportunities for confessional consultants to confer together. At the national level, representatives of their member churches cooperate in councils of churches and other ecumenical endeavours. But it is clear that the question of fellowship presents far more formidable problems for the loose collectivity of WCFs even than it does for the World Council of Churches. Leaders of WCFs would be the first to admit that the exchanges which have been developing in recent years are still piecemeal, often perfunctory, and between some Families virtually non-existent. There is a growing conviction among many that the present situation urgently calls for a comprehensive ecumenical strategy, englobing both confessional and conciliar forms of ecumenism. But to project a strategy presupposes a coherent theological frame of reference, an encompassing vision of what the WCFs are and stand for.

Catholicity as context and criterion

A strong case has been made for adopting *catholicity* as the key perspective. This may sound strange if one recalls the restrictions and

distortions which this credal attribute of the Church has undergone in the history of Christianity. As late as 1948 the constituting Assembly of the WCC called the Catholic-Protestant dichotomy 'our deepest difference'. But since then new emphases and horizons have appeared which make catholicity a highly appropriate and illuminating context. Expressing the *pleroma* of the triune God, the notion of catholicity includes the integrity and universal wholeness that struggles to take life and form in all the confessional Families. Moreover, there exist important consensus documents which offer a suitable point of departure: the report of the Uppsala Assembly on 'The Holy Spirit and the Catholicity of the Church' and the report on 'Catholicity and Apostolicity' produced by a WCC/Roman Catholic Joint Theological Commission⁹. These documents possess of course no doctrinal authority, but they are more inclusive and future-oriented in their outlook and concerns than are existing confessional views of catholicity and, above all, they reflect an exceptionally representative convergence of Orthodox-Protestant-Roman Catholic minds.

The perspective of catholicity would indeed provide an appropriate frame for elucidating a number of questions affecting the WCFs. One of the most intractable clusters of problems, for example, is undoubtedly the conflict between the respective claims of universality and locality, between the claims of confessional continuity and those of missionary obedience, between the desire to preserve intact the global self-identity of a confessional family and the desire of member churches to enter into local unions.

The WCFs have always pointed to the universal fellowship which they form as their special *raison d'être* and their unique contribution to the ecumenical movement. They give small and scattered local churches around the world a genuine sense of belonging to a wider fellowship, and are the natural instruments for drawing these out of isolation into conciliar relationships. They can provide aid and protection against oppressive governments and against aggressive majority churches. In the event of conflicts between local churches, the WCFs concerned can serve as pastoral counsellors and mediators. The other side of the coin is the evidently partial character of their geographical universality — a universality which can easily turn self-protective or triumphalist; a universality which is partial in the deeper sense also that a separate

⁹ *Faith and Order* : Louvain 1971, Geneva : WCC, pp. 133-140.

tradition, precisely because it has been and remains separated, cannot encompass the catholic fullness of the Gospel.

The dilemma becomes particularly acute at two points: (1) in the case of proselytism with its collision of confessional universalisms, and (2) in the case of church unions across confessional lines, with the subsidiary questions of (a) eucharistic communion privileges and/or double membership in *both* World Families, and (b) continuing financial support after the union has been enacted. This is obviously one of the places where the Protestant, Orthodox and Roman Catholic differences are most conspicuous and need to be worked through. For the latter it still seems to be unthinkable that one part could go its own way and unite with some other denominational body before the whole is ready to do so.

From conversation to conversion

The challenge being made will not be met by further theological documents on the meaning of catholicity in general, however useful in other ways these may prove. At least since the Uppsala Assembly there is general recognition that all the churches are called to serve and embody a true catholicity. The vital and still unanswered question is 'How?' The various confessional families must at least inform one another of what their present visions of catholicity mean in day-to-day practice and not hide behind idealizing self-presentations. They must work together towards mutually agreeable criteria of what does or does not further the Catholic unity to which all are in theory committed, extending into practical guidelines for their own institutional practices and relationships.

This would all most usefully clarify the ecumenical role of the WCFs. Meanwhile the Salamanca Report (pp. 291 ff. below) makes a number of important points. The Conference of Secretaries of WCFs is in turn convening a group of representatives of WCFs and the WCC to begin preparing the proposed 'joint discussion paper'. It may be helpful to round off the present discussion by some further questions.

1. In the bilateral dialogues new convergences are cristallizing which, if accepted, would have the most far-reaching implications for the self-understanding and the interrelations of both the WCFs and the individual churches. What should be done to make these insights more widely shared and appropriated?

2. The Salamanca Report rightly insists on the need for adequate coordination between bilateral and multilateral dialogues and church

union negotiations. The plea has a much wider bearing, however, and concerns the WCFs as a whole. With few exceptions, their means of intercommunication and cooperation are still embryonic. The frequent complaint about wasteful duplication of effort among local and national churches becomes even more grievous when one thinks of the competing programmes of many WCFs. Equally pressing is a fresh reconsideration of the tenuous and unsatisfactory relationships between WCFs and the WCC, which need strengthening.

3. The WCFs lay stress upon their universal fellowship and the service they can thereby render their member churches. On the other hand, the immense question of what forms a *truly universal* Christian community should take lies beyond the present scope both of interconfessional dialogues and of church union negotiations. If strategy means thinking ahead of events and thereby influencing their course, should this not be a focal point of shared concerns among the WCFs in the years to come? Among other things, it would force them to make a more radical reappraisal than they have been willing and able to do so far of their ingrained westernness.

Yet we must end by reminding ourselves that all these suggestions and demands will only have meaning and promise if they are the out-working of a spiritual odyssey. Ecumenical conversations are but little worth if they do not reflect a basic ecumenical conversion — away from the world's usual expectation that each will fight for his own, in favour of striving for the common good. Can the World Confessional Families teach us all in what ways and to what extent, in practice, loyalty to the historical heritage of a particular, separate church belongs to the appropriate obedience of Christ's people today? In what ways and to what extent, in practice, can the discordant voices of our present situation move towards the appropriate harmonies of a single praise-song to the common Lord?

THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH — NEXT STEPS

*Report of the Salamanca Consultation convened by the Faith and Order Commission, WCC, on 'Concepts of Unity and Models of Union', September 1973.*¹

PART A

I. The context

In the course of the last years much progress has been made in the search for a fuller expression of unity. Most churches have to some degree or other entered the process of exploring and manifesting their unity; in the years since the Fourth Assembly in Uppsala endeavours to overcome the inherited divisions between the separated churches have advanced to such a degree as hardly ever before in such a short space in history. Multilateral theological discussion in the Faith and Order movement has led to agreements which represent a challenge to the churches, especially on the questions of baptism and the eucharist; and issues of controversy are now under discussion which could not have been approached a few years ago. Several interconfessional dialogues, especially between the Roman Catholic Church and other churches, have led to remarkable consensus statements; in some cases, the churches are faced with the question whether they are prepared to draw the logical consequence from the common ground they have discovered and to establish full church fellowship.

The movement for church union has continued to bear fruits. In the past 50 years approximately 60 unions have been consummated; in recent years, united churches in North India, Pakistan and Britain have come into being. In about 30 countries negotiations are being conducted and in several countries plans have been presented to the churches for their decision.

¹ Omitting from Part B a brief section of recommendations concerning united churches and a longer statement of the various legal issues that arise in the process of union negotiations. These latter questions are being studied in a separate consultation convened by Faith and Order in March 1974.

Perhaps even more important is the actual fellowship which in innumerable places has grown among Christians and congregations of different traditions. Coming together in common worship, witness and action, they experience Christian unity to an extent which is not yet possible for their churches as a whole.

At the same time much still needs to be done. The traditional divisions are far from overcome; in some parts of the world their negative force in obscuring common Christian life and witness is still acutely felt. Very often the confessional positions are made even more intransigent by historical, social, political, ethnic and cultural factors. As agreement is being reached on the theological issues which divided the churches in the past, the decisive role of these factors has become even more apparent than before.

But it is not only traditional disagreements that divide us. As the search for unity proceeds, the churches are threatened by new tensions and divisions; many illustrations of these tensions could be given. The search for new expressions of Christian identity, especially in the so-called Third World, and the mutual questioning which results from it, puts strain on the relationship between the churches. Is unity possible between churches in rich and powerful countries and those in poor and oppressed countries? Between churches living in countries with different political systems? Christians facing the issues of the contemporary world often find themselves sharply divided by radically different political and social engagements. They often feel closer to members of other churches sharing the same convictions, experiences and aims than to the members of their own church. The division is often rather between different transconfessional groups and movements than between the churches. How can unity be maintained in these tensions? Can it be maintained at all without betraying the causes recognized by the different groups as imperatives inherent in the Gospel? Is it necessary to give institutional expression to unity? Should there not be, on the contrary, the fullest freedom for new movements to spring up

and to grow? Why crush the Spirit by working for the visible manifestation of the communion given by the power of Christ?

Several WCC Assemblies, especially those at New Delhi and Uppsala, have formulated their understanding of the unity to be attained in the ecumenical movement. Their statements are still relevant and need to be reaffirmed. They express the goal of the ecumenical quest for visible unity. But the question arises as to how the search for this goal must be pursued in the present time. Obviously, the vision cannot be realized step by step according to a preconceived plan. The vision granted to the churches may be obscured; they may be tempted to withdraw or they may feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the issues arising as they seek to witness to the Gospel. Is visible unity a possibility at all in this world? Is the Church not bound to be torn in different directions? Nevertheless, God's promise stands. Christ has prayed for the unity of His disciples and it is on the ground of this prayer that the search for unity can be pursued with the confidence and expectation that the aim will be realized in ever new ways.

II. *The unity of the Church in God's purpose for the world*

The unity of the Church which we confess in the creed has been given by God in Jesus Christ. It is not the result of human creativity but the living acceptance of God's gift.

God's love has been revealed in and through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, His son. He has come to reconcile men with God and with one another. He called the disciples. He gave His life for them and His victory over death freed them from the forces of separation. Through the power of the Holy Spirit they were made one in Him. This communion, achieved for the first time in the apostolic community, is at work today as people open their hearts in faith to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The unity of the Church stands in relation to God's promise and purpose for the world. Jesus proclaims that the Kingdom of God has drawn near. Sin and its consequences will be overcome. Human self-confidence, rebellion and fear will end. Brokenness and division will be healed and all things will be gathered up under the rule of God. The

mystery of the Kingdom was anticipated in Christ's life, death and resurrection, as it is wherever the believing community participates in Him and bears witness to Him.

The one Church today is the continuation of the apostolic community of the first days. If the churches are to overcome their present stage of division, that original communion must be restored among them. But unity does not mean returning to the past. By the power of the Holy Spirit the communion must be realized anew in each period. The Church exists under the call to proclaim God's purpose for the world and to live it out in ever new historical contexts and situations. The mystery of the Kingdom is to be announced today and the unity of the Church will be achieved as Christians are united in the anticipation and expectation of God's future.

God's purpose embraces all people. The Church is called to discern by faith the signs of God's actions in history, in men and women of other faiths and commitments. Their meaning becomes clear only as they are understood in the perspective of Christ's coming. The Church rejoices in these signs and recognizes them as a judgment and bearer of renewal for the Church. In particular, it needs to explore, in its search for unity, both what, out of its own experience, it may contribute to the overcoming of human barriers and divisions and also those insights which others may contribute to the life of the Church itself.

By what terms can the unity of the Church be best described today? Perhaps the terms 'sacrament', 'sign' and instrument provide the most promising approach.

