

REFLECTIONS ON The Spiritual Work of Ecumenism

by Thomas D. Paxson Jr.

DECEMBER, 1998;
late spring; rainy season; Zimbabwe's
capital, Harare.

Four thousand people from all around the world converged to participate in one way or another in the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches on its 50th anniversary. At least 18 Friends, of whom I was one, were among them. Filled with anticipation and uncertainty, I was eager to participate in a great adventure. I was not disappointed. It was a rich and rewarding experience, and Friends were able to make a modest contribution to the Assembly's work. A statement introduced by Friends opposing the use of child-soldiers was approved. Thanks to the persistence of Mennonite Fernando Enns, a "decade to overcome violence" was approved that will further implement and extend the Programme to Overcome Violence adopted some years ago at the initiative of Barbara Bazett of Canadian Yearly Meeting and Donald Miller, then general secretary of the Church of the Brethren.

Since the Assembly I have been reflecting on what I shall call the spiritual work of ecumenism. Friends recognize the importance of listening both carefully and deeply to one another. This practice is fundamental not only to the health but to the very existence of our spiritual communities. Certainly today, this is not always easy, for we bring to our meetings many different backgrounds, traditions, patterns of thought and understanding, and linguistic sensitivities and aversions. Yet it is our experience that we are richly rewarded for what ability we have to listen through the static caused by these many differences among us.

So it is also with ecumenical dialog, listening to others in the extended family of Christianity. Each day of the Assembly in Harare commenced, after breakfast, with inspiring programmed worship services that were followed by small group sessions

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for deep sharing. Many Friends also felt the need for a quiet meeting for worship each evening before supper.

I find meeting for worship central to my experience of holy fellowship. Greater understanding among people is laudable in itself, but the primary spiritual purpose of listening in a meeting for worship is to discern that of God in what is said. This is true of programmed worship as well, if it is genuinely worship. For those like myself brought up in the traditions of unprogrammed Friends, the interfering "static" through which I hear may be considerable given my own contributions to this static. I am reminded of the final pages of Hermann Hesse's *Der Steppenwolf*. The protagonist, Harry Haller, is visited by Mozart, who forces him to listen to a very low-fidelity radio broadcast of a Handel concerto. Like Haller, we can attend to the static, the loss of the overtones and nuance we love to hear, and recoil from the "distortions" and "violations" masking the heavenly music. Or we can learn, again like Haller, to hear heavenly music through the "radios" that bring it to us, heavenly music that might otherwise be out of our hearing. Yet it is not "living radios" but living people and living churches to which we are called to listen. Here we may encounter greater "static" than we do in our meetings for worship, but we also may hear divine melodies we would not otherwise hear.

By authority of the grace God has given me, I say to everyone among you: do not think too highly of yourself, but form a sober estimate based on the measure of faith that God has dealt to each of you. For just as in a single human body there are many limbs and



Above: A Finnish intern offers another from Ghana "water from the well of salvation" during worship.



Left: A symbol of the assembly showed the many ways in which Africa has been crucified—by war, famine, and disease.

organs, all with different functions, so we who are united with Christ, though many, form one body, and belong to one another as its limbs and organs.
—Romans 12:3–5

After this admonition, Paul writes of various gifts of the spirit. Friends have never held that the Religious Society of Friends was the universal and catholic Church, so perhaps it is not difficult for us to appreciate different churches as providing different gifts within the Church. While remaining true to our own witness and testimony, it behooves us to be open to the dimensions of faithfulness represented in such splendid variety in the Church. One of the Friends participating in the WCC Assembly was Paul Oestreicher, a delegate of the Church of England, who observed that the Religious Society of Friends could be thought of as a religious order in Christianity, after the manner of a religious order in the Roman Catholic Church. Benedictines are ex-

Photos by Alex Kern

pected to acknowledge the Christian (indeed the Catholic) identity of Franciscans and vice versa; and each, to be open to learning from the other. Certainly, I have learned much from spiritual dialog with non-Friends over the years, and I am sure that many, many Friends, probably the vast majority, would testify similarly. Nor is this a new phenomenon. Even in periods when the Religious Society of Friends most turned in upon itself as a separate people, Friends' homes contained books of a spiritual nature by non-Friends, e.g., Fenelon, Mme. Guyon, and Molinos.

