



## Lukas Vischer: Christian Councils – Instruments of Ecclesial Communion

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Lukas Vischer was director of the Commission on Faith and Order at the World Council of Churches. He delivered the following speech at the World Consultation on Christian Councils, in June 1971.

### 3. Summary

The earliest associations which can be described as Christian Councils came into being at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They were Protestant creations. They needed only such agreements and structures as were absolutely indispensable for carrying out the tasks imposed by the Gospel and by the situation. Progress and extension of the ecumenical movement led to a new type of Christian Council: the fellowship of churches on the way to unity – i.e. of churches which are already able to bear joint witness and to co-operate in spite of their differences. Most Christian Councils today are based on this conception, the WCC as well as most National Christian Councils.

Christian Councils have an instrumental significance in the promotion of communion among the churches. Yet they face some difficulties: 1) They can fulfil their ecclesiological function only when they embrace the *entire* fellowship engaged in the ecumenical movement in a specific area, the Roman Catholic Church being included. 2) Christian Councils must help to lead the churches nearer to unity instead of simply adding one further structure to the already complex network of church structures. 3) In recent years many of the new ventures which point towards the future don't originate in the institutions of the churches but in movements and groups. Christian Councils could grant full rights to those movements and groups in specific areas of their work and arrange for representative confrontations and discussions by ad hoc meetings.

The real question, however, lies deeper than strategic considerations: Is the life and work of the Christian Councils inspired by a *vision*? This is not just a matter of agreeing on a definition of the ecclesial communion but rather a matter of *living that communion in anticipation*: 1) How are we to give an "account of the hope that is in us"? 2) Christian Councils must help the churches to understand proclamation, social and political witness and diaconia as one single coherent responsibility. 3) Christian services increasingly bring together members of different confessions. Even if Christian Councils have to respect the rules of the churches, they cannot ignore the movement towards communion in the Eucharist. 4) The system of representation is felt to be inadequate in almost all churches. Christian Councils are more unhampered by the weight of traditions; they can create synodal structures in their own life which will do more justice to the contemporary demand for representation and communication. 5) There is a danger today of absolutizing the local dimension. Nonconforming groups which feel progressive in their reaction against authorities are in particular danger to end up in a complacent provincialism. An important task of Christian Councils lies therefore in a fruitful interrelationship between various levels of councils.

# ONE IN CHRIST



## CHRISTIAN COUNCILS : SOME APPRAISALS

Important documentation and papers by

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1972-2

# ONE IN CHRIST

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## CONTENTS

### *Introductory Note*

### *Guest Editorials*

Editorial 1 *Victor Hayward* 126

Editorial 2 *Basil Meeking* 129

Christian Councils—Instruments of Ecclesial Communion  
*Lukas Vischer* 132

Difficulties in the Growing Pattern of Co-operation  
*Basil Meeking* 148

Christian Councils and the Unity of the Local Church  
*Nikos A. Nissiotis* 158

National Christian Councils as Instruments of Mission and  
Renewal *N. J. Maro* 167

Flexibility in Conciliar Structures *R. H. Edwin Espy* 175

### *Ecumenical Notes and Documentation*

World Consultation on Christian Councils Report . 187

Roman Catholic Participation in Councils of Churches:  
a Survey . . . . . 200

Caribbean Councils of Churches and the Caribbean  
Conference of Churches (in process of formation)  
*Bishop R. L. Guilly, S.J.* 215

Extracts from 'Report on Possible R.C. Membership in  
the N.C.C.'—U.S.A. . . . . 223

# CHRISTIAN COUNCILS— INSTRUMENTS OF ECCLESIAL COMMUNION\*

WHAT are Christian Councils? Is it possible to define them in theological, or, more precisely, in ecclesiological terms? How are they related to the One Holy Church of the creeds? Are they the Church or at least something like the Church? Or are they so different from the Church that to speak of them in theological or ecclesiological terms would only cause confusion and should therefore be avoided? When we try to answer these questions we at once face two almost insuperable difficulties. To speak of ecclesiology at once raises the problem: *which* ecclesiology? Ecclesiological assumptions differ from tradition to tradition, and even when we all confess One Holy Church we are far from a common understanding of the Church and differ considerably even in our use of ecclesiological terms. These differences will affect our answers to these questions. The answers will vary according to our ecclesiological presuppositions. This needs to be remembered particularly by those who hold radical ecclesiological views and believe that their understanding of the Church is independent from any particular confessional view but entirely derived from the contemporary situation. To a much greater extent than they would like to think, they belong to the ecclesiological tradition of the Reformation and nonconformity. None of us can altogether escape from the shadow of his own tradition. But how then are we to find common ecclesiological views?