In the first place, the terms 'sacrament' and 'sign' refer to the mystery of God's revelation in Jesus Christ—the great mystery that 'He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory' (I Tim. 3 : 16 RSV). But in the course of history, the terms have also been used for the community of those who believe in Him. Because this community is an integral part of the mystery of God's action in bringing about His Kingdom, it is, in a derivative sense, 'sacrament' and 'sign' in history, reflecting God's purpose and promise to all people. As the Church communicates the Gospel, it is

'sign' in the sense of instrument. It contributes to the salvation and communion of people with God in Jesus Christ.

When the Church is called 'sacrament' and 'sign', there cannot be any thought of identifying the Church and the kingdom of God as if the Church has already arrived at its goal and thus embodied the fulness of God's gift in its historical existence. It is no more than a sign indicating the reality of God's purpose for the world. It might even be said that the sign is often hidden because Christians are disobedient to their call and divided in their response. The Church must confess that it shares in and contributes to the brokenness of the world. The Church is a sign which constantly needs to be made visible. Therefore, the Church must constantly look at the ways in which its sign character has been obscured and needs to be restored.

The terms 'sacrament' and 'sign' raise many questions which need further attention in the ecumenical movement. How is the sacramentality of the Church to be understood? In what ways does an adequate understanding of this notion challenge the present self-understanding of the churches? What is the relationship between the sacramentality of the Church and the sacraments? A study of these issues may be a priority on the agenda of the Faith and Order Commission.

III. *The vision of a united Church as a conciliar fellowship*

Jesus Christ founded one Church. Today we live in diverse churches divided from one another. Yet our vision of the future is that we shall once again live as brothers and sisters in one undivided Church. How can this goal be described? We offer the following description to the churches for their consideration: The one Church is to be envisioned as a conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united. In this conciliar fellowship each local church possesses, in communion with the others, the fulness of catholicity, witnesses to the same apostolic faith and therefore recognizes the others as belonging to the same Church of Christ and guided by the same spirit. As the New Delhi Assembly pointed out, they are bound together because they have received the same baptism and share in the same eucharist; they recognize each

other's members and ministries. They are one in their common commitment to confess the Gospel of Christ by proclamation and service to the world. To this end each church aims at maintaining sustained and sustaining relationships with her sister churches, expressed in conciliar gatherings whenever required for the fulfilment of their common calling.

But how is the relationship between the conciliar fellowship and the local churches to be seen? Further elaboration of each of these two terms is necessary.

Conciliar fellowship

The word *conciliar* refers here to the mutual relationships of local churches within the *one* Church. It is derived from *concilium*. The term does not refer to the councils of divided churches (e.g. the World Council of Churches, National Councils, etc.) which have come into existence in the ecumenical movement as instruments to promote the search for unity and common witness; these, in relation to the goal we seek, are 'preconciliar'.

Meeting together in representative gatherings is required to proclaim the truth of the Gospel and to carry out the mission of the Church. It is a natural expression of the *communion* among the churches, not simply an organizational pattern. Occasionally when major issues concerning the truth and the unity of the Church need to be faced, the need for universal councils may arise. But maintaining communion calls for a *regular* conciliar practice, in order that legitimate diversity be prevented from deteriorating into division and that conflicts which might lead to trust and growth be 'enabled'. Meeting in council is a discipline required by communion in Christ; it is verified in the history of the Church. It is an expression of the *relatedness* among all who call on the name of Christ and a means of mutual edification and correction.

This goal may still be in the distant future. But if the churches can accept this description of unity as their goal they must commit themselves to working together towards its achievement. What are the conditions which must first be fulfilled? What are the issues which must receive priority on the ecumenical agenda if we are to advance on the road towards that goal? Already the churches are

engaged in multiple dialogues. Already they experience some sort of pre-conciliar fellowship. If all these efforts are directed towards reaching conciliar fellowship certain common priorities can be established. And the conciliar process must be carried on *within* each church as well as among them.

The following considerations regarding conciliar fellowship may be mentioned :

1) Conciliar fellowship can exist only if the churches recognize one another as holding and confessing the same truth. Primary emphasis must, therefore, be placed on the search for a common understanding of the Gospel. This does not necessarily need to be expressed in the same form of words but there needs to be sufficient mutual understanding among the churches to accept one another as living visibly in one and the same truth. Conciliar fellowship requires full reconciliation of the now divided churches. Wherever invalid condemnations have been issued in the past, they must be faced in dialogue and eventually be explicitly shown to have become inapplicable.

2) Conciliar fellowship cannot but be eucharistic fellowship. United by one baptism, members of all local churches should be able to share everywhere in the celebration of the eucharist. No council (*concilium*) can be held without celebrating the eucharist. Many different forms of celebration may be possible as long as the celebration can be recognized by all as the fulfilment of the Lord's commandment, 'Do this in remembrance of me.' Priority must be given to reaching such common celebration. Obviously, this means also that different understandings of the ministry need to be clarified.

3) Conciliar fellowship necessitates representative gatherings and this means that thought must be given to the most appropriate ways of representation in the Church. Who speaks for the local church? Who represents the Church at the regional, national or world level? For this reason also the issue of the role of the ministry in the Church must be pursued as a priority. How should the ministry function at various levels of the Church's life and how should these various ministries be related to one another? In particular, the vision of a conciliar fellowship requires a fresh examination of the place

of the ordained ministry in the whole people of God. What is the role of the laity — both men and women — in representing the Church in the conciliar process?

