

## Common Witness: Evangelism in an Ecumenical Context- Celebrating Edinburgh 1910

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This year a number of celebrations will mark the centenary of the famous 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference.<sup>1</sup> It will be a year in which a wide range of groups look back on the past century to assess the fruit of that conference and to redirect the Church's missionary and evangelistic efforts for the future. There is much to celebrate in the various festivities that will take place from Edinburgh to Cape Town. The 1910 World Missionary Conference demonstrated the need for continued work in world mission and evangelization at a time when colonialism, indeed, Christendom as it had been known for over a millennium and a half, was beginning to break down.<sup>2</sup>

What many of you may not know is that the 1910 World Missionary Conference emerged as a result of a series of compromises between British and American church leaders. First, it was originally expected to be convened as the "Third Ecumenical Missionary Conference," but organizers dropped the word "ecumenical" when it was argued that neither the Catholic nor the Orthodox churches would be participants. Second, largely at the insistence of the Anglo-Catholic wing of Anglicanism, the Conference limited its scope to mission work being done solely among non-Christians and not among Roman Catholics. That meant that Protestant missions to Latin America would not be included.<sup>3</sup> Third, there was considerable conflict between those who wished to place a moratorium on missions in light of a fulfillment theology or a theology of religions that tended to play down the uniqueness of Christian doctrine, including the notion of classical Christology and the Incarnation but emphasized the philosophical and ethical dimensions of Christian faith, and those who viewed the missionary task as including primarily a clear presentation of Jesus Christ in classical terms.<sup>4</sup> Fourth, again at the insistence of Anglicans, the Conference would focus on missionary policy issues, while issues of doctrine and polity, which clearly separated the churches and contributed to problems on the field, would be excluded from consideration.<sup>5</sup> Still, whether it intended to do so or not, the Conference laid a foundation that ultimately led to the establishment or expansion of such initiatives as the International Missionary Council, the Faith and Order movement, and ultimately the World Council of Churches.<sup>6</sup>

Sadly, this centennial year also marks the fact that many churches remain unwilling or unable to come together, even for a celebration of this centenary marking the importance of ongoing evangelization and missionary work. The historic denominations, which stood behind the 1910 Conference will celebrate a relatively small meeting in June in the same Great Hall of Edinburgh where the 1910 Conference was held, while most Evangelicals will celebrate the event in a much larger meeting with the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization in Cape Town's Convention Center.

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<sup>1</sup> The most comprehensive books on the subject in recent years are Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* Studies in the History of Christian Mission, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009 and David A. Kerr and Kenneth R. Ross, Eds., *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Then and Now* Oxford, England: Regnum, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002), 33-38, 142-162.

<sup>3</sup> Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, 36, 50-58.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, 214-235.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, 38, 50-51.

<sup>6</sup> On the debate regarding the role of the International Missionary Conference on the emergence of these entities see Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, especially, 37-41 and 277-302 and Rose Dowsett, "Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity: An Evangelical Response," in David A. Kerr and Kenneth R. Ross, Eds., *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Then and Now*, 253-255.

Ironically, the Catholic Church, Orthodox Christians, and Pentecostals will participate at some level in both celebrations, although none of these churches participated in the 1910 gathering.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, the task of world evangelization is still far from complete. The hopes of Edinburgh have not yet found their mark. The world is still largely unevangelized. For the most part, our churches still live in division. Even if we may be thankful for the ecumenical distance traveled over the past century, there are still many groups that have not yet caught the ecumenical vision, many which have not yet chosen to participate in any way. We seem still to be short on ecumenical imagination. Memories of past rebukes and perceived slights, of unfair or ill-informed judgments, of arrogant and unilateral decisions, of unshared visions and self-serving actions are all too fresh and still quite influential among us. Our memories do not always comport with the facts, nor do our histories always comport with the memories of others. We have developed our own ways of thinking and acting in isolation from one another, as though that were the way it has always been or that is the way that it should be. On the whole, we have chosen to take a superficial approach to unity in the Church and have failed to take seriously any sense of a common mind, and hence, a common will among us. When we are together, we may speak as though we had a common mind and will, but when we are apart, we typically go our separate ways.<sup>8</sup>

If our churches have no shared vision it is difficult to imagine that we would have anything like a common witness. Many of our churches approach evangelism solely from our specific denominational perspective. We want to see our own denominations grow. All too often, we have not weighed the consequences of our actions on the churches around us. Those churches in various parts of the world that believe themselves to be under attack by other churches need to be *revalued* and *treated as equal partners* in discussions surrounding the continuing need for evangelism where they are present. At the same time, all churches need to address one another *as equal partners without claiming superiority over anyone else* for one reason or another.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, we need to acknowledge that some of our congregations have decided against supporting the missionary or evangelistic outreaches of their denomination altogether. Some have done so as a protest against some kind of perceived “neo-colonialism”, while others have done so in protest against different positions taken by their denominations with which they disagree but which they feel otherwise powerless to influence.<sup>10</sup> At the same time in the USA, and increasingly around the world, we have seen an explosion of independent ministries, congregations, mega-congregations, and so-called

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<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, papers already presented by Viorel Ionita, “Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity: An Orthodox Perspective,” David A. Kerr and Kenneth Ross, Eds., *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Then and Now*, 263-275; John A. Radano, “Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity: An Roman Catholic Perspective,” David A. Kerr and Kenneth Ross, Eds., *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Then and Now*, 276-289; and Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., “Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity: A Pentecostal Perspective,” David A. Kerr and Kenneth Ross, Eds., *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Then and Now*, 290-303 in preparation for the Edinburgh celebration.

<sup>8</sup> In an eight-page typed, single-space manuscript of a conversation between Gustav Kinderman, J. Roswell Flower, and Noel Perkin on November 14, 1946, Kinderman, who was then responsible for Assemblies of God mission interests in Europe reported that while representatives involved in forming the World Council of Churches “may talk about cooperation and working together, the very minute they go to different countries, they stick with their own. For this reason there is not this cooperation in the World Council of Churches that some people may think there is.” This transcription is available from the Flower Heritage Center of the Assemblies of God. It may be found under the title “Europe-Gustav [sic.] Kinderman, 11/14/46”, 8.

<sup>9</sup> The issue of canonical territory needs to be reviewed by all parties together, and not simply used as an excuse to keep the Gospel from being spread among people who are not currently being reached by it in any personal or substantial way.

<sup>10</sup> On the first point, see Samuel Kobia, “Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity: A World Council of Churches Perspective,” in David A. Kerr and Kenneth Ross, Eds., *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Then and Now*, 238-239. On the latter point, see “Church Withholds Funds from UMC,” *The Christian Century* 116:14 (May 5, 1999), 495; “No Funds for European Seminary,” *Christianity Today* 36:1 (January 13, 1992), 52.