The second difficulty is even more serious. To speak of Christian Councils raises the question: *which* Christian Councils? The organizations described as Christian Councils are so diverse that it can be asked whether it is right to give them all the same label. There are certain common features, of course. But the one *genus* embraces a great variety of species, just as with animals and plants. Many 'councils' are loose associations while others are so strongly organized that they push the member Churches into the

\*Dr Lukas Vischer is Director of the Secretariat of the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches. This is the text of a speech given last June at the World Consultation on Christian Councils, and is here reprinted, by permission, from the *Ecumenical Review*, January 1972.

background. Many are held together not by a confession of faith but only by certain common tasks. Others do all their work together on a common basis. Many lead somewhat hidden existences whereas others make their presence felt as councils by public statements and declarations. In each individual case the theological and ecclesiological considerations to be made are different. There are also considerable differences when the question of ecclesiological significance is raised in the case of local, national, regional or international Councils. At each level, the ecclesiological problems raised are quite distinctive. Any comprehensive ecclesiology of Councils is therefore ruled out from the start. Any such attempt could only lead to crude generalizations. The only possible solution is to consider the variety of Christian Councils and to venture some critical theological and ecclesiological comments on it. A critical attempt of this kind may well bring out more clearly the strengths and weaknesses of the existing Christian Councils.

### **Two Types of Christian Councils**

A brief glance at the history of the ecumenical movement brings to light an important distinction. The earliest associations which can be described as Christian Councils came into being at the beginning of this century. In concept and character they differ fundamentally from the associations which came into existence later, especially during and immediately following the Second World War. The earliest associations were Protestant creations. Various Protestant Churches which in spite of differences were nevertheless closely related to one another united in Alliances or Federations; for example, the French Protestant Federation (1906), the Federal Council in the United States (1908), and the Swiss Federation of Evangelical Churches (1928). Separation and division had become intolerable. The common tasks were so evident that they felt constrained to come together. If they were to act at all effectively, they had to act together at the national level. The establishment of a federation seemed the appropriate step to take. No very profound ecclesiological reflection accompanied this step. In general the founders of these federations believed that a federal structure was appropriate and adequate to express the unity of the People of God. They were opposed to unification and uniformity. The Protestant Churches needed only such agreement and only such structures as were absolutely indispensable for carrying out the tasks imposed by the Gospel and by the situation. In a certain

sense, therefore, the federation or alliance was for them the Church. Similar thinking underlay the missionary councils which sprang up increasingly following the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910. As a rule they were, however, associations of missionary societies, not of Churches, and were concerned with the one task of what were then known as 'foreign' or 'overseas' missions.

But the progress and extension of the ecumenical movement led to a new type of Christian Council. More and more Churches began to share in the ecumenical movement. How were they to organize themselves for joint witness and action? The creation of a federation could be regarded as a final and adequate answer to the structure question so long as only Protestant Churches with more or less similar ecclesiological convictions were involved. But once Churches with divergent convictions joined in, Churches for example which regarded a precisely formulated confession, or a sacramental view of the Church, or a particular church structure or pattern of ministry, as a precondition of fellowship, it was no longer possible to regard the federation unquestioningly as the Church. A new concept gained ground.