There is no dialog where one only listens—even where one listens actively. Dialog requires speaking and being listened to as well as listening. Friends have been listened to in the councils of churches. Both Friends General Conference and Friends United Meeting have been members of the World Council of Churches from its inception.

In spite of our small numbers and concerns of a theological nature, Friends have been welcomed by the World Council of Churches, and by the national councils of churches in many countries, for our distinctive voice. It is a curious role. Some delegates and some officials within the WCC look to Friends to articulate understandings and commitments toward which they personally lean, but which their function as church delegate or WCC official prevents them from advocating. Others disagree with Friends but recognize that Friends articulate strands within Christian tradition that should not be ignored. For others we represent the immense impediments to Christianity's achieving full visible unity, since we don't even celebrate the Eucharist ritually.

It is nice to be recognized, despite our small numbers, but the spiritual work of ecumenism is not to perform roles for others, but to testify to the living truth, as Friends have been given to apprehend it. Each individual Friend participating in ecumenical dialog is challenged to bear witness to the understanding given in her or his own experience as it reflects the stream of Quaker tradition. That is, Friends participating in ecumenical dialog are called to participate as Friends: participation should both reflect and exhibit our testimonies, starting with the testimony

of integrity. Ecumenical work is spiritual work, both humbling and nourishing.

Six years before the founding of the World Council of Churches, Elbert Russell identified several areas in which Friends might be able to contribute to the growing ecumenical movement:

The Society has still a "testimony" to elements of the Christian gospel not yet fully acknowledged by even Protestant Christendom, such as simplicity in manner of living, complete spiritual democracy in the church, the ministry of women, inward spiritual authority, personal religious guidance, sincerity and truthfulness in speech, freedom of conscience and worship, simple mystical public worship, a classless Christian Society, reliance on spiritual forces only to

Right: An Orthodox church leader attends worship in the main tent.

Below: Assembly participants on the University of Zimbabwe campus



with Women," but not its concern that the churches move toward according women opportunities for church service equal to those men enjoy. The Orthodox churches bring to Protestantism a concern for inward spiritual authority and mystical public worship. The WCC and its member churches are wrestling to overcome the legacies of discrimination on the basis of sex, class, nationality/ethnicity, and race. In December, the Assembly decided to launch a "Decade to Overcome Violence." All these issues have been put on the table, as well as others that Elbert

Russell did not list, for example "the integrity of creation" and issues regarding sexuality.

In many of these areas liberal Western European churches have taken the lead in pressing the issues. This has produced manifest strains within the World Council of Churches, especially between the liberal Protestant churches

and the Orthodox churches, on the one hand, and between the liberal North American and European Protestant churches and the churches in Africa, Asia, and Central and South America, on the other. In short, issues of concern to Friends are under active consideration in ecumenical dialog within the World Council of Churches, and Friends have substantive contributions to make in these areas. We also have much to gain, as Friends participating in such dialog will be challenged to articulate spiritual foundations for our witness and testimony. Complicating

the situation is the relative lack of freedom with respect to many sociopolitical issues for churches in many parts of Africa and Asia. It was one thing to speak prophetically to Western European churches in the early 1950s; it is quite another to speak to churches struggling for survival in the face of serious persecution in many parts of the world today.

The World Council of Churches is not simply a forum for discussion, or even for prayerful deliberation. It is also active in the world. Practical ecumenical work includes peace and reconciliation work, com-

overcome evil, international peace and the brotherhood of man regardless of sex, class, nation, or race. There is still an urgent need for its ministry of impartial love in a divided, "war-torn" world.

The world is still "war-torn," though the churches seem more open to finding nonviolent solutions than they were in 1942. Ecological concerns and demands for global economic justice have led some churches to begin to think seriously about simplicity in manner of living. The World Council of Churches has just concluded its "Decade of the Church in Solidarity

munity development efforts, public health projects, etc. These activities are also included in the spiritual work of ecumenism.

They can also be forms of prayer. (Remember Jesus on what we do for the least of people or Mother Teresa on seeing Christ in distressing disguise in the destitute and dying persons whom she aided in Calcutta.) Friends have made much of prayers of vocal ministry and prayers of silent attendance upon God, but prayer can take ever so many forms—as many forms as have thought and expression of the heart: there is prayer in silence, prayer out loud, prayer on paper or canvas, and prayer in action. One aspect of the spiritual work of ecumenism is to enrich one's inventory of prayer, as it were. We can grow to honor, if not practice, the concrete expressions of spirituality and prayer in all their variety, while seeking together the spiritual Ground, Source, Light from which they grow.