“emerging” congregations that have developed their own evangelistic strategies and messages, the kind that they believe best fits the felt needs and expressed desires of their intended audiences.<sup>11</sup>

There is no question that it is important for our churches to exegete and to address the cultures around us, but many of our churches whether older and traditional or newer, independent and innovative continue to act as though we were in a shoving contest. “Move over,” we command one another. “We can do the job better than you can. The people want to hear *our* message, not yours.” Or in the words of the Apostle, Paul, “I have no need of you” (1 Corinthians 12:21). In such a context, how is it possible for us to speak of embracing a common witness? And yet we must, for in the end, there is but one Lord, one faith, and one baptism (Ephesians 4:5), and in the end, there is the prayer of Jesus that we may all be one (John 17:21).

Among the new realities the Church is facing in 2010 is the fact that the Church’s center of gravity has shifted increasingly from the North to the South since 1910. That fact was overlooked in 1910. The world of 2010 is a far cry from the world of 1910. While many of the actions of the nations that engaged in colonialism between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries have since been undone, many of the consequences of these actions still linger. At the same time, the Church has moved from more formal, traditional patterns of structure and worship found among pre-1910 missionaries, to less formal and innovative patterns throughout the South that are more commonly found among post-1910 missionaries and in a wide range of indigenous expressions.<sup>12</sup>

Just two months ago, I participated in a meeting in Accra, Ghana, where I heard complaints from over 70 African denominational heads from Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa. They spoke of families broken, of people enslaved by so-called Christians, of past oppression by the “Christian” nations of Europe, of indigenous leaders who were suppressed by colonial mission boards, and of missionary failures on the field. Their testimonies were not all negative by any means. They were also quick to affirm the coming of the Gospel to their shores in spite of the fallibility of those who brought it,<sup>13</sup> and they affirmed the fact that the missionaries took seriously their cultures when they took the time to translate the Scriptures into their indigenous languages.<sup>14</sup> But the message came through quite strongly that the alignment of churches with certain colonial policies did not always work to underscore the reconciling message of the Gospel.

While I was there, I also attended a three-hour long Sunday morning worship service in a Presbyterian congregation of a thousand people that would have curled the hair of many, if not most American Presbyterians. It reminded me more of a Black Pentecostal congregation than any Presbyterian congregation I have ever visited. It was decent and orderly, complete with a power point presentation, but they cranked up their amps, included multiple worship teams, shouts of joy, speaking

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<sup>11</sup> The phenomenon of independency is so large that David B. Barrett now counts at least nine different types of independent groups. See David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, Eds. *World Christian Trends AD 30 – AD 2200: Interpreting the Annual Christian Megacensus* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2001), 296-298.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 185-190; Jehu Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in 1998, Nelson Mandela spoke eloquently about the positive contributions of missionaries in South Africa. “The government of the day took no interest whatsoever in the education of Africans, Coloureds and Indians. The churches bought the land, built the schools, equipped them, appointed and employed people. Therefore when I say we are the produce of missionary education, I recognize that I will never have sufficient words to thank the missionaries for what they did for us.” See, “Address by President Nelson Mandela,” in Diane Kessler, Ed., *Together on the Way: Official Report of the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva, Switzerland: WCC Publications, 1999), 228.

<sup>14</sup> This has been pointed out also by Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message; The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1997), 123-124; Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity: The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 10-11, 25-26. See also, Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 26-42.

in tongues, hankie waving, clap offerings to the Lord, dancing in the aisles during a 15 minute offering collection, and the sermon on tithing ran 90 minutes during which the pastor ran back and forth through the aisles addressing particular people as he went! But that is the way much of Southern Christianity looks today.

There are, of course, more traditional churches in the region, but they are finding it increasingly difficult to compete without being transformed by the newer churches in the region. In his book, *The Future Church*, released at the end of 2009, John Allen noted that one of the most significant trends in the Catholic Church worldwide and something worth watching is the Pentecostalization of the Church.<sup>15</sup> The delegates at Edinburgh would have found these changes to be inexplicable.

None of this is news today, though in the North, some of our churches respond as though it were not so, and many of our churches find it difficult to know how to respond. The balance of power between denominations in the United States, many of them founded as the offspring of European denominations, has also shifted as older Protestant denominations decline in numbers while grasping to maintain the power they once held.<sup>16</sup> Do we tell the churches in the South that they have it all wrong and that they need to pay better attention to us as some leaders have chosen to do,<sup>17</sup> or do we listen to them as peers, and *together* discern what the Spirit of the Lord might be saying to all of us?<sup>18</sup>

In 2010, we are also being confronted by an increasingly virulent Islam, by rising fundamentalism and nationalism among India's Hindus, by the slow but steady re-opening of China, by the reality of global climate change, by diminishing natural resources – especially water, by the effects of globalization both positive and negative, by increased secularization, a newly empowered atheism, and by the moral, social and scientific challenges that were not even on the horizon in 1910.<sup>19</sup>

In spite of these many new challenges, two facts remain the same as they were in 1910. First, the command to evangelize and to incorporate new believers into the ongoing life of the Church is still in play. The mandate of the Church to make disciples has not been withdrawn. That has suggested in some cases and is becoming increasingly the case in all of our churches that the re-evangelization of our own members needs to be made a renewed priority.<sup>20</sup> Second, the task of evangelization among non-Christians is still an enormous unfinished task. In 1910, the estimated global population was 1.75 billion people. Today, we may speak of 6.9 billion people, of which only 2.3 billion of these people

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<sup>15</sup> John Allen, *The Future Church: How Ten Trends Are Revolutionizing the Church* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2009), 375-413.

<sup>16</sup> In fewer than four decades in the United States of America, for instance, the Episcopal Church has lost over 1,000,000 members, the Lutherans have lost some 800,000, the Presbyterians have lost nearly 800,000, the United Churches of Christ have lost over 730,000, and the United Methodists have lost over 2.7 million members. These figures are all self-reported by the denominations in question in the *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches* published by the National Council of Churches between 1971 and 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Former Bishop John Shelby Spong labeled the bishops from the developing world who disagreed with him as backward Fundamentalists and the actions of the 1998 Lambeth Conference the decent of Anglicanism into “irrational Pentecostal hysteria”. See “Bishop Spong Delivers a Fiery Farewell,” *The Christian Century* 116:5 (February 17, 1999), 178;

<sup>18</sup> For a recognition of the need for American churches to learn from churches of the South, see Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), 127-140, 164-179; For a very interesting discussion on discerning what the Holy Spirit might be saying to the churches, see D. Donnelly, A. Denaux, and J. Famerée, Eds. *The Holy Spirit, the Church and Christian Unity: Proceedings of the Consultation Held at the Monastery of Bose, Italy (14-20 October 2002)*, BETL 181 Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Discussions and practices related to the beginning and ending of life, stem cell research, genetic manipulation, designer babies, same-sex relations, the ordination of homosexuals, and the nature of war, reality programming, shock radio, and many others were at very different points than they are today.

<sup>20</sup> The call for re-evangelization, or the “New Evangelization” was first made by Pope Paul VI in his encyclical on Evangelization in the Modern World, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. This theme was picked up and given repeated emphasis in many of the speeches and some of the encyclicals of Pope John Paul II. See for instance, his encyclical on the Permanent validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate, *Redemptoris Missio*.

claim to be Christian.<sup>21</sup> That leaves some 4.6 billion who presumably need some form of evangelization. The question before us then, is how best to be obedient to that command. Is it possible for us to give a common witness to the One who has reconciled us to God and to one another through His work on the cross?