A Christian Council now came to be regarded as a fellowship of Churches. These Churches have begun to take an interest in each other. The fellowship which binds them together in Christ has summoned them out of their isolation. They must, therefore, bear witness to the Gospel together. They have still not clarified, however, much less overcome, the differences which divide them from one another. Real unity still lies in the future. Fellowship in the Christian Council is no more than a provisional fellowship, therefore. It is fellowship on the way to unity. It brings together Churches and Christians from a particular area and makes it possible for them already to have a foretaste of that full fellowship, already to bear joint witness and to co-operate. At the same time it also helps the Churches to expose themselves continually to mutual criticism and in this way to correct mutually the one-sidedness of their positions. Most of the existing Christian Councils are based on this conception. Not only the World Council of Churches but also most of the National Christian Councils interpret themselves in this way. This is not to say, of course, that the earlier conception has disappeared. Some of those earlier federations are still in existence today: and the influence of the older view can be seen in the fact that many regard even the new type Christian Councils as federations. The official view of the Council's

character and function does not always impose itself in actual practice. The Christian Council is still thought of as the appropriate and adequate expression of the Church of Jesus Christ.

But if we take this concept of the Christian Council as a fellowship of yet divided Churches to its logical conclusion, the question of the ecclesiological significance of the Christian Council becomes even more complicated. How can this fellowship be described in ecclesiological terms? Is it partly Church? Is it an anticipation of the Church? Is it Church from time to time when it is in session and makes some decisive statements and takes some decisive action? Or is it completely lacking in ecclesial character? Discussion has constantly wavered between these various possibilities.

### **Three Impasses**

Before tackling this question, however, we must ask how this second concept has actually worked out in practice and how it works out today. The description of the ideal of a fellowship of Churches arouses great expectations. Are these expectations being fulfilled? Have the Churches borne joint witness? Have they drawn closer to unity? The validity of this conception must be shown by its fruits. Clearly, however, only to a very limited degree have these expectations been fulfilled. Today in fact the Christian Councils are in considerable difficulties. Let me mention three in particular which are also important for the ecclesiological discussion :

(1) To be regarded as a fellowship of yet divided Churches, a Christian Council must include as far as possible *all* Churches and Christians who are engaged in the ecumenical movement in a specific area. It must provide the framework by which they are all held together and in which they all make their particular contribution to the ecumenical movement. It must be an expression of the indissoluble unity of the one ecumenical movement. It fails in this task, however, if it continues to be confined to Churches belonging to certain traditions, if certain Churches stand aside from it and make their contribution to the ecumenical movement in some other way. The problem does not arise primarily from Churches which are in any case opposed to the ecumenical movement, but with Churches which wish to fulfil their role in the ecumenical movement independently of the Christian Councils. The most obvious and most important example of this is the Roman Catholic Church. This Church has joined actively in the ecumenical movement but so far only in a relatively few cases has

it joined the Christian Councils. There are many reasons why it holds back. The ecclesiological self-understanding of the Roman Catholic Church is probably still to be mentioned in the first place. Can the Roman Catholic Church maintain its claim to represent the one Church of Christ if it enters into a structured fellowship with other Churches? The documents of the Second Vatican Council can, of course, be interpreted in such a way that membership of the Christian Councils seems not merely possible but actually desirable. But earlier views continue to be influential in preventing Roman Catholic membership, especially when in addition there are practical grounds which seem to argue against such a step. But the reasons are not exclusively on the Roman Catholic side. Christian Councils themselves can reinforce this hesitancy on the part of the Roman Catholic Church by their tendency to think of themselves as a fellowship of non-Roman Churches and by their unwillingness to have their conscious or unconscious Protestant assumptions disturbed. But whatever the reasons for it may be, the very fact that the Roman Catholic Church usually remains outside the Christian Councils results in a whole new crop of diverse ecumenical structures. Not only individual Churches but often the Christian Councils themselves are related to the Roman Catholic Church by special bodies. Many projects are carried out by new structures outside the Christian Councils. Each particular structure serves some immediate goal and can be justified in terms of that goal. Variety is undoubtedly essential but we must not be blind to the dangers of this uncontrolled growth of structures. For the longer structures last, the more they tend to gather a momentum of their own, with the result that the Christian Councils may all of a sudden discover that they are no longer able to be the fellowship of Churches they were originally meant to be. The life will have been sapped from them by the transference of important ecumenical tasks elsewhere.