For the ecumenical movement it is a scandal for Christianity that Christians are so divided among themselves. Ecumenism involves seeking together common grounding and mutual appreciation, with the hope that eventually there will be full mutual recognition of Christian

faithfulness. Whether intentionally, inadvertently, or in spite of themselves, the member churches of the WCC have various visions of what it is to be Christian (shall we say "properly" Christian?) and various self-understandings that are shaped by tradition and historical experience.

For most of us in Western Europe and the Americas, this vision is shaped by the Church's evolution in the Latin West: the Roman Catholic church for 1,500 years and then the Protestant separations and radical Reformation that yielded an experience of multiple streams of Christianity in Western Europe and North America, with almost 500 years of theological debate among these streams. The moderator of the WCC, Aram I, Catholicos of Cilicia, reminded us that this history was alien to the experience and self-understanding of Christians of the Orthodox East, that Protestant-Catholic dialogs tend to share presuppositions that are not part of Orthodoxy. It was a simple point, but of sweeping significance. Our collective consciousness includes the popes, the Crusades, the wars of religion, the Inquisition, anti-clericalism, disestablishmentarianism, the brutal suppression of Lollards, Albigenians, Familists. . . . These shape our conscious-

ness of Christianity and our ecumenical dialogs among Protestants and between Protestants and Catholics. Can we truly understand Christianity while limiting our understanding to the Western European experience?

As long as European Protestants dominate the World Council of Churches, they are likely (as they have done in the past) to control the language and agenda of ecumenism. This has proven to be nettlesome and frustrating for the Orthodox churches, which tend to feel misunderstood and ignored.

The World Council of Churches now comprises some 330 churches from throughout the world, among which are independent or indigenous Asian and African churches like the African Israel Nineveh Church, the Harrist Church, and the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth by his Messenger Simon Kimbangu. In Harare we experienced the rich tapestry of the Christian world. The increasing number of indigenous churches from around the world and the growing independence of churches started by missionaries from Europe and North America, combined with a persistent Orthodox presence, may well break the dominance of European Protestant theology within the WCC and force ecumenists to pay more attention to the Ground, Source, Light from which the many churches grow and to which they witness.

Appeals to shared theological history and tradition are destined to fail. Quaker Christian universalism may have a role in helping the World Council adjust to the emerging reality of Christian diversity—if we are up to the challenge of genuine dialog with these churches. Such dialog will require great humility and openness to the motions of Love among those who seek to follow Christ.

For it is not opinion, or speculation, or notions of what is true; or assent to, or the subscription of articles, or propositions, though never so soundly worded, which, according to their sense, makes a man a true believer, or a true Christian. But it is a conformity of mind and practice to the will of God, in all holiness of conversation according to the dictates of this holy Spirit of light and life in the soul, which denotes a person truly a child of God.

—William Penn



JUBILEE 2000

Breaking the Chains of Debt

"Jubilee 2000" is a worldwide movement requesting debt cancellation for "heavily indebted poor countries." Recalling the Mosaic "jubilee year" (Lev. 25: 10–17), the movement seeks a redemption of the poorest countries from the crushing burden of external debt. The Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches last December adopted a "Jubilee Call to End the Stranglehold of Debt on Impoverished Peoples," calling for debt cancellation for heavily indebted poor countries, ethical lending and borrowing practices, and ethical governance including especially the ending of corruption and of the misuse of loans. The World Council recognized in its statement at

least some of the complexity of this very complex issue, and its action is to be welcomed. Six months later, the G8, meeting in Cologne June 18, 1999, agreed to provide more debt relief, faster, and to more countries than it had in 1996. Thirty-three countries would now seem to qualify, but public support within the G8 nations for debt cancellation will be important.



Right: Zimbabweans in a theater production during the preassembly youth event

About the Wider Quaker Fellowship

Friends World Committee for Consultation, Section of the Americas, works to facilitate loving understanding of diversities among Friends while we discover together, with God's help, our common spiritual ground, and to facilitate full expression of our Friends' testimonies in the world. Friends World Committee's Wider Quaker Fellowship program is a ministry of literature. Through our mailings of readings, we seek to lift up voices of Friends of different countries, languages and Quaker traditions, and invite all to enter into spiritual community with Friends.

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