In one sense, Christian Churches Together in the USA has already given an affirmative response to that question. It has succeeded in drawing together a large cross section of churches in the United States, to engage in a greater level of cooperation with one another. It has identified evangelism and poverty as being two issues where all of its participants should be able to make a substantive effort *together*.

The alleviation of poverty is a definable and measureable goal. It cries out for all of us to address it in a selfless way. And it is an issue that is consistent with Jesus' call to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 19:19). Thus, it is an issue on which we can work together, even though it is sometimes argued that the example of the early Church was to limit the care for material needs to those in the household of faith.<sup>22</sup>

The effort to address poverty is a good and noble goal, to which you have committed your churches and Christian organizations. Undoubtedly, there will be those who come to faith as a result of this common effort to address their physical needs. Evangelism can be done by engaging in acts of mercy, though frequently it has come under attack as an evangelistic tool. As Jacques Matthey, until recently the Director of the World Council of Churches' Programme on Unity, Mission, Evangelism and Spirituality has noted, the tendency to separate service from an evangelistic agenda "...has been strengthened by the criticism from people of other faiths, who have complained that Christians use human distress to attract vulnerable sectors of the population into the church."<sup>23</sup> Sometimes, of course, that complaint has been accurate. Still, it is possible to see a link between evangelism and service that does not simply produce so-called "rice Christians".

But there is more to evangelization than social intervention, for evangelization has always had proclamation as its primary component. When Jesus sent his disciples out, He sent them "to *proclaim* the Kingdom of God and to heal" (Luke 9:1-2). There was first proclamation and then there was action. When Peter stood up on the Day of Pentecost and addressed the people, he *proclaimed* the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ according to the plan of God, and as a result people were brought to a place of decision regarding what they would do with Jesus. As the story unfolded, Peter did not point them first to feeding programs or to treatment centers. He did not supply them first with affordable housing or a subsistence wage. He called them to repentance and to baptism in the name of Jesus Christ. This was the consistent pattern throughout the Book of Acts.<sup>24</sup> But it is equally important to note that the story quickly moved to include the sharing of goods (Acts 2:43; 4:32), and then to the care of those in need (Acts 6:1-7). Given the state of the world today, it seems to me that both proclamation and action continue to be necessary.

I recognize the tendency of most Evangelicals and Holiness Christians and Pentecostals (of which I am one) to major on the oral presentation of the Gospel as the primary, if not the only legitimate form of evangelization since at least the time of Charles G. Finney in the 1830s. I affirm much of that position. Through the years, the oral proclamation of the Gospel message has taken many forms, from personal

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<sup>21</sup> David B. Barrett, "Global Table 5," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 33:1 (January 2009), 32.

<sup>22</sup> Graham Twelftree, *People of the Spirit: Exploring Luke's View of the Church* (London: UK: SPCK / Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 177-203.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Matthey, "Evangelism, Still the Enduring Test of Our Ecumenical – and Missionary Calling," *International Review of Mission* 96, No. 382-383 (July-October 2007), 365.

<sup>24</sup> Acts 2:14-39; 3:13-26; 4:10-12; 5:30-32; 10:36-43; 13:17-41. See, C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (NY: Harper & Row, 1964), especially, 7-35.

evangelism, to door to door evangelism, to street evangelism, to evangelistic services with altar calls, to open air, tent and stadium evangelism, to radio and television evangelism, to movie evangelism, and even to internet evangelism. These things have been very effective in the lives of some people. But they haven't always been done well, and there are many times when they seem not to have been very effective either.

At times, our simplistic ideas regarding conversion have led people to make a decision, and then we have left them to fend for themselves. We have given the message and then walked away. I see it happen every year at the annual Rose Parade in Pasadena. Evangelists of all kinds, most with good intentions and a high degree of Christian zeal get people to "accept Christ" on the street. They talk with them, pray with them, hand them a few tracts, tell them to connect with a church, and then walk away. And at the end of the parade, you will find thousands of Christian tracts lying in the gutter. All too often, we have let converts down by failing to provide adequate follow-up and discipleship that calls their pre-Christian values into question and forms them as followers of Jesus Christ with values that reflect the Kingdom of God.

Some of you know the story of the Apostolic Faith Mission pastor, Frank Chikane, who pastored a congregation in Soweto during the Apartheid era.<sup>25</sup> In 1977, he was arrested, held, and tortured, for what the Apartheid government suggested was his role in aiding young people in his congregation in an anti-government uprising, a claim that to this day he strongly denies. The person who oversaw his torture introduced himself to Frank as a deacon in a white congregation from the same denomination. How could this happen if this man were, as it seems to have been assumed by his church, truly converted to Jesus Christ? Evangelism is about conversion from one way of life, from one form of thinking, to another way of life and thinking. The question of where was the conversion and formation of this individual that reflected the values of the Kingdom of God simply must be raised with respect to the actions that this deacon took to oversee Frank's torture before going off to a prayer meeting.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time, I recognize the tendency of some more traditional believers to major on the presentation of the Gospel in service as the primary form of evangelization since at least the time of the Social Gospel in the 1890s. Coming as it did at the height of the Social Gospel period, some at the Edinburgh Conference viewed the supremacy of Christian ethics and social programs as the preferred method of Christian witness, especially in Asia.<sup>27</sup> They even favored a moratorium on proclamation in favor of action. In the United States, this kind of incarnational evangelism had been present among Evangelical, Holiness and Perfectionist Christians for over half a century before the 1910 World Missionary Conference.<sup>28</sup> With the emphasis upon the ethical dimension of Christianity and the rise of the Social Gospel, however, such action was mainstreamed into most other Protestant Churches, while in reaction against the Social Gospel, many Evangelicals and Holiness Christians reoriented themselves almost exclusively toward proclamation.<sup>29</sup>

If we look closely at the forms that social ministries have taken, from the development of soup kitchens, feeding programs and rescue missions, to the enrollment of voters in the fight for civil rights, to identification with various minority groups and calls for action in their causes, to work for better

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<sup>25</sup> For an account of his life, see his autobiography, Frank Chikane, *No Life of My Own* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989.

<sup>26</sup> Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., "Rebuilding a Broken Society: An Interview with Frank Chikane," *Theology, News & Notes* 48:1 (Spring 2001), 20-27, especially 22-24.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Henry Sloan Coffin, "Christianity the Final and Universal Religion: As An Ethical Ideal," in *The History and Records of the Conference together with Addresses Delivered at the Evening Sessions* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Oliphant, Anderson, & Ferrier, 1910), 164-172.

<sup>28</sup> Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957, 1980), especially 148-177, 235-236.