(2) For a Christian Council to be regarded as a fellowship of Churches on the way to unity, it must help to lead the Churches ever nearer to unity. Have the Christian Councils really helped to achieve this goal? Have they been able to eliminate the divisive factors which keep Churches apart and to help the Churches to achieve complete ecclesial fellowship? On the whole, most would agree that progress has been very modest. Indeed, we are bound to ask whether the Christian Councils do not in many cases actually represent a hindrance to the achievement of full ecclesial unity?



In many cases, it is true, relations between the Churches have become more intimate and in some cases a Christian Council has developed from a loose association into a closer fellowship. One of the more significant examples, perhaps, is that of the Churches of Indonesia. But on the whole, Christian Councils have left the divisions between the Churches intact. Generally speaking, they have been an agency for carrying out certain joint tasks rather than an instrument of unification. They have tackled tasks which the individual Churches could not or would not tackle separately. The result is that in many cases they have become a structure alongside the Churches, with its own momentum. Instead of making more manifest the fellowship of the Churches, they have simply added one further, more or less permanent, structure to the already complex network of church structures. This development cannot be blamed wholly on the Councils' lack of roots in the Churches. The Churches themselves are equally responsible. A Christian Council can only influence the Churches in the direction of unity when it is allowed to do so and when the individual Churches take joint decisions seriously. Many Christian Councils, however, are debarred in principle from exercising any influence on the life of the Churches. All questions relating to unity have been expressly reserved by the constitution of the Council to the Churches themselves. The Council is to deal exclusively with external matters which raise no awkward questions about the character, order and self-understanding of the individual Churches themselves. Can we wonder then that Christian Councils develop into organisations isolated from the Churches? Can we wonder that they find their *raison d'être* in a programme carried out independently of the Churches? Or that they succumb to the pharisaism found in so many Christian Councils? 'I thank Thee, Lord, that I am not as these Churches, these unrenewed exponents of the *status quo*!' The vicious circle is obvious. The less the Churches focus their joint work on the central spiritual questions, the more inevitable is that sterile *vis-à-vis* of Councils and Churches which cripples the work of so many Councils today.

(3) My third point is even more important than the first two. In many countries Christian Councils face the almost insoluble problem of finding a constructive relationship to the movements and unofficial groups which are springing up alongside, and often in opposition to, the Churches. The tensions in the Churches have greatly increased in recent years. Many of the new ventures which

point towards the future originate not in the institutions of the Churches but in these movements and groups. The causes of this are many: the increasing inadequacy of inherited tradition, the acceleration of change in the world, the slothfulness of change in the Churches, the decay of authority, the restlessness and impatience of the present generation. The longer the division of the Churches continues, the less is it accepted as a fixture which calls for patient long term work. So little are the distinctive features of the confessional traditions accepted consciously, that ever increasing numbers prefer to abandon the existing fellowship. They find the half-measures of the past no longer tolerable. Full fellowship, including eucharistic fellowship, is to be achieved *now*. As a result of this growing tension the Christian Councils find themselves in a difficult position. In many cases, they owe their existence to the Churches. In a sense they are the instrument of the Churches. But they were brought into existence by the Churches to break new ground and to bring the Churches into closer fellowship. They therefore feel a close kinship with these movements springing up in the Churches. But the movements and groups have hardly any more sympathy with the Christian Councils than they have with the Churches themselves. Have the Councils spoken out or acted any more plainly than the Churches? Have they brought about the ecclesial communion which is so badly needed today? Have they not become obstructive institutions? The Christian Councils thus find themselves between the hammer and the anvil, which is never a very comfortable situation! For some they are not responsible enough, for others they are too reactionary and bureaucratic. In such a situation can the Christian Councils fulfil their task and hold Churches and Christians in a particular area together in one spiritual fellowship? Or in this new conflict have they lost their *raison d'être*? Are they doomed to become, sooner or later, simply an institutional fossil of an earlier ecumenical epoch which has now gone?

These are three difficulties which cannot be ignored. It would not be difficult to mention others. But what consequences follow? Do our present difficulties represent an argument against the conception which has for the most part determined the creation of Christian Councils in recent decades? Have we to find a completely new approach? Or is the conclusion to be drawn from our present difficulties rather that the conception has not been put into

practice with sufficient consistency? Do these difficulties point to a lack of sound strategy on the part of the Churches, as a Catholic theologian has recently suggested? Reflection on the ecclesiological significance of Christian Councils may perhaps shed some light on this.