4) Conciliar fellowship is concerned with the truth. How can the churches agree on a way of articulating the faith they hold in common? What are the bases of authority; how are they related to each other; who is competent to represent the faithful in synods and councils which decide on both doctrinal and juridical matters affecting the life of the Church? The focus here is twofold: (a) the sacramental and ecclesiological *context* in which authority is exercised, and (b) *how* decisions are made at various levels of the Church's life, in diverse cultures and national settings, as well as at the universal level. Authority is closely and inescapably connected with power. How can the conciliar process contribute to empowering the powerless? While most of us are agreed that the final authority of the Church resides in the whole congregation of the faithful, who through the years either do or do not receive the findings of councils as authoritative, the question of authority in conciliar life is crucial. Councils take decisions which affect the lives of all and require their response. The power inherent in authority must be exercised in overt and transparent ways. How can authority be exercised as a service to the Church, avoiding domination of one part over the other? The statement of the Faith and Order Commission at Louvain puts it pointedly:

'There must be opportunity within the life of the Church for each community of mankind to develop and express its own authentic selfhood; for the oppressed and exploited to find justice; and for the "marginal" people in our society — the handicapped in mind and body — to make their own distinctive contribution.'²

5) The conciliar fellowship is a confessing fellowship. As the churches strive to achieve greater unity, they must begin to engage in common witness and service. But they need constantly to ask 'What is the Church for? To what task is God calling each church in

² *Faith and Order Louvain 1971*, Geneva: WCC, 1971, pp. 226, 227.

its particular time and place?' This implies their facing together the issues arising from their witness in the contemporary world. Many of these issues are new and have not been controversial in the past. But they may be profoundly controversial today, sometimes even dividing the churches in new ways and leading to new transconfessional groupings. But potentially divisive issues should not therefore be avoided. Their preliminary ecumenical fellowship must be used as the place to practise in anticipation that conciliar fellowship the churches are ultimately seeking to build.

As the churches commit themselves to the goals of conciliar fellowship, the following steps may help to initiate and hasten that process.

(a) The initiative for any advance must primarily come from the churches themselves. Most churches have declared in one way or another that they are committed to the ecumenical movement. But if further progress is to be made, they need to express more clearly how they understand the unity that Christ wills for His Church and above all they need to state how this unity can be reached in a concerted effort with the other churches.

(b) The ecumenical discussion still concentrates too exclusively on the issues which were manifestly controversial in the past. But the agenda of the ecumenical movement is wider. The churches need to face together the issues which arise from their witness in the contemporary world, especially those which may cause new tensions and divisions. What is the role of the Church in the field of political and social responsibility? What is the appropriate relationship between Church and state? Is it essential that each church consider all problems of its life in the light of the ecumenical movement? Common conciliar life can be developed only if common perspectives and mutual understanding emerge at all levels and in connection with all problems. By adopting this ecumenical discipline the churches may gradually become 'unitable churches'.

(c) The Uppsala statement on 'The Holy Spirit and the catholicity of the Church' speaks of the existence of regional councils and the World Council as 'a transitional opportunity for eventually actualizing a truly

universal, ecumenical, conciliar form of life and witness'.³ There exists a need for relating efforts at all levels—local and universal. Because of this, we recommend that *churches, union negotiating committees, partners in bi- and multi-lateral conversations* use the World Council of Churches and the Faith and Order Commission in coordinating the efforts and collating the results of these diverse efforts towards unity. In this way these efforts could reinforce and aid each other and energy be focused rather than diffused.

Local churches

The second focus of this discussion concerns the local churches. It has been said above that the conciliar fellowship is a fellowship of *local churches*, that is to say, churches which are themselves already one in a locality.

But the term *local* can have different meanings. It can refer to the individual worshipping congregation, to dioceses or other regional groupings as well as to national churches. It means here primarily the eucharistic community in a given place or context. Conciliar fellowship must be realized in the first place among the local eucharistic communities of a given area. It must find expression, however, at all levels of the life of the Church—in regions, nations and eventually at the world level.

But how can the local churches, often divided and in isolation from one another, work toward this unity? In discussing the necessary elements of conciliarity above, some of the ingredients of this search have been described. At this point one expression of local church unity can be mentioned: that of *church union*.

IV. Conciliar fellowship and organic union

The unity described in the preceding section requires union of the churches which are still separated today. There is no contradiction between the vision of a conciliar fellowship of local churches and the goal of organic union. Both terms point to the same calling. The conciliar fellowship requires organic union. The vision of such a

³ *The Uppsala '68 Report*, Geneva: WCC, 1968, p. 17.

conciliar fellowship will, therefore, become a reality only as the churches are prepared to face, at all levels, the implications and challenge of organic union.

In particular, union negotiations at the national level need to be pursued. Since the local churches which form the universal conciliar fellowship must be truly united themselves, division at this level of the Church's life is particularly intolerable. But union negotiations at this level must recognize especially the necessity of finding appropriate ways to provide fully for emerging expressions of human diversities within the united Church, as well as ways of expressing the worldwide dimension of the Christian community.

God's great gift in Jesus Christ is the promise of a new community in which humanity's estrangements are overcome. The churches are called to seek to give visible institutional form to this new community—in a manner which will enable their members in each place to gather around the Word and sacraments and to work out their mission in the world together. Corporate union is such a form.

In many places unions have occurred or are now being considered. Union has repeatedly become the occasion for Christians discovering a deeper identity; it has proved again and again to be a dynamic concept with a capacity to respond to new expressions of human need, making possible the growth of a more inclusive identity and fellowship. Union does this by gathering up into one body the various confessional traditions of the past and thus enriches the life and faith of each member. It thus makes it possible for Christians previously isolated from one another by racial and cultural barriers to learn from one another and in so doing to move towards a fuller involvement in the human community. Church union can also provide a place within the Church for groups now developing that transcend existing confessional and cultural lines.

The relevance and urgency of organic union

The urgency and relevance of organic union has been underlined by several recent developments.

Thus, for example, in union negotiations the churches are rediscovering both what

Jesus Christ means for our time and how the community which bears His name witnesses to this faith. Organic union also enables Christians to play a more effective part in the struggle for social justice and peace. It does so by challenging institutional barriers which block effective action, by encouraging and facilitating new strategies for witness and by building patterns of shared life for groups that have been estranged.