<sup>29</sup> Ronald C. White and C. Howard Hopkins, *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1976), 285-295 for a concise critique of the Social Gospel, both negative and positive..

housing, for better working conditions, and the regularization of the immigration status of many foreigners in our midst, this reorientation should not have been necessary. Each of these actions can be summed up under Jesus' call for us to offer a cup of cold water to those in need (Matthew 10:42), actions that all of us should be able to affirm. But the reorientation revolved around a basic power struggle over the nature of the Gospel message itself, a struggle which to this day is still not fully resolved. Who is Jesus and what is the Kingdom of God?

Unfortunately, and all too often, our attempts at social ministries have tended to degenerate into little more than social welfare programs administered by churches instead of vital means to bring people to decisions about what lies in their hearts and lives. Again, as Jacques Matthey has noted, "The tendency to reduce mission to involvement in the field of social work, accompanied by acts of worship and programmes of Christian education, is still dominant in many traditional churches."<sup>30</sup> Some Christians seem even to suggest that it does not matter that we try to bring these people to Christian faith if they are faithful to their own faith tradition<sup>31</sup> or that we might consider their participation in a new form of ecumenism that extends beyond the Church.<sup>32</sup> So what must we do in order to evangelize effectively in an ecumenical context? How can we bear a common witness? I will make four observations, though there are obviously others that could also be made.

### **1. We can only give common witness when we trust one another completely.**

By now, most of you will be aware of the Global Christian Forum.<sup>33</sup> It developed from an idea that Dr. Konrad Raiser, who at the time was serving as General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, had that rose out of the "Common Understanding and Vision" discussions concluded in 1998. Dr. Raiser maintained that the WCC would never be able to receive all churches into its membership. And the churches that did not hold Council membership, namely Roman Catholics and the majority of Holiness, Evangelical, and Pentecostal churches represented more than 75% of all Christians in the world. At the same time, Dr. Raiser became convinced that it was necessary to find a way to engage those churches in critical conversation about the role of the Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century world. But how could we elicit trust from these churches, when in many cases there was so much animosity and mistrust on both sides of the divide. I was invited to participate in the initial discussion of this question.

As we pondered the question of what to do, we realized two things. First, we determined to become neither an appendage to nor a substitute for or a competitor with any contemporary ecumenical organization. Whatever means we could imagine that might end the impasse needed to be neutral and non-threatening for everyone. For us, that meant the development of a forum in which membership was not part of the equation though participation was, and where those not normally at the ecumenical table were represented in numbers sufficient to make clear that their voices were both desired and heard. This

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<sup>30</sup> Jacques Matthey, "Evangelism, Still the Enduring Test of our Ecumenical – and Missionary Calling," 356

<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, Barbara Brown Zickmund, "Faithful Living in a Multi-Faith World," Program 3817, January 19, 1995,

"Unfortunately many Christians have presumed that God's particularity in Jesus Christ is some kind of proof of Divine partiality for Christian faithfulness. We have assumed that our insights gained through God in Christ provide the only means of human salvation. We have sought to squeeze all religious truth through a Christian filter. We have equated the particularity of God in Christ with Divine partiality.

It is time, I believe, for Christians to realize that we do not control God, and that we cannot define the work of the Holy Spirit out of our limited human experience. In our confession that God was in Christ reconciling the world, we are called to engage and support faithfulness. God does not show partiality, and we dare not either – even as we witness that God's love in Christ is sufficient for salvation. In fact, radical openness to many forms of faithfulness may be the ultimate calling of a Christian."

This text is available at: [http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/Zickmund\\_3817.htm](http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/Zickmund_3817.htm) . Accessed, January 2, 2010.

<sup>32</sup> S. Wesley Ariarajah, "Wider Ecumenism: A Threat or a Promise?" *The Ecumenical Review* 50:3 (July 1998), 321-329.

<sup>33</sup> For a comprehensive assessment of the Global Christian Forum to date, see Huibert van Beek, Ed., *Revisioning Christian Unity: The Global Christian Forum*, Studies in Global Christianity, Oxford, UK: Regnum Books International, 2009. Its website is [www.globalchristianforum.org](http://www.globalchristianforum.org) .

neutrality was critical, especially in the international arena where ecclesial differences were often made more complex by the political and social realities of the countless expressions of a global Church.

Second, we recognized that our churches are all at different stages of ecumenical development. There were experienced ecumenical veterans, there were relative newcomers to the ecumenical field, and there were those who were clearly ecumenical outsiders. They did not all speak the same language. They did not share the same histories. They did not always appear to value the same things. Their leaders did not always have the same level of education or ministry preparation, and therefore, were not at the same level of ecumenical sophistication.<sup>34</sup> And their reasons for separation seemed endless.

As a result, we needed to limit our expectations for the forum and we needed to introduce a different methodology into the mix. It needed to be a methodology that began on common ground and built from there. So we introduced the personal testimony or personal narrative as our starting point. Since all participants were Christian leaders, they would be asked to speak of their faith journeys in very personal terms – how they came to faith, and/or how they received or came to understand their call to ministry. Our sense was that if we could get them to share themselves with one another at this level, they would begin to recognize something of Jesus Christ in the other that they had previously missed.

In 2002, we held our first real test meeting, a gathering of some 65 individuals from the spectrum of Christian traditions and from many countries around the world. Tensions ran high at the beginning of the meeting because most participants had very little knowledge of more than a handful of the others. Everyone was at an equal disadvantage. We introduced the idea of the forum, and then invited the participants, one at a time, to share with the whole group their responses to our questions. It took four or five people to set the example, and two and a half days to complete the exercise. The level of discovery that emerged was nothing less than stunning! In many cases, we heard that for the first time, people who thought that they had nothing in common with some or all of the rest, found themselves viewing one another as sisters and brothers.

At the same time, those of you who were looking to expand the ecumenical table in the USA saw the positive side of that breakthrough and that became the methodology that CCT also adopted at an early stage. But it was only a beginning. Trust levels were raised in those introductory statements, and you have been building upon them ever since. Relationships were established, but both relationships and the trust that comes from them take time to develop and they need to be deepened. They need constantly to be cared for and nurtured between annual meetings if they are to bear the fruit you envision. And our trust for one another will continue to develop only as all parties involved in the process continue to do their best to be trustworthy. The task is not yet complete.

Especially when many of us have been strangers for so long, the development of trust takes time. One of the things I have learned in our process is that if you push too fast or too hard in any one direction, trust quickly breaks down. People worry about unspoken agendas that might be below the table, agendas that they did not expect or agendas that they might have rejected had they known about them at the beginning. The development of trust involves growing *together* and in a sense, engaging the language and the experience of one another. We need not become the other, for it is not uniformity that

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<sup>34</sup> While it is typical for ministers in historic denominations to hold the minimum equivalent of a four-year Bachelor's degree from a college or university and a three-year Master's degree from a seminary, and most ecumenists hold advanced degrees (PhD) as well, a study of educational levels among Assemblies of God clergy in 2000, for example, revealed that among senior pastors, 12% had no education beyond high school and 4.3% claimed no ministerial training at all. While 30.6% claimed some training in college or at a technical school, 27.4% had taken a certificate course or had completed some correspondence courses in ministerial training. Some 55.6% had attended Bible College, though only 41.3% completed a degree. While 12.4% held a master's degree, only 9.9% held a seminary degree [often in counseling] and 2.8% held an advanced degree in ministry. "Fact\* Survey Results: A 2000 Survey of Assemblies of God Churches" (Springfield, MO: Office of the General Secretary, 2000), 9. Copies of this survey are available from the Office of Statistics or from the Office of the General Secretary in Springfield, Missouri.

we seek, but unity for common witness. At the same time, we need to be tempted to become the other to such an extent that the logic of the other's position makes complete sense to us. Trust does not allow us to push our own agenda at the expense of the others. Nor does it allow us to force our agenda upon the others. It is just the opposite. Trust involves our willingness to give up any thought that we control the other, any attempt to make them into our own image. And it allows others to have meaningful input into our lives. It involves our willingness to give up ourselves in a way that enhances the position and value of the other, and thus, of all.