### **The Ecclesiological Significance of Christian Councils**

Some have suggested that the Christian Councils are already in some measure ecclesial in character. While they are not yet the Church, they are already ecclesial insofar as they lead the Churches into a fellowship of worship and witness. The attributes used in describing the Church in the creeds can be applied also to the Christian Councils. As they bring about fellowship, lead to new obedience, proclaim the universal sovereignty of Christ, the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church becomes visible in them. They can possess a certain—greater or less—ecclesial reality depending on their structure and authority in any given case. But they have, in any case, a certain ecclesiological quality. How could a fellowship created by Churches be completely neutral ecclesologically? Indeed, we may even ask whether the more comprehensive fellowship of the Christian Council does not have in principle even greater ecclesial reality than the individual Churches?

This view, however persuasive at first sight, has one fatal weakness. It does not distinguish sufficiently between the visible structure of a Christian Council and the communion which is established among the Churches as a result of the Council's existence and work. No-one will dispute that this communion between the Churches has ecclesial reality. When Churches meet and bear joint witness, the unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity of the Church can in fact shine out, like signs of the promise that God wills to renew his Church in its totality. Even Orthodox theologians, who have displayed considerable reserve in the discussion of the ecclesiological significance of Christian Councils, have frequently acknowledged this ecclesial reality. But can we attribute ecclesial reality to the Christian Councils themselves, as such? Can it be said that they are already in an incomplete sense the Church? Would this not be to go beyond what the realities warrant? Would it not imply that the Christian Council is the Church in process of becoming and that the individual Churches are simply the material from which this embryonic reality is to be constructed? But on

what basis can we know this? How do we know that the full ecclesial fellowship will in fact result from the further development and reshaping of the existing Christian Councils? The issue of the ecumenical movement remains an open question, possibly more an open question today than might have been imagined a few years ago. It would therefore be a disastrous mistake to exalt the Christian Councils by describing them as structures with ecclesial quality. What is gained by setting Christian Councils over against the Churches and distributing the reality of the *ecclesia* among them in more or less generous proportions? This would only harden the already sterile opposition between Councils and Churches and make it even more ideological. The ecclesial reality is not to be sought in the Christian Councils but in the communion among the Churches, in their encounter with one another and with the world. As structures, Christian Councils have only an *instrumental ecclesiological significance* in the promotion of this communion, in bringing it to birth and helping it to grow.

*Instruments of communion!* This calls for fuller explanation. The Churches which share in the ecumenical movement today all acknowledge that the present state of division is an intolerable anomaly. In the confused medley of traditions, the People of God cannot be the sign of Christ's presence which it is destined and called to be. The Churches know that this anomaly must be removed. Whatever convictions they may each have about themselves they all recognize that this task of being a sign of Christ's presence can only be fulfilled in a common effort on which all are agreed. No Church can cure this obscuring of the sign on its own. Christian Councils are the structural expression of this shared conviction, this common commitment. They are not anything in themselves. Their significance derives from the Churches. The Christian Councils are, so to speak, the thorn in the flesh of the Churches. They are a constant reminder to the Churches of the anomalous situation in which they live. They prod the Churches to expose themselves continually to the power of the Holy Spirit. They constitute the setting, created by the Churches themselves, within which the promise of renewal may be heard, within which the Churches can share their experiences and gradually establish a common tradition, and within which they can also face together and overcome together the crises to which they are exposed.

It follows from this that the form taken by Christian Councils must vary according to circumstances. Christian Councils have

instrumental ecclesiological significance when they stimulate the advance of this movement. They forfeit their ecclesiological significance when they become narcissistic or yield to the temptation to contemplate their own navels. The question for the Christian Councils and for the Churches is this: 'Are the Christian Councils *really* the setting in which the promise of renewal can come true and the renewed fellowship really grow?' One way or the other, the answer to this question will show whether or not any particular Christian Council can claim ecclesiological significance.