God calls the Church into the world to build personal and corporate community, in creating structures of justice and service, in mediating reconciliation. But each of these commissions of Christ is called into question and crippled in implementation by our divisions. By their disunity and competition the churches make fully authentic witness or community impossible and their resources are squandered in an irresponsible fashion. Organic union is an appropriate response to the call for responsible Christian stewardship of personnel and resources.

Finally to be mentioned is the evangelistic commission. Faced by a world that denies the lordship of Christ, the churches need to be united in the task of evangelism, so that their divisions no longer belie the gospel of reconciliation.

A united Church is a necessity. Thus some form of organic union must be the goal of the churches and this goal should be pursued urgently, under divine guidance and compulsion.

Steps on the road to union

As churches grow towards union, they have found a whole number of possible intermediate steps which help to move them toward their goal. Examples of such steps are:

- involvement in joint mission projects;
- shared worship, especially intercommunion, on a regular basis;
- covenanting, by which churches at all levels of their life publicly declare their common intention;
- united theological education, training of the laity, Christian education and literature work, etc.;
- evaluation and re-allocation of funds and programme priorities.

Such typical intermediate steps, however, should not be allowed to become resting places.

It is clear that Councils of Churches can make significant contributions to the union of churches. In some cases Councils have played an initiating role. But even if a Council has not taken an active part, it should be possible that interested member churches in a Council be free to work toward union without breaking the fellowship within that Council. A Council can also help build relationships among churches as a first step in establishing acquaintance and can assist in facilitating greater communication among them even before union is possible.

V. Different levels of unity — Complementarity and interaction

Unity must be established at all levels of the Church's life — congregational, national, regional and worldwide. Basically, unity is the same at all levels. It is lived out as Christians profess the same faith, witnessed to by the one baptism, as they share in one and the same eucharist. But unity requires different expressions at different levels. When efforts toward unity are undertaken, the envisioned goal will inevitably vary according to the level at which they are taking place: e.g. conversations at the world level will not lead to the same type of union as negotiations at the national or local levels. Though the different levels need to be distinguished, they must not be separated from one another. All efforts towards unity depend on one another and must, therefore, be seen in their interaction. There is urgent need for consultation between the different levels as a whole.

Each level has its own proper value and function and none is privileged above another. Initiatives towards fuller unity can and should be proposed from any level. Today we are realizing anew that the local level where Christians come together out of confessional separation to achieve certain common tasks, can often be a vital source of ecumenical initiative. Yet it is in other places the level at which the strongest resistance to moves towards unity is felt.

There is at all levels a serious danger of the further fragmentation of the existing churches. Some are tempted to apply the term 'schismatic' to newly constituted transconfessional groups which come together out of a vivid awareness of a common task. Yet there is the real danger that the existing churches may make themselves responsible for schism if they refuse to accept and act upon the true insights expressed in such groups. Situations where the potential for gain or loss exists are found in abundance — mixed marriages, the charismatic renewal, experimental joint congregations, action groups for evangelism or for social action, to name only a few.

In such cases the ordained ministry has an important role to play in maintaining unity and, therefore, particular attention needs to be paid to its exercise. Ordained ministers may often prove to be one of the main links between transconfessional groups and the churches to which their members belong and yet by the same token to be in danger of pulling such groups apart because of inherited separate patterns of training, approach, payment and the like. The ordained ministers should in these cases seek primarily to interpret the insights and experiences of the united groups into other levels of church life so that the church as a whole may learn how to incarnate the truth there perceived. The loosening of traditional disciplines (e.g. of eucharistic fellowship) that some churches now find possible in such circumstances must always be accompanied by a correspondingly eager discipline of interpretation and reception in the wider levels.

Similarly, particular attention needs to be given to the form of the Church's ministry at the world level. Some churches know what they believe to be appropriate here and have patterns of experience (e.g. the communion of the bishops) which witness to that. But many churches have not yet developed clear ideas of what sort of structures are appropriate to the exercise of universal unity. It is at least evident that the present pattern of the World Council of Churches as a world fellowship of churches, while providing useful experience, cannot in itself constitute a satisfactory answer to this ecclesiological question. More thought must be devoted to this problem.

Unity is not something to be created but to be received — yet not passively; rather in an active search. This 'reception' of God's gifts demands that we give expression at all levels to these gifts in signs and actions which commit us personally and which can in time commit the churches to which we belong. Ecumenism is essentially a movement in which each step ahead must be translated into visible experience by church members so that it may in turn be lived out by ever wider circles of Christians.

VI. *Identity, change and unity*

Any advance towards unity calls into question the identity of the now divided churches. But can this identity be abandoned? Is it not the expression of God's faithfulness throughout history? All churches face this dilemma in one way or another. A group of Orthodox theologians has recently described it in the following terms: 'The Orthodox emphasize the God-given ontological and indivisible unity of the Body of Christ realized and preserved in history. They believe that this unity has existed continuously and without interruption in the Orthodox Church, its doctrine, its sacraments and its essential order — even if its members either as individuals or corporately fail to realize and manifest the implications of this divine gift. Other churches find it difficult to accept this claim. They share the view that the Church is founded and given in Christ and that it has existed in history without interruption. They cannot share, however, the identification of the one Church with the Orthodox Church. They either identify the one Church with a different historical tradition or believe that the continuity must be affirmed in faith but cannot be identified with one particular historical tradition.'⁴ Even if the latter view described in this quotation is held, union cannot easily be achieved; the historical identity represents a decisive obstacle.

What can be said about this dilemma? The identity and the unity of the Church have their ultimate and normative reality in Jesus Christ, who comes to us in the power of the

Holy Spirit, calling His Church to and empowering it for an ever-renewed testimony to His redeeming and reconciling work. In this living tradition we are one with the Church throughout history and at the same time we are liberated to articulate our witness within the conditions and demands of our present historical moment. Identity and change are not therefore opposed or contradictory. Rather our present identity is to be found as, from within its whole tradition and out of its solidarity with the needs and hopes of the world, the Church undertakes to manifest the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in thought, life and action.