Perhaps a simple question to ask yourselves would be this one. Am I sufficiently comfortable with these other churches and organizations to entrust the evangelization of my children to them? If you can respond positively to this question, then you may already be at the place where common witness is possible. If not, then there is more work to do in building trust. Perhaps a second question should be asked of those who wish to press the evangelism question too hard. "Am I sufficiently comfortable with the Holy Spirit of God, to allow the Spirit of God to bring people to faith in His own time and apart from a compelling Gospel witness that I must provide? This leads me to my second point.

## **2. We can only give common witness if we set aside our desire to receive credit for the work that we do.**

Setting aside our desire to receive credit for the work that we do is extremely difficult for us. Jesus explained to his disciples that unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it will remain a seed alone. But if it dies, it will produce an abundance of fruit (John 12:24). He also explained that those who hold on to their lives will lose them, but those who lose their lives for His sake will save them (Matthew 16:25). Most of us find it very difficult to die to self. It simply isn't in our genes. In the American meta-narrative we are supposed to be rugged individualists, who rely upon our own skills to bring the world around us into submission. We are supposed to be independent spirits, able to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We are, after all, people with a 'Manifest Destiny'. Such ways of looking at life are ingrained in us by our history and our culture. We have built entire systems around this way of looking at ourselves.

Our patent and copyright laws are two examples of how this works. Seldom do we hear that a major scientific breakthrough has taken place that is intended to be shared freely with all of humankind with no strings attached. No, our tendency is for someone or some company to take a seed and manipulate its genetic core. They may build into such seeds the ability for that seed to produce a more abundant crop, but they may also give it the inability to reproduce itself, and they may modify the seed so as to require a specific type of fertilizer. Then they quickly patent that genetic transformation as their idea, and then sell the seed for a profit. They become the monopoly that controls the market. As a result, farmers who use their seed become dependent upon them.

The same idea stands behind our copyright laws. We typically write down a thought, or a book, or a song and we get a copyright on it. If someone wants to use that thought, or book, or song, they must receive permission or more commonly, pay a fee to do so. We want the name or the reputation for having done what we have done, for making the contribution that is worth making. Admittedly, there are those who abuse others by stealing and misusing such things. It has happened in the Church as well as in everyday life. When someone picks up one of our ideas and uses it without acknowledgement or authorization, we sue for loss of intellectual property. We own it, and it is not to be given away. At the very least, we want personal credit for our idea.

Some people do share their thoughts or music without price, but they are rare. I have a number of Gospel songbooks that date from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. While the music contained in those books is not always worthy of carrying into another generation, at times I have been humbled as I have read a footnote in several of these books. John G. Foote wrote a song that we sang many times in my

congregation, “When I See the Blood”. The footnote in many of the song books that reprinted that song reads simply, “Not copyrighted. Let no one do so. May this song ever be free to be published for the glory of God.”<sup>35</sup> What a testimony to the One who gave John Foote the picture that stands behind that song or even the words and music to that song!

Still, most of us do not think like this, nor do our churches. We don’t always do things simply to bring glory to God. We want credit for our work. Our churches are set up like corporations, even when our theologies do not support such an idea. It is an accommodation to cultural expectations intended to protect us from potential challenges as wide ranging as the misappropriation of funds to costly lawsuits. There is an exigency that drives us in this direction. At the same time, there is a corporate mindset that also comes with incorporation. In the United States, the notion of religious affiliation as voluntary, the widespread invocation of congregational and denominational control, the need for fiscal responsibility and accountability to the membership and other donors, our share holders, leads us to report on our activities in certain ways. We highlight our gains and we downplay our losses. We cook the books when we measure our membership, often with enormous disparity between those we claim and those who actually participate.<sup>36</sup> And like any good business, we invest in those places where we seem to get the biggest return on our investment.

I don’t know about your church, but in mine we are very much invested in mission and evangelism. My wife and I have been lifelong supporters of mission and evangelism programs. But denominationally we require our pastors to complete annual church questionnaires. We ask questions like “How many times did you preach? How many were saved? How many were baptized? How many were baptized in the Holy Spirit? How many joined the church?” Then we add them up and we develop charts and graphs. We celebrate the great gains we are making around the world, from roughly 300 people in April 1914<sup>37</sup> when we were founded, to 61,000,000 around the world in 2010.<sup>38</sup> And we compare ourselves with other churches around us. Who is growing? Who is not? And we tell our people why we are doing so well and why others are not doing so well. And we pat each other on the back. And we raise more money by showing how evangelists and church planters are winning souls in this part of the country or how missionaries are winning souls and establishing congregations in that part of the world.

But the second we die to ourselves, the moment we decide not to boast of what we are doing and we attempt to raise money for projects and missionaries over whom we have no immediate control, we are in trouble. To do so, involves trust. And we have not trained our people to trust anyone but us. We have not trained our people to think any more broadly than us. The Assemblies of God does not raise money to support the evangelism program of the Disciples of Christ or the latest outreach of the United Methodist Church. They raise it to develop their own programs. Why? They do it first of all, because they do not trust that the Disciples of Christ or the United Church of Christ or the Mennonites or the Baptists will use it the way that they would use it. It is about trust. It is also about pride. It feels good to be numbered among the successful, or should I say, “growing” churches. You see, our churches think and act just like we think and act. It is difficult to die.

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<sup>35</sup> “When I See the Blood,” R. E. Winsett, Editor, *Christ Exalted in Song* (East Chattanooga, TN: R. E. Winsett, 1924), No. 121.

<sup>36</sup> On the necessity and difficulties surrounding the use of such measures, see Eileen W. Lindner, “The Meaning of Membership: Reassessing the Counting of Sheep,” in Eileen W. Lindner, Ed. *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, 2009* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009), 16-19.

<sup>37</sup> William W. Menzies, *Anointed to Serve: The Story of the Assemblies of God* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1971), 97.

<sup>38</sup> This figure comes from the official General Council of the Assemblies of God website, accessed January 5, 2010 at <http://www.ag.org/top/Press/index.cfm>.