In the light of all this, can we now say something about the three difficulties mentioned earlier? I have three comments on this:

(1) The Christian Councils can only really fulfil their instrumental ecclesiological function when they embrace the entire fellowship which has emerged in the ecumenical movement today. But this fellowship includes the Roman Catholic Church. It is vital, therefore, that we clarify the question of the membership of Churches which do not as yet belong to the Christian Councils, and above all the question of the membership of the Roman Catholic Church. The question can no longer be avoided either by the Roman Catholic Church or by the Councils. The hesitancy and uncertainty which has surrounded the question so far must be dispelled. It is not a matter of pressing the Roman Catholic Church to become part of a structure in which it could no longer truly be itself. The form which the instrument must take today to correspond with the existing stage of fellowship in the ecumenical movement remains an open question. But the Roman Catholic Church also owes it to itself and to all its partners to clarify its position. Does it in fact continue as before to believe that the ecumenical movement must ultimately revolve around the Roman Catholic Church? Or does it too regard the Christian Councils as the appropriate instrument for extending and deepening fellowship between the Churches? And if the Roman Catholic Church has any alternative to propose, what are the immediate steps which have to be taken in the ecumenical movement?

(2) The Christian Councils are only real instruments of fellowship among the Churches if they help to strengthen unity in ever new ways. This task assumes different forms at the local, national and international levels. But in any case the ecclesiological significance of the Christian Councils depends on their concern with the question of unity as a continuing matter of priority. In other words, it depends on whether the Churches are constantly stimu-

lated by the Christian Councils to advance on the road to closer and truer fellowship. We need, therefore, to re-examine the role of the Christian Councils in the furtherance of the unity of the Church. Neither the Councils nor the Churches can be satisfied with the classical but nonetheless questionable answer that this is a matter for the Churches alone to handle. Christian Councils and Churches must play one into the other's hand. The Christian Councils can not only improve the atmosphere of mutual understanding among the Churches but they can also help the Churches to take concrete steps towards unity, in the framework of the Christian Councils. For example, they can provide the channel for agreement on the mutual recognition of baptism, marriage, the ministry or the Eucharist. But they can also promote closer relationships between certain of their member Churches. Unions must not be regarded as ventures undertaken independently of the Christian Councils. On the contrary, the Christian Councils can serve as channels through which concrete achievements of this kind are encouraged and made possible. The danger of non-committal superficiality is increasing today in the ecumenical movement. The Churches are in relationships with so many Churches that they are hardly able to summon sufficient determination to clarify at least one such relationship thoroughly. One relationship neutralizes another with the result that in the end they are all superficial. The Christian Councils can encourage this kind of attitude. But they can also help to overcome it whenever it appears.

(3) But what are we to say about the third difficulty, the tension which exists in almost every Church today? What must the Christian Councils do to fulfil their instrumental ecclesiological function in face of this new development? Neither the widening of membership nor a more intensive concern with unity can be of much help here. Indeed these developments could make the work of the Councils even more cumbersome and complicated. If the Christian Councils are really to act as midwives to assist at the birth of new fellowship, a profound transformation will be required here. They must become places where the strains and tensions of our time can really be dealt with. Movements and groups must be able to feel themselves to be an integral part of the Christian Councils and even those who feel that they no longer belong to any confessional group must be able to feel they belong to the Councils. This, of course, raises the difficult question of representation. Who is the Church? Who represents the Churches? Can a Christian

Council really embrace the entire gamut of conflicts in its work? Or is it ultimately committed to representing only the Churches and possibly the movements which have become respectable institutions? It is difficult to break through these limitations, but it is not impossible. Councils can, for example, in specific areas of their work, grant full rights to certain movements and groups. They can arrange, by *ad hoc* meetings, for representative confrontations and discussions. Councils which achieve this breakthrough forfeit none of their ecclesial significance. On the contrary, not to venture it would involve the forfeiture of their ecclesial significance. For the aim of the Christian Councils must in fact at all times be to maintain the nascent fellowship amid conflicts and controversies and to help it to bear a true witness.

