

# HISTORY OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

## Definition of Terms

(1) The term **ecumenical** (*Oikoumene* in Greek) is used 15 times in the New Testament. In a number of places it means simply “the whole world,” without any specific cultural or political connotation, but there are other texts where it is used in the sense of one great political unit like the Roman empire, in Luke 2:1 and Acts 17:6.<sup>1</sup> This word was used later in church history to describe its great synods or councils, like the councils of Nicea (325 AD) and Constantinople (381 AD). Constantine was the emperor then and claimed to be a Christian. It was thus understood that an ecumenical council was convened by the Emperor and also met under his authority. “Later, when the Roman Empire had assumed the mantle of the Emperor, we find the political and imperial significance of the word retained in the usage of the church. Today we are witnessing in the ecumenical movement the revival of that concept of empire in the church.”<sup>2</sup>

(2) The **World Council of Churches (WCC)** was founded in 1948 in Amsterdam. It was the merging of the Life and Work and Faith and Order arms of the International Missionary Conference. World War II delayed the formation of the WCC. The name was proposed eleven years before its formation in Amsterdam by US ecumenist Samuel McCrea in London.<sup>3</sup>

(3) The **International Council of Christian Churches (ICCC)** was also founded in 1948 in Amsterdam. It was founded by Dr Carl McIntire. The aim was to expose the agenda and threat of the WCC to the known Christian world. It was meant as a presentation of what true faithful and biblical Christianity is. It refused to allow the WCC to misrepresent and delude the world by her false representation of Christianity. Sadly this movement has been infiltrated by the neo-evangelicals and has lost much of her influence. With the death of its founder—the Rev Dr Carl MacIntire—in 2002, the ICCC is all but a spent force.

(4) **Life and Work** is one of the two arms of the International Missionary Conference which finally became a part of the WCC. Its work lies mainly in the area of social, economic and political issues. The aim of this arm of the IMC is to make the church more relevant to the world.

(5) **Faith and Order** was the second arm of the IMC. Its aim was to facilitate doctrinal compromise and dialogue. The many different doctrines and practices of the many denominational churches that were part of the IMC had to be eradicated or neutralized so that they will not become a hindrance to the ultimate formation of one global united Christian front.

## Historical Development of the Ecumenical Movement

“On 23rd August 1948, delegates from 147 churches, who had come to Amsterdam from around the world, unanimously approved a resolution that the formation of the World Council of

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<sup>1</sup>Luke 2:1, “And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the **world** should be taxed.” And Acts 17:6, “And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the **world** upside down are come hither also;” (emphasis added).

<sup>2</sup>David Samuel, **The End of the Ecumenical Movement**, (Ramsgate, Kent: The Harrison Trust, 1990), 2.

<sup>3</sup>**One World** 138 (August-September 1988): 4.

Churches be declared to be and is hereby completed.”<sup>4</sup> This took many years and tonnes of paper work and millions of dollars and man hours to bring this into fruition. It was no small feat. In the incident of the tower of Babel, the attempt then by Nimrod was to bring about a one world political, economic and religious system. He would have succeeded if God had not intervened directly by bringing a confusion of languages.<sup>5</sup> Many today believe that the solution to the world’s political woes and economic crises is to form a world system where global rule will ensure peace and prosperity. Poverty and wars now present in the world would be quickly eradicated when this world system becomes a reality. After two World Wars and with the entrance of nuclear age at the end of the Second World War, man’s heart is fearful that a global destruction might become a reality.

After September 11, 2001, the world has entered into a new dimension of global fear caused by worldwide terrorism. This new threat has created a new fear and an urgency never known before on such a global scale. All the nations of the world are putting their resources together to deal with this new threat. The psyche of every citizen of America and member of the world was changed forever on September 11. The WCC has been thrust into the forefront by world events. This need for world peace will lead a new generation to bring into fruition what Satan had started in Genesis 11—a one world global system with Antichrist as the ultimate ruler and sovereign king of this world.

### **Early Beginnings of the WCC**

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Fisher, considered the formation of the WCC as an “act in the faith of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>6</sup> The Ecumenical Movement began with a memorandum for a meeting of mission leaders in 1920 by J H Oldham. In that memorandum he commented that for any organization to coordinate international Christian mission would “probably have to give way to something that may represent the beginning of a world league of

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<sup>4</sup>**One World** (August-September 1988): 4.

<sup>5</sup>Genesis 11:1-9, “And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them throughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech. So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.”