Some of you may know the name, David Bjork. He was for many years a missionary to France with the Missionary Church. Somewhere along the way, he got the idea that he was doing the French a disservice by leading them to the Lord and then asking them to join the Missionary Church. He realized that in the French mindset, to be French was to be Catholic. To be non-Catholic in France was to be culturally marginalized. So he began to develop relationships with local priests and the local bishop. He shared with them his burden for evangelism and told them that he thought that he could make some non-practicing Catholics better Christians by introducing them to the Lord in a new way. Once the bishop came to trust him, they encouraged him to work with their people. What they saw was a new vitality among their people and greater church attendance.

But that is not what the Missionary Church saw. For a time, they allowed David to work this way. But in the end, they did not view this as a legitimate evangelistic outreach of their denomination. And in the end, there came a parting of the ways.<sup>39</sup> David did not want to leave the mission team of the Missionary Church. He loved them; but he also understood their position. They wanted to see results that they could claim as their own. I don't really wish to single out the Missionary Church. I believe that most all of our churches would do the same thing. If we do not see an increase in our membership, we believe that we will lose the support of our people.

Such realities often force us into unnecessarily competitive relationships with one another. They suggest that we must show a profit for any investment we make. They work on our pride. They push us to make a name for ourselves, thereby earning us a greater reputation or more power or influence in how things are done. It is difficult to die. None of us wants to do it. But if I have learned anything in ecumenical dialogue, it is that agreements that make a difference do not carry the names of individual authors. They are the products of the *groups* who have worked *together* to birth something new. We will not succeed so long as we want the glory that belongs rightfully to the Lord of the harvest! It is about Him and not about us. It is about Him and not about our denominations.

### **3. We can only give common witness when we agree together on what evangelism is.**

Even through relationships between the denominations that have joined CCT are in the process of developing, there yet exist many differences of opinion among us on what constitutes evangelism. We do not yet have a common mind on the subject. Some of our differences spring from our theologies. Some of them come as a result of societal pressures and changes. Do the old evangelistic methods still work in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? Have we done any scientific study of their past or present effectiveness? If so, which ones work most effectively among older people, among younger people, among Post-modern people, etc? The fact is, we simply do not know.

What is more, we need to recognize that most of our thinking on evangelism, even our theological thinking on the subject, has been done while we have been isolated from one another. The United Methodists have not asked the American Baptists or the Roman Catholics how they should define evangelism. The Orthodox Church in America and the Presbyterian Church do not normally ask the Open Bible Church how they should think about evangelism, and the Pentecostal Holiness Church does not typically ask the Episcopal Church or the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America how it should engage in evangelism. We just do it on our own terms.

Furthermore, some of us have developed approaches to evangelism and evangelism programs in opposition to one another. Some believe that it is sufficient simply to live a Christian life as a silent or passive form of evangelism. And for some people it works. Others believe that it is necessary to be proactive, to confront people about their spiritual situation. If we don't confront them, they argue, people may be eternally lost. And this approach works for some people as well. Some place their

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<sup>39</sup> David E. Bjork, *Unfamiliar Paths: The Challenge of Recognizing the Work of Christ in Strange Clothing: A Case Study from France*, Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1997.

emphasis on the grace of salvation solely as a sovereign act of God, while others tend to highlight the role of human beings in accepting this grace of salvation. Still others have argued that in the end, God will sort it out because everyone has a different path to God. Our job as Christians is simply to learn tolerance and radical faithfulness.<sup>40</sup> These different approaches have produced tensions among us. It is essential for us to work our way through these differences *together*. Let me give you an example from the global scene.

We can easily imagine the complexity of the situation in the Middle East. The ancient churches such as Roman Catholics, the Orthodox, and the Church of the East have paid an enormous price through the centuries, in order to remain there. They have learned how to stand firm, and while they are generally marginalized by the Muslim majority, they are tolerated. In most cases, they do not believe that they can or should engage in overt acts of evangelism except among their own children or an inquiring Muslim whom they trust, if for no other reason than the fact that it is too dangerous to do so.

Protestant missions such as the Presbyterians have been in that region of the world since at least the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. They have tended, though not exclusively, to limit their evangelistic work to establishing schools, hospitals, and aiding in social programs. They, too, have attempted to be a faithful Christian presence in the region, but they have worked hard not to contribute to any form of social destabilization.

But especially from the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, others missionaries have also arrived, among them certain Independent mission groups, and missionaries from various Evangelical and Pentecostal denominations. In some Middle Eastern countries, they have established congregations that are publicly, though not necessarily officially recognized. In other countries, they have been much more clandestine in their work. They have taken risks to develop relationships that are intended to lead Muslims out of Islam and into full faith in Christ Jesus. And in some cases, they have been very successful. They have not been content to be “place holders” as they often judge the older churches to be, but rather, as “soul winners” intent upon bringing as many people to the Lord as possible.

In such a situation, it is quite easy to see the level of concern, disagreement, the lack of trust, and even the animosity that has developed within the region between older and younger churches. The survival of the Church in that region of the world is tenuous. The judgment of the younger churches is that the older churches have failed in the task of evangelism. As a result, the younger churches have decided unilaterally that they must intervene. As a result, the older churches do not welcome these newer churches in the region. They accuse the younger churches of not respecting their long term witness, of not being legitimate manifestations of the Church, and of sowing potential devastation upon the entire Christian community in the region without their concurrence.

Both groups are engaged in legitimate forms of evangelism, but neither seems to be ready or willing to recognize the value of the other sister and brother in that region of the world. Some fear that the presence of the other will bring repercussions upon them from their Muslim neighbors. Others fear that many Muslims will be lost through inaction. But perhaps more importantly, both sets of churches seem to fear the risks involved in simply recognizing one another as part of the same Church. Such a decision might require that both groups change their ways of thinking and acting not only toward one another, but also in the process of evangelizing their Muslim neighbors.

This example may be more extreme than what we might find in the United States, but it seems clear to me that we cannot really have a common witness when we do not recognize together the parameters of Christian evangelism. Some denominations are satisfied that evangelism is best accomplished through a passive witness over a lifetime, while others are satisfied with nothing less than an active

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<sup>40</sup> See, for instance, Barbara Brown Zickmund, “Faithful Living in a Multi-Faith World,” Program 3817, January 19, 1995. This text is available at: [http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/Zickmund\\_3817.htm](http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/Zickmund_3817.htm). Accessed, January 2, 2010.

witness in light of their belief in the imminent return of Jesus Christ. Some may be described as embracing a kind of universalism, while others are motivated by a very clear sense of particularism. For some, effective evangelism is best accomplished by meeting the physical, material, and social needs of people, while for others it can be accomplished only by confronting their spiritual needs. For some, it is best accomplished by acts of mercy, while for others it can only be done through some form of proclamation. For some, it involves speaking prophetically against oppressive structures in society, while for others it involves speaking prophetically the power of the Holy Spirit into individual lives. But in the end, we can only give a common witness when we agree together on the full parameters of evangelism. Evangelism is about proclaiming the Gospel. The Gospel seems to contain both the elements of word and of deed, but bottom line, the Gospel must bring about an introduction to Jesus Christ.<sup>41</sup>

**4. Similarly, we can only give common witness when we agree *together* on what constitutes proselytism. We must agree *together* that it is unacceptable as Christian behavior. And we must agree *together* that it is an unacceptable activity by our own churches.**

Proselytism is a very real problem for all of us. It is a problem because all of our churches are guilty of proselytism at some level. This may come as a surprise to some of you. While it is apparent that some churches engage in proselytism more actively than others, it is still the case that all of our churches are guilty of proselytism at some level. Proselytism is a problem because our definitions of what constitutes proselytism often differ. The reason is that we have developed these definitions in isolation from one another. Proselytism is basically a self-serving activity. And the result of our independence from one another is that what may be evangelism for one person or group constitutes proselytism for another person or group. Once again, we do not have a common mind on the subject.