### **The Vision of the One People of God—Life in Anticipation**

But these comments made so far are inadequate. However important strategic considerations may be, they are basically only preliminary questions. The real question lies deeper. Is the life and work of the Christian Councils inspired by a vision? Do they see the goal of their journey at least in outline before them? If they are really to fulfil an instrumental ecclesiological function they cannot be content to hold the Churches, movements and groups together in as representative and as serious a dialogue as possible. On the contrary, they must strive to anticipate now in the provisional fellowship they have established the goal which is ultimately to be attained. Again, they are not the Church, not even to a certain extent. But they would not be instruments of the embryonic and nascent communion if they did not strive in their life and their work for the ecclesial communion which the Churches are to find with one another; and it is not just a matter of agreeing on a definition of this ecclesial communion—as was done for example at the Third Assembly in New Delhi—but rather a matter of *living it in anticipation*. To be sure, the goal is in many respects still far from clear. It is part of the essence of the ecumenical movement to be a journeying into the unknown. But it is equally true that the encounter between the Churches thus far has not been entirely unproductive. Certain common perspectives have already emerged and the Christian Councils would fail in their duty if they did not make use of this common vision but out of mistaken respect for the Churches limited themselves to tasks which are not thought to affect their ecclesiality.



Let me give a few examples.

(1) How is the Gospel to be stated today? How are we to give an account of the hope that is in us? The question faces the Churches today at all levels. It occupies the official Churches, the movements, and the groups each in its own fashion but all with equal urgency. No Church, however, can any longer answer it on its own. Theological thinking keeps less and less to the confessional compartments and, in certain respects, the problems are so new that the concepts available in the confessional traditions are anyway inadequate. The answer can only develop, therefore, from common effort, even if the individual Churches may perhaps still be unwilling to admit this. Most Christian Councils have a formal Basis. But this Basis too easily tends to be a theological bow with no further consequences, a statement which later fulfils no vital role. But the Basis must not be regarded as a possession once-for-all acquired, any more than should the Church's confession itself. It must be constantly re-developed, so that the centre and basis on which the Church lives can become clearly visible again and again. This is not yet achieved by establishing study-groups on some particular theological theme. The effort must go much further. Statements must be formulated which provide an answer to the questions which are actually raised by the members of the individual Churches today. This effort may, in certain circumstances, take the form, for example, of drafting together a statement of common belief or a catechism for a specific region. Certain individual first attempts in this direction are already being made.

(2) Thinking in the ecumenical movement on the nature of the Church has shown increasingly clearly that the proclamation of the Gospel, social and political witness and diaconal service are inseparably interconnected dimensions. None of these can exist without the others and therefore the Christian Councils must not separate them in their life and work. They must not remain standing always on the threshold of proclamation and confine themselves exclusively to the fulfilment of practical tasks. To do so would make them guilty of a lopsidedness which could only end in the spiritual distortion of the fellowship of the Churches as well as the life of the individual churches themselves. The Christian Councils must, therefore, concern themselves with the witness of the Gospel and the problems this presents today. It is not enough for one Church to respect the others and to abstain from illegitimate proselytism. On the contrary, the Christian Councils must



help the Churches to understand proclamation, social and political witness, and diaconia as one single coherent responsibility. Of course, the unsolved theological and ecclesiological problems cannot be ignored. But the Councils can become agents of witness. Witness, of course, will involve the Council's exposure to opposition. Witness necessarily involves the cross and therefore decision. If the Christian Councils are to be instruments of ecclesial fellowship, this aspect of witness cannot be evaded. However inclusive they are meant to be, and however imperative it is that they should bring together in confrontation as many partners as possible, their witness nevertheless also inevitably establishes frontiers. Openness does not exclude militant witness. The Christian Councils must have the courage to draw the boundaries between church and non-church.

(3) *Worship* is most profoundly anchored in the individual Churches. The Christian Councils have for this reason concerned themselves relatively little with questions of worship. Certainly prayer and worship have never been missing from their life. But they have made only a modest contribution to the creative renewal of worship. They tend rather to evade the problems which worship and the spiritual life in general face today. They lean anyway to activism. While this has always been unsatisfactory, it has become intolerable today. The traditions of worship of the individual Churches are today less and less respected. Almost everywhere new ways are being followed. Services increasingly bring together members of different confessions. The liturgical forms which are used often arise spontaneously from the particular situation. The hymns which are sung do not belong to any one Church. Do not the Christian Councils, therefore, far more than ever before, have to become places where common worship is celebrated? Must they not devote far more energy than ever before to elicit and to test new forms? As they do so, they will also inevitably have to face the question of the Eucharist. However much they have to respect the rules of the Churches, they cannot ignore the irresistible movement towards a common communion. For the sake of ecclesial fellowship they must provide the place for a real discussion of this question.