In this effort, the traditional expressions of our identity as confessions and communions are gratefully received as witness of the ever-faithful leading of the Spirit, but they are also time-bound in their terms of reference and relevance. They have helped us to enrich our understanding of the Christian faith and they should also help us in accepting the change that the present moment demands. While we recognize the fundamental unity which Christ gave and wishes for His Church, it is not imperative that we express it today by a return to one of these particular expressions of the living tradition and continuity of the Church, nor by seeking a compromise by combining several historical forms of the past. Rather we are free and compelled to attempt to express in the present, in the variety of our circumstances, the living tradition of the Gospel.

In virtue of this living tradition which expresses the economy of Christ through the Holy Spirit for the salvation of the world, the Church professes the same witness as was professed by the apostolic community, and her ministry continues the apostolic ministry. Her whole life is integrally related to the experience of the whole People of God of all ages, so the Church that is permanently renewed by God in her historical continuity. In this process, historical traditions will at the same time be tested, renewed, transcended and reconstituted in the catholicity and the unity of the Church. Thus we are given, through repentance and conversion, a present identity which we recognize as in some continuity with our common and particular histories but at the same time as a new and original gift of God.

⁴ See *Minutes of Working Committee*, Faith and Order, Paper No. 66, p. 47.

PART B

I. *How can consensus (agreed statement on doctrine) contribute to unity among the churches? What use can be made of the consensus on baptism, the eucharist and the ministry?*

In the course of the past years, the Faith and Order Commission has spent much time and energy in formulating agreed statements on baptism, the eucharist and the ministry. Draft statements were submitted to the Commission. The texts on baptism and the eucharist were sent to all member churches of the World Council of Churches with the request that comment be made on them.⁵

One group at the Salamanca consultation was asked to study the significance of such consensus statements. The following observations are the fruits of their discussion.

The consensus as part of a process

It is vital that consensus be understood as part of a process. It is like a single frame taken from a motion picture: the attitudes seen in it indicate the direction of movement but they are fully intelligible only when the whole picture is shown in motion. It is from the life and thought of the People of God that the consensus emerges and it is into that life that it must be fed back. Only in this way is it possible to appreciate the living context which gives meaning to the consensus statements, albeit sometimes divergent meaning in different contexts; and only in this way is it possible to give life to the consensus by hearing the testimonies of those who variously, and sometimes contrastingly, illustrate or challenge the consensus out of their own Christian experience.

The process preceding and following up the establishment of consensus provokes that fermentation of thought and discussion which is essential to the preparation of a future general ecumenical council. A process of true consensus derives from and moves towards Jesus Christ.

⁵ Cf. 'Ecumenical Agreement on Baptism' and 'The Eucharist in Ecumenical Thought', *Faith and Order Louvain 1971*, pp. 49-53, 71-77.

The value of consensus

The consensus on baptism and the eucharist creatively emphasizes the fact that baptism and eucharist are essentially concerned with the outpouring of God's love to the world and the consequent responsibility of Christians.

The search for consensus of this kind is an important element in the ecumenical movement. Some see it as the essential method of ecumenical progress, while all the groups would give it an important place along with the complementary exploration of partnership in service and mutual acceptance despite doctrinal diversity.

Churches called to make pastoral decisions, e.g. on confirmation practice in relation to the eucharist, may avoid unhappily divergent decisions if there is widespread achievement of and knowledge of ecumenical consensus.

The consensus, and even more the discipline of arriving at it, can lead participants to a discovery of the riches of Christian insights and experiences other than their own.

A common discovery of revealed truth by opening our hearts and minds to the reception of the Divine Word gradually unites us in the communion of the Holy Spirit and, therefore, in the unity of the one Body of Christ, the Church. Ambiguous diplomatic formulae are to be avoided, but there is a need in many circumstances for a form of words that can register a partial agreement sufficient for the next steps to be taken in co-operation.

The limitations of consensus

This kind of consensus is by its nature verbal and doctrinal. This means that it can be too theoretical, e.g. in defining baptism but failing to indicate which actual rites of Christian initiation fall within the agreed description; it means also that it may bypass the possibilities of mutual acceptance in diversity or mutual challenge by varied witness.

The very desire to encompass the richness of insights mentioned above can make it difficult to express the witness of those Christian bodies whose emphasis is upon the simplicity of the Gospel.

Up to this time the consensus reflects too much the pastoral situation of secularized Europe and North America. The discussion of

infant baptism, for instance, shows little awareness of the facts of community solidarity in some parts of the world.

The addressees of the consensus

The consensus is addressed to at least three groups — theologians, church leaders, and the faithful in general. This means that it has a variety of uses but also that it cannot completely satisfy any one group. The theologians demand greater precision, the church leaders more practical application and the faithful in general more clarity and immediate relevance; yet theologians are stimulated to new encounters, church leaders given a basis for decision-making and the faithful in general encouraged to deepen their Christian living together.

The use that can be made of the consensus on baptism and the eucharist

Recognition of the nature and function of consensus as part of the ecumenical process makes possible specific recommendations concerning the use of the consensus on baptism and eucharist. The existing consensus statements are open to many critical comments but they contain such a breadth and richness of material in quite brief compass that they should not be locked away in the files of Faith and Order or at church offices. The consensus will have achieved little unless it be given living expression in the ecumenical movement and in the life of local communities of Christians in many ways, including the following:

1. *Worship*

The consensus statements on baptism and eucharist should be revised to include ways of understanding and testing the consensus in actual worship; this could be done either by indicating existing liturgies and forms of worship (in which it is believed that the consensus already finds expression) or where necessary by developing new orders of baptism and eucharist.

On particular occasions Christians from a number of local fellowships should gather for the common renewal of their baptismal vows.

Christians of one church should be invited to be present at baptisms in other Christian communities.

The expression of the consensus in relation to eucharistic sharing calls for great pastoral sensitivity both to the existing disciplines of the churches and to the longing of Christians to be at one at the Lord's table.