Before I go any further, I want to make one thing very clear. I do not accept the common sociological definition of proselytism that is so frequently invoked by the media and is often invoked by States as well as by members of many non-Christian religions.<sup>42</sup> I understand proselytism here to be an intra-Christian problem, that is, it is a violation of our unity as sisters and brothers. At its most basic level, it involves the stealing of one another's sheep, the recruitment of members from the folds entrusted to others. I look at the proclamation of the Gospel message of Jesus Christ to people of other faiths as a form of evangelism, not of proselytism. One may engage in the evangelism of any non-Christian person with or without integrity, but that is a different question. I understand proselytism to be a sin against my sister or brother in Christ, and a sin against fellow denominations.<sup>43</sup> There are a number of fine treatments of the subject that simply need to be studied and received by our various denominations.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Richard Peace, *Rediscovering Evangelism: Outreach in the United Church of Christ in The Twenty-First Century* (Cleveland, OH: United Church of Christ, 2009), 5.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Martin E. Marty and Frederick E. Greenspahn, *Pushing the Faith: Proselytism and Civility in a Pluralistic World*, New York, NY: Crossroad, 1988.

<sup>43</sup> This is the official position of the World Council of Churches as well. See Jacques Matthey, "Evangelism, Still the Enduring Test of Our Ecumenical – and Missionary Calling," 356-357.

<sup>44</sup> "Revised Report of the Commission on 'Christian Witness, Proselytism and Religious Liberty'," *The Ecumenical Review* 13 (1961), 79-89; "Common Witness and Proselytism: A Study Document," *The Ecumenical Review* 23 (1971), 9-20; *Common Witness: A Study Document of the Joint Working Group of the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches*, Geneva: WCC Mission Series, 1982; Basil Meeking and John Stott, Eds., *The Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986 / Exeter, UK: The Paternoster Press, 1986), 89-91; George Sabaera, "Proselytism, Evangelization and Ecumenism," *Theological Review* 9:2 (1988), 23-26; "Alta/Baja California Bishops, "Dimensions of a Response to Proselytism," *Origins: CNS Documentary Service* 19:41 (March 15, 1990), 666-669; "Towards Responsible Relations in Mission: Some Reflections on Common Witness, Proselytism and New Forms of Sharing," *International Review of Mission* Vol. 82 No. 326 (April 1993), 1-5; "Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness," The Report from the Fourth Phase of the International Dialogue

Sometimes, proselytism is heavy-handed and easily identified. At other times it sneaks through because of its subtlety. It is easy to point to proselytism when it is highly visible, but it is not as easy to point to proselytism that is more discreet. Pope John Paul II referred to sectarian proselytizers as “ravenous wolves” in his famous address to the Bishops of Latin America gathered in Santo Domingo in 1992.<sup>45</sup> Whenever we actively involve ourselves or our churches in recruiting people who are known to be members of other churches, we are involved in an act of proselytism. We can also recognize that proselytism is in play when we manipulate, cajole, or in other ways coerce people to change their ecclesial allegiance.<sup>46</sup> In a more subtle way, it can even involve the recruitment of students from other churches to ministry in our churches while they prepare for ministry in our seminaries, even when our schools claim to support “an ecumenical vision of the Church”.<sup>47</sup>

We can take the example of what happened beginning in 1989 with the fall of the communist government and the breakup of the former Soviet Union. The Russian Orthodox Church had been present in that region since AD 988. It believed then, as it asserts now, that it was the only church invited by the king of Rus, to evangelize the people of Rus, and therefore, that this territory is not to be considered a *terra missionis*, but remains their territory in a unique way.<sup>48</sup> When the communist revolution overthrew the Russian Czar and installed its government, the Orthodox Church came under heavy persecution. Millions of Orthodox faithful, and over a hundred thousand Russian Orthodox priests and bishops were persecuted, imprisoned, or martyred.<sup>49</sup>

Throughout this period, Christians in the West prayed for the churches in the Soviet Union. They prayed for their strength and endurance, for faithfulness under pressure, for their health and well-being, and for the eventual freedom to worship without persecution that they hoped would come to them. I remember praying such prayers from the time of my childhood. And when the Iron Curtain fell, Christians in the West rejoiced at the new freedom of the Church in the former Soviet Union, including the freedom to evangelize. They also began to send missionaries to evangelize.

In most cases, they did not ask for permission from the one church that had dominated the region for a thousand years, nor did they always treat the Orthodox as sisters and brothers in Christ. Often, those who engaged in evangelism in the former Soviet Union, did not know the history of the region, did not always understand the cultures of the region, did not know the languages of the region, nor did they understand the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>50</sup> Instead of viewing Russian Christians as potential allies that they could encourage and empower to find their new place in the former Soviet societies, they

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1990-1997 Between the Roman Catholic Church and Some Classical Pentecostal Churches and Leaders. This document has been published in the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity’s *Information Service* N. 97 (1998/I-II), 38-56; *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 2:1 (January 1999), 105-151; *One In Christ* 35:2 (1999), 158-190; *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 21:1 (Spring, 1999), 11-51; and in Jeffrey Gros, FSC, Harding Meyer, and William G. Rusch, *Growth in Agreement II: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical conversations on a World Level 1982-1998*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company/ Geneva, Switzerland: WCC Publications, 2000), 713-779. Spanish, French, and German translations have also been published.

<sup>45</sup> John Paul II, “Opening Address to Fourth General Conference of Latin American Episcopate,” *Origins: CNS Documentary Service* 22:19 (October 22, 1992), 326, ¶ 12.

<sup>46</sup> “Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness,” ¶ 93.

<sup>47</sup> *Consultation with Pentecostals in the Americas: San Jose, Costa Rica 4-8 June 1996* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 1996), 83.

<sup>48</sup> “Message of the Primates of the Most Holy Orthodox Churches,” *Ecumenical Trends* 21:4 (April 1992), 59, § 4.

<sup>49</sup> See, “The Demographics of Christian Martyrdom, AD 33-AD 2001,” in David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, Eds. *World Christian Trends AD 30 – AD 2200: Interpreting the Annual Christian Megacensus* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2001), 227-264, especially 243-245.