(4) The view has increasingly gained ground in recent decades that the Church is to be understood and fashioned as a fellowship in which each individual member can fully develop his gifts and place them at the service of the others. Those who hold an office

in the Church are not set over the fellowship but within the fellowship. They have a specific role to play in the fellowship. The Church is only a genuine fellowship when all its resources play their due part. It is no accident that the Church today is so often described by the metaphor of the body and its members. This is not the place to explain this development in detail. Many explanations might be given. But the clear consequence of it is that the existing system of representation in almost all Churches is felt to be inadequate. They are more and more felt to be authoritarian. Many Churches are therefore seeking new solutions which make possible a much fuller participation of all members in decision-making and in their activities in general. The problem of communication is becoming more and more crucial. The Christian Councils can here fulfil an important ecclesial function. Just because they are more unhampered by the weight of traditions, they can create new patterns. They can create synodal structures in their own life which will do more justice to the contemporary demand for representation and communication. They can in this way help the Churches to achieve a genuine ecclesial conciliarity.

(5) My last example concerns the relationship between the local and the universal Church. In recent years the ecclesiological debate has resulted in astonishing agreement on this point. Almost all the Churches today stress with renewed emphasis the importance of the local Church. The Church always means primarily the congregation in a particular place or in a particular situation, the baptized who come together for the Eucharist and maintain fellowship with Christ together. They are not merely a part of the Church. Insofar as Christ is present among them, they are the Church. At the same time, however, they belong within a universal fellowship. They belong to the one People which embraces all the baptized in every place. This universal fellowship is not only a spiritual reality; it must also assume visible expression. The tasks which are assigned to the Churches at the universal level are so numerous that this visible form is more important today than ever before. The Christian Councils can play an important role in the building of this universal fellowship; and they have this advantage over the Churches, that they can approach the relation between local Church and universal fellowship without the handicap of cumbersome structures bequeathed them by history. In their own life they can relate the local and the universal fellowship to each other in a way appropriate to contemporary ecclesiological insights.

The local Christian Councils are of fundamental importance here. It is they who have to establish the ecclesial fellowship in each place, that local Church whose unity in Christ is still hidden today. They must fulfil this function, each in accordance with its particular situation. The larger Councils, especially the World Council of Churches, have here a two-fold task. On the one hand they must prevent the local Christian Councils from being side-tracked from their specific task, from having imposed on them from outside functions which make it impossible for them to carry out their immediate role. On the other hand, the larger Councils must also prevent the local Councils from losing sight of their universal horizon. They must remind them of the conditions to be fulfilled before it is possible to speak of a universal fellowship. We are in great danger today of absolutizing the local dimension. The non-conforming groups which, perhaps rightly, feel themselves to be progressive in their reaction against authorities, are in particular danger in this respect. They terribly quickly end up in a complacent provincialism. The fruitful inter-relationship between the various levels of Councils is therefore a decisively important task.

The list could be extended. The examples given are, however, sufficient to show that the tasks of the Christian Councils are scarcely any different from those which face the Church today. Or do not the same tasks impose themselves with equal urgency in countries where there is only one Church and where there is therefore no Christian Council? The battle fronts and the measures required are the same. The Christian Councils are not the Church. But they are so similar to the Churches because like them they work for the ecclesial communion which it is God's will to rebuild today and tomorrow. The better, the more effectively they carry out these tasks, the more they will make themselves superfluous, and we all of us can only hope that the day is not too far distant when Christian Councils will no longer be needed, a day when conferences such as this will no longer need to take place and discussion about the ecclesial significance of the Christian Councils can be closed, a day when we shall rejoice a little more spontaneously and a little more unselfconsciously in the fellowship which has been given us in Christ.

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