<sup>6</sup>Geoffrey Francis Fisher, Baron Fisher of Lambeth (May 5, 1887 - September 15, 1972) was Archbishop of Canterbury from 1945 to 1961. In this role, he carried out the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom, and was the first to be seen doing so by television audiences in the oft-screened footage of the 1953 event. He was also the first Archbishop of Canterbury since the Reformation to visit the Pope. It was quoted in Roald Dahl’s biography, Boy, that he was Headmaster of Repton, where he went at the time. He later moved to Chester, England for work in the clergy, before appointed to his post as the 99th Archbishop of Canterbury. He was created a life peer on retirement, as Baron Fisher of Lambeth, of Lambeth in the County of London. [[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geoffrey\\_Fisher](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geoffrey_Fisher)]

churches.” At the same time, in January 1920, (Oldham was unaware of it though) an encyclical letter was sent by the synod of the Church of Constantinople (the Ecumenical Patriarchate) “to all the churches of Christ everywhere.” It was a call for the formation of a “league of churches.” Hence, this was the first official ecclesiastical proposal for an institution expressing a worldwide ecumenical collaboration.

The original idea to form a one world organization was a noble one. It came out of missionary beginnings. The Christian churches in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, fueled by a number of revivals across Europe and America, wanted to evangelize the world in their generation. Missionary work then was exclusively a denominational enterprise. But “the challenge of a common task in a context where confessional identity was something transplanted from afar convinced many missionaries that division among Christians was a scandal.” The first World Missionary Conference (IMC) was formed in 1910 in Edinburgh.

The delegates at Edinburgh were from mission societies, not from churches. Those societies were all Protestant. Most of the participants were North Americans and Europeans (and the latter were predominantly from the UK); Latin America was almost completely excluded (because the conference’s scope was limited to missions working among non-Christian peoples). Even with these limitations, Edinburgh, which has been described as “one of the great landmarks in the history of the church,” is often cited as the birth place of the ecumenical movement.<sup>7</sup>

Ten years after the conference at Edinburgh, the International Missionary Council was formed. Before it joined the WCC in 1961, the IMC was instrumental in building up many of the structures of regional and national ecumenism. The following is a brief summary of the IMC up to its present.

The International Missionary Council was established at London in 1921, dividing its work with a New York office from 1924, and later also providing for a Far Eastern office. The IMC linked some 14 interdenominational associations of sending societies - such as the Division of Foreign Missions of the National Council of Church of Christ, USA - with some 16 interdenominational field bodies, such as the National Christian Council of India.

The Council served its member bodies through study, consultation and programmes of mutual assistance. Questions were considered as they arose. Missionary freedom, general and theological education, opium addiction, labour, slavery, racial discrimination, the church in rural and industrial society, home and family life, and literature were the main emphases. IMC officers, staff, and committees consulted, stimulated, and advised an increasing number of local and regional church bodies.

Several major international conferences were held, of which the complete records are available in the IMC archives for study and research. The meeting in Jerusalem, 1928, made the message its first consideration, especially in relation to modern secularism. At Madras, 1938, the study of the Christian message in a non-Christian world was emphasized. At the international gathering in Whitby, Ontario, 1947, the IMC set itself to discover the relevance of the gospel to

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<sup>7</sup>**One World** (August-September 1988): 5.

the world recovering from war. At the IMC meeting at Willingen, Germany, 1952, delegates of younger churches stated their belief in church unity as an essential condition of effective witness and advance. Finally, at the meeting in Ghana, 1958, a theological education fund was established, providing for substantial aid for buildings, facilities, and libraries of institutions in which churches were united in training for the ministry.

Though wide-based in the participation of thousands of Christian workers of many nationalities, the Council was most deeply indebted to the formative leadership and services of J. H. Oldham, John R. Mott, William Paton, and A. L. Warnshuis. The WCC library has many papers and letters relating to the work of these pioneers of the IMC.

The International Missionary Council early became a focus of the emerging ecumenical movement. From 1949 its association with the World Council of Churches (while the WCC was “in process of formation”) continued to be close until 1961, when the IMC became the Division of World Mission and Evangelism of the WCC.<sup>8</sup>

### **Faith and Order Movement**

One of the missionaries at Edinburgh was Charles H. Brent, a Protestant Episcopalian bishop. [He devoted himself tirelessly to the new Life and Order Movement from the end of World War I until his death in 1929.] Brent was a missionary to the Philippines. “Moved by his experience in Edinburgh, he persuaded his own church later that year to invite ‘all Christian Communion throughout the world which confess Our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour’ to a global meeting on the divisive issues of doctrine and church order -- questions deliberately not treated in Edinburgh.”<sup>9</sup>

Brent’s dream took more than 17 years to come to fruition, and not after countless letters were written and a World War (WW I). In August 1927, nearly 400 people, most of them official delegates from over 100 churches assembled at Lausanne, Switzerland for the first World Conference on Faith and Order. One of the most controversial issues mentioned was “The unity of Christendom and the relation thereto of existing churches.” At issue was the appeal for collaboration in “applied Christianity.” This referred particularly to two other recent ecumenical impulses: The Life and Work Movement and the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches.