<sup>50</sup> Lawrence A. Uzzell, “Guidelines for American Missionaries in Russia,” in John Witte, Jr. and Michael Bourdeaux, Eds. *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia: The New War for Souls* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 324, and Anita Deyneka, “Guidelines for American Missionaries in the former Soviet Union,” in John Witte, Jr. and Michael Bourdeaux, Eds. *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia: The New War for Souls* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 332.

looked at the Russian Church as a dead church, with many of the forms and rituals of Christianity, but without any real spiritual power. And they reported their biases to people in the US, while soliciting yet more funding to continue their evangelism. They entered the region uninvited and engaged in their own forms of ministry, often to the detriment of their sisters and brothers already present in the region.

Needless to say, the Orthodox Church in the region did not respond well to these intrusions, nor did the government.<sup>51</sup> They viewed these intrusions as nothing less than proselytism. New laws were implemented that now make it much more difficult for Western missionaries to carry out many forms of evangelism in the region. What is more, the potential for building common evangelistic cause with Christians indigenous to the region was greatly reduced.<sup>52</sup>

As we seek to understand our task to evangelize within an ecumenical context, the issue of proselytism needs to be addressed in very clear terms, and everyone needs to agree to live within those terms. In one sense, zealous laypersons who seek to evangelize but who may be judged as actually engaging in proselytism when they do so, need to be taught how to distinguish between the two. Our people need guidance on this subject, guidance which we as leaders should provide.<sup>53</sup> But we are often guilty of not only not teaching them right from wrong in this regard, but also of modeling behavior that sets them up for failure. Whenever we speak or write disparagingly of another church especially in order to promote our own church, we set our own people up for failure. This is particularly the case when our statements about one another are either ill-informed, or unfair.<sup>54</sup> So long as we are willing to continue to work in isolation from one another, this presents a very real problem for us.

The issue of proselytism can only be resolved as we grow together in greater unity. Thus, it would seem to me that it is important for the churches of CCT to study and approve and receive a common understanding of what constitutes proselytism, both in North America and abroad, and that together, they seek to hold themselves and one another accountable to that understanding while they evangelize within the American context. Unless this is done together, it will fail.

### Summary

The world of 2010 is very different from that of 1910. Those who convened the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh intended to bring new clarity to the status of mission and evangelism around the world. The denominations that convened and played a major role in the Conference, in particular, Anglicans and Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Methodists, saw some important signs emerging around them. Some they understood and interpreted well. They knew, for instance, that the end of Christendom was upon them as they saw the beginning of the end of Colonialism. They recognized that the lack of unity between and among the churches was a detriment to Christian witness. They found a role both for a clear proclamation of the Gospel in word and for the witness of social justice.

At the same time, they failed to do justice to other signs. While they knew that issues of Faith and Order played an enormous role in the failure of Christian mission, they feared to address such issues in that forum and lost an opportunity. They feared that Africa would ultimately be lost to Islam once the Colonial powers left the continent, but much the opposite has taken place in sub-Saharan Africa since that time. In 1900, Christian adherents constituted only 9.2% of the African population, but by 2000

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<sup>51</sup> See, for instance, "Message of the Primates of the Most Holy Orthodox Church," 57-60; and the sensitive, irenic, and enlightening article by Leonid Kishkovsky, "Orthodoxy at a Crossroads," *The Catholic World* Vol. 237, No. 1417 (January/February 1994), 15-16.

<sup>52</sup> Lauren B. Homer and Lawrence A Uzzell, "Federal and Provincial Religious Freedom Laws: A Struggle for and against Federalism and the Rule of Law," in John Witte, Jr. and Michael Bourdeaux, Eds. *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia: The New War for Souls* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 284-320.

<sup>53</sup> "Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness," ¶ 110.

<sup>54</sup> "Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness," ¶ 93.

that number had grown to 45.9%.<sup>55</sup> The majority of Christianity in the region may no longer be Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, or Reformed, the way they saw it in 1910, but that the Church is present is no longer up for debate. Perhaps the largest sign they missed was that they did not see how dramatic would be the development and growth of newer denominations such as the plethora of Pentecostal and Charismatic ones, and the appearance of new constellations of churches such as those now designated as African Independent Churches.<sup>56</sup>

When we think about engaging in Common Witness, or evangelizing within an ecumenical context, we need to take seriously both the context and the task. Many of the issues remain the same. Within the American context today, you have identified the task of evangelization as one that remains to be completed. You have committed yourselves to do something about it together. Your success in this arena will require several major commitments from you.

First, you will need to move from acquaintances and friends, to colleagues and fellow laborers in the same task. That will require greater openness between you, the development of your relationships in ways that you have not yet envisioned. And you will need to develop deeper levels of trust with one another. That means that communication between you must also improve.

Second, you will need to be willing to give up complete control of what has before now been your own domain. That is far more easily said than it is done. It will take time, and it can only emerge from new levels of trust between you. If I really trust you to get the job done and if I believe that you can do it as well or better than I can, then I will invest in *you* to do the job, freeing me to do something else where my gifts are best put to work. If we can allow the others to benefit from our evangelistic gifts, it makes sense that we might consider new ways of approaching evangelism.<sup>57</sup>

Third, in order to accomplish our shared goal with respect to evangelism, we need to define and describe it *together*. Its purpose should be to proclaim Jesus Christ in clear and compelling terms. He is, after all, at the very heart of the Gospel! At the same time, we need to agree on the nature of our role in proclaiming the Kingdom of God both in word and in deed. And we must do so with an understanding that is shared by all. To do less than that will put the entire endeavor in jeopardy and bring us back to the way things have been for the past century.

Finally, the parameters of any shared approach to evangelism will also point to the ways in which its limits are reached. The issue of what constitutes proselytism simply must be studied and received *together*. To do less than this puts the entire endeavor of a common witness in jeopardy. But if we can begin to work on these four things, I believe that we can take great hope in the future and vitality of the Christian Churches who work Together in the USA.

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<sup>55</sup> David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, Eds, *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1982, revised 2001), Table 1-4, "Adherents of All Religions on 6 Continents, AD 1900-2000," 1:13.

<sup>56</sup> Among the major books that have been published on this topic are four worthy of mention. Cf. B. G. M. Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (Oxford, England: The International African Institute/Oxford University Press, 1948, 1961), 381 pp; David B. Barrett, *Schism & Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements* (Nairobi, Kenya: Oxford University Press, 1968), 363 pp; G. C. Oosthuizen, *Post-Christianity in Africa: A Theological and Anthropological Study* (Grand Rapids: MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), 273 pp; Inus Daneel, *Quest for Belonging: Introduction to a Study of African Independent Churches* Mambo Occasional Papers - Missio-Pastoral Series No. 17 (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1987), 310 pp. A smaller but useful volume by an AIC bishop is Paul Makhubu, *Who Are the Independent Churches?* (Johannesburg, South Africa: Skotaville Publishers, 1988), 106 pp.

<sup>57</sup> I once made a proposal that encouraged Catholics and Pentecostals to consider this as a possibility in Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., "Evangelization or Proselytism of Hispanics? A Pentecostal Perspective," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 4:4 (1997), 62-64.