2. *Pastoral relationships*

Every effort should be made through teams of clergy and laity (which could be sponsored by local Councils of Churches) to enable Christians to enter into common Christian life experiences. Across a wide spectrum of the ecumenical movement these efforts could be based on the mystical unity of all Christians through their baptism, although for some this would not be the natural starting point.

This general sharing could both be aided by and be of help to the households of mixed marriages among Christians.

3. *Study*

Consultations concerning the consensus should be encouraged: (a) among the partner churches in bilateral discussions (preferably with consultants from other traditions present); (b) with churches and groups not hitherto involved in the discussions.

There should be common study of those passages of Scripture which are basic to the consensus. Scripture also underlies developed Christian teaching on the meaning of sacraments in general and on this a further consensus still needs to be evolved.

To assist these studies and the wider sharing of the consensus, there will be need for publications at all levels: brief popular pamphlets to state and explain the essential elements of the consensus; catechetical material; study documents suitable for ecumenical use in seminary and university groups.

All these studies need to be kept in relation to the development of other WCC programmes preparing for the next Assembly, in particular the sections on 'Confessing Christ Today' and 'What Unity Requires'.

4. *Use in relation to church union negotiations*

Church leaders should be encouraged to use the consensus in preparing the way for developments in inter-church relations such as covenanting for union.

The consensus documents should be widely studied in church union negotiations with the recognition that the material will have to be worked through in each particular situation by the negotiators.

II. *The role of World Confessional Families in the ecumenical movement*

We must emphasize the extreme heterogeneity of the bodies grouped together as World Confessional Families. They have described themselves as follows: 'Each World Confessional Family consists of churches belonging to the same tradition and held together by this common heritage; they are conscious of living in the same universal fellowship and give to this consciousness at least some structural expression' (Conference of Secretaries of WCFs, 1967). It is the very disparate nature of this structural expression that makes it very difficult to give precise formulation to the role of the World Confessional Families, and in fact leads to considerable frustration in discussing their role, and in making generalizations about them. We would, however, prefer the term 'World Families of Churches' as a more appropriate description to include all those who have become the partners in dialogue referred to below.

Bilateral conversations

Most of these World Families have been in recent years, and still are, engaged in a process of bilateral and multilateral conversations at world and regional levels. An expression of the achievement and range of their conversations can be found in the survey *Confessions in Dialogue* (Geneva: WCC, 1972). The evaluation of this process of interconfessional dialogue raises, among others, the question of the relationship between, and respective functions of, the World Council of Churches and the World Families. It is important that both examine how they can conceive their own role in relation to one another in the pursuit of unity in relations to the ecumenical movement in general.

Concerning the dialogue in which World Families are engaged, we draw attention in particular to the need for adequate coordination between bilateral dialogues, multilateral dialogue and church union negotiations. There is also the need to relate the

results of interconfessional dialogues to the decision-making processes of the churches at every level.

We request that at the meeting of General Secretaries of the World Confessional Families in Geneva, 1973, the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Churches and the other World Families should be effectively represented so that plans can be made to constitute an adequate forum for the full exchange of views on bilateral conversations at the world level.

Ecumenical commitment

We appreciate the value of world-wide fellowships which the World Families represent and the way in which, as they engage in interconfessional dialogue, they seek to find a universal expression of the faith. We also appreciate how small and scattered churches are brought into a broader community through the World Families, and how in some cases their member churches are helped to overcome isolation and to enter into real relationship.

On the other hand there are ways in which the World Families may hinder the ecumenical movement, and we suggest that in view of frequently expressed misgivings, World Families should seriously consider whether:

- (a) they give sufficient attention to the local situation in the processes of agenda-setting and decision-making;
- (b) they engage in sufficient consultation between each other and with the World Council of Churches;
- (c) their structures, policies and activities in fact encourage and support their member churches as they move towards union, and do not prevent local ecumenical commitment;
- (d) their financial policies, or the policies of the boards or agencies of some of their member churches, lead to domination and a dependence on the part of member churches which restricts ecumenical engagements;
- (e) their policies encourage consultation and common planning for mission, service and development at local and national levels.

In the field of theological education World Families cooperate with one another in some places, but we urge that in every local situation

there should be consultation between the World Families, the Theological Education Fund and the local churches of whatever denomination with the aim of establishing theological education on an ecumenical basis.

We also request the World Families to ask their member churches to listen to the witness of the unity found in spontaneous groups, and to give a greater hearing to the voices of the Third World, of women and of youth.

In parts of the world member churches of the World Families have crossed their denominational frontiers and joined together in organic union. The very existence of these united churches is a sign of the need to interpret the universal Gospel at the local level. The united churches are a challenge to the World Families, and the problems of those wishing to unite should set the agenda for discussions at the world level. The ecumenical experience of those who have achieved organic union, both in their struggle towards union and in their growing together after union, should be made available to, and made use of by, others as they in their turn move towards union.

In the light of the foregoing we would urge upon the World Families the need to clarify their understanding of the quest for unity by cooperating with the World Council of Churches to develop an agreed discussion paper on the ecumenical roles of the World Families and the World Council of Churches to be used in preparation for their next world assemblies. We request that this concern should become part of the agenda of the meeting of the Conference of General Secretaries of the World Confessional Families in Geneva, November 1973.⁶

PART C: PRAYERS

I

Father,

We thank you
for the power you have released into human history.

You are calling us to proclaim your salvation
and to serve all humankind.

⁶ At their 1973 meeting, the World Families began the planning of a consultation in December 1974 to begin this process.

Bring us, through this humble service,
to the final joy and oneness of all things in
your kingdom.

Father,

we thank you
that your power is already moving us together:
that from our isolated and hostile back-
grounds
we have begun to talk to one another as
equals;

that though the world may not yet believe,
we have started to obey your will, together;
that in our divided churches
you have taught us the way towards agree-
ment in doctrine and practice;

that in so many places, through so many
efforts, you offer us a vision of life in full
unity and agreement in faith.

Father of our crucified Lord,

we remember with sorrow
that we can only stand before you
as members of churches that for centuries
have been cutting themselves off from one
another.

We confess that our struggles to understand
your truth and tell of your love have all too
often had the tragic results of shameful re-
jection and mutually impoverishing misunder-
standing.

We are just too sure of ourselves, Lord,
in claiming to know the only way
while vainly praying for the unity you will.

Often we hesitate,
fearing to upset links with secular powers
and so refuse all change, all newness.

Often we content ourselves with a superficial
unitedness and fail to see, and fight against, the
sufferings and schisms in our world.

Often we forget how much we could learn
from one another and how much our witness
in the world is falsified because we pay more
heed to our differences
than to Him who is the Centre of us all,
the common life of us all,
Jesus Christ our Lord.

Father who sends us the Spirit,
 Pour your Holy Spirit anew upon us
 that we may so deepen our repentance
 for the sins that have divided us,
 and that still part us in isolation ;
 that, filled with your grace, we may grasp
 new opportunities
 to publish your Good News, and to travel
 the road to unity
 which you are preparing for us, now as
 always ;
 that we may be one and holy, your Spirit-
 filled people,
 alive in the love of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Lord of the 'now' and the 'always',
 grant us to learn 'ecumenism'
 not as the abstract word of a passing fashion
 which speaks of faceless bureaucrats or
 remote theologians,
 but as our own obedient struggle
 to agree on your truth,
 to witness to your love
 and to build up your Church into the fulness
 of your purpose.

Lord, may we open ourselves to you and to
 one another
 in prayer for the unity you desire.

Lord, may we act out together
 what we can show each other to be your will
 for the world.

Lord, may we meet one another for common
 counsel and decision,
 welcoming each others' questions and raising
 our own in unassuming love.

Lord, help us to receive and interpret for our
 own time and place the truth in creeds and
 agreements
 that others have written for us ;
 to accept the challenging of our former
 structures of division
 and dare to move on into new forms of
 obedience ;
 to spend our time, our money and our love
 on those whom you send to us as neighbours.

Grant this, O Lord,
 and bring your Church nearer to the time
 when, in obedience to your will,
 a council of all Christian families

may once more speak for all Christian people,
 and all mankind, with all creation, move
 toward their fulfilment
 in the revealing of your Kingdom.

All this we pray, Father,
 knowing that we do not know even how to
 pray as we ought.
 By the grace of your Spirit who goes before us
 may it be your will, not ours, that is done
 here and now among us in this place
 and unto the ends of the ages ;
 through Jesus Christ our Lord.

II

O Lord, Word of God, Word of life,
 release us from the tyranny of words.
 Remind us that, when we have said something
 it does not always mean we have done
 anything.

Warn us lest we say Peace, peace
 when there is no peace.

With you to speak is to do : with us, not so.

Word made flesh, inspire us to give flesh to
 to our words.

God of love,
 May your love be seen openly in lives which
 serve you
 with the wholeness, the integrity of love.

Spirit of the living God,
 fall on us again to renew us
 through him who 'spoke, and it was :
 he commanded, and it stood firm'.

May it be so with us : Let it be so.

III

Christ, whose resurrection broke the seals
 of a tomb
 and shattered the walls of racial prejudice,
 Break down by your risen power in our
 lives
 the partitions which divide your Church,
 that you,
 who are hope for the nations and healing for
 the races,
 may bring us all together in the harmony of a
 common justice —
 the unity of a single peace and the fellowship
 of one family.

Also available from WCC Publications

Faith and Order Louvain 1971
(Faith and Order Paper No. 59)

1971, 264 pp., SFr. 22.80

Contains the nine principal study reports presented to the Faith and Order Commission at its 1971 meeting together with the chief texts and addresses from the meeting itself.

Confessions in Dialogue
Nils Ehrenström and Günther Gassman
(Faith and Order Paper No. 63)

1972, 166 pp., SFr. 6.75

An indispensable guidebook for those engaged in bilateral and other ecumenical conversations and for those interested in contemporary reinterpretation of classic Christian teachings and practices.

What Unity Implies
ed. Reinhard Groscurth
(World Council Studies No. 7)

1969, 135 pp., SFr. 7.90

Leading theologians of the Faith and Order movement discuss the current understanding, as exemplified in the Uppsala Assembly, of Christian unity and its wider implications for the nature and action of the Church.

**Councils, Conciliarity and a
Genuinely Universal Council**
(Faith and Order Paper No. 70)

1974, 24 pp., SFr. 3.—

This study by an ecumenical group in the Federal Republic of Germany which included Roman Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants, sets out the nature of the conciliar character of the Church, and throws considerable light on present dilemmas facing the ecumenical movement.

Christian Unity and Social Reconciliation
José Míguez Bonino (SE/36, Vol. IX, No. 1)

1973, 8 pp., SFr. 7.—
for 10 copies

Starting from the now familiar dilemma in Latin America between a concern for the unity of the Church and a concern for justice in society, this article shows how a true understanding of the biblical witness of the ecumenical movement holds together rather than apart what different groups are striving for.

Giving Account of the Hope that is in us
(SE/45, Vol. IX, No. 3)

1973, 16 pp., SFr. 7.—
for 10 copies

Theologians from five continents here set out their understanding of the meaning of Jesus Christ in their particular culture and discuss the implications for the world Church of the differences in their ways of presenting Him.

Unity of Mankind — Unity of the Church
André Dumas (SE/61, Vol. X, No. 2)

1974, 16 pp., SFr. 7.—
for 10 copies

Against a vividly depicted awareness of the perils facing humanity if the nations do not soon find ways of living together in peace, Dumas discusses the appropriate marks of the Church as a sign of the unity to which mankind is summoned.