Apart from the hiatus of World War II, the Continuation Committee met almost annually until 1948, when, at the first meeting of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Amsterdam, Faith and Order was transformed into a Commission of the WCC.

As complement to the Life and Work movement, whose purview was practical questions of social reform and action, the Faith and Order movement pondered the diversities of belief, liturgical practice, polity, and ministry among the denominations of Christianity. Its aim was

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<sup>8</sup><http://www.library.yale.edu/div/imcpart2.htm>.

<sup>9</sup>**One World** (August-September 1988): 5.

never so much to erase these differences, as to present and understand them, in hopes of furthering good will and cooperation among the several Christian strands.<sup>10</sup>

By this emphases of Faith and Order (doctrinal emphasis); Life and Work (Social and political emphasis) and to do so through the many varied denominational churches, Satan, has begun his work of mind manipulation which will culminate in the One World Church which is now known as the Ecumenical Movement. The Bible calls it the kingdom of “the feet part of iron and part of clay” (Dan. 2:33)<sup>11</sup> or “the little horn” (Dan. 7:7-8, 20-21). This is the kingdom of the antichrist that Daniel prophesied more than 2,600 years ago.

### **Life and Work Movement**

In 1925, two years before the meeting of the Faith and Order Movement convened at Lausanne, a Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work met in Stockholm to address social issues together. This was a result of years of effort to get the churches involved. “It was the first international ecumenical conference whose delegates had all been appointed by their respective communions (including a strong presence of Orthodox churches). A central role had been played by the Scandinavian churches, led by the Archbishop of Stockholm, Nathan Soderblom.”<sup>12</sup>

The origin of the Life and Work Movement dates back to a meeting hastily arranged in London in August 1914. This was just before the out break of WW I. After the war, Life and Work Movement was formed officially in 1930. Its motto was “doctrine divides and service unites.” On paper it sounds very good but in reality the delegates realized that theological differences particularly over what the “kingdom of God” means cannot be easily swept aside. Furthermore some delegates belonging to the Faith and Order Movement were fearful that social order (or applied Christianity) might take precedence over doctrines in achieving church unity.

The following is a summary of the Life and Word Movement.

In the history of 20th century Christian ecumenism, the Life and Work movement represents the attempt of Protestant and Orthodox churches to reach consensus on the church universal’s practical role in society. The movement began with a preliminary conference held in 1920 in Geneva, and culminated in two world councils: one at Stockholm in 1925, and another at Oxford, England in 1937. In between, a loosely constructed Continuation Committee, and then a formally constituted Council for Life and Work, maintained the ideals of the movement. Its

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<sup>10</sup>“The idea for a conference on the faith and order of the church was first proposed at the World Missionary Conference of 1910, by Bishop Charles H. Brent of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the USA. Over the next decade, the Episcopal Church pursued the vision, until, at a preliminary meeting at Geneva, in Aug. 1920, an ecumenical Continuation Committee was appointed to plan an official assembly. When the Continuation Committee met again at Stockholm, in 1925, it chose 1927 for the official assembly date, and Lausanne for the site of the meeting. The Lausanne conference occurred as planned and, before it closed, provided for another Continuation Committee to carry on its work.” [<http://www.interchurch-center.org/content/resources/researchlibrary/pdfs/FAITHORD.pdf#search=‘faith%20and%20order%20movement’>]

<sup>11</sup>Daniel 2:31-33, “Thou, O king, sawest, and behold a great image. This great image, whose brightness was excellent, stood before thee; and the form thereof was terrible. This image’s head was of fine gold, his breast and his arms of silver, his belly and his thighs of brass, His legs of iron, his feet part of iron and part of clay.”

<sup>12</sup>**One World** (August-September 1988): 6.

formal end came in 1938 when it was incorporated into the preliminary founding stages of the World Council of Churches.<sup>13</sup>

These differences between the two groups were not healthy. Thus a decision was made to merge the two movements into one. “That growing realization--along with a sense that the number of different ecumenical initiatives springing up was confusing and counterproductive -- led to decisions by the 1937 world conferences of Faith and Order and Life and Work to form a committee for their merger.”<sup>14</sup> This conference was held in Oxford. It was the high point of the ecumenical movement where key important decisions were made. The theme of the Oxford Conference was “Church, Community and State.” This theme sets the action agenda for future World Council of Churches meetings. It was at this conference that the first official decision was made to form the World Council of Churches.

Some of these participants were fearful of their church becoming like the world. The identity of the church must remain intact. It must not become like the world.

Participants in the Oxford Conference feared that Christians and their churches had become too like the world with its penchant for injustice and war and needed individual and corporate repentance. In all times, they said, the Church must be the Church, continually regaining its essential character as the Church. In his address to the Conference, French ecumenical leader Pierre Maury insisted that ...the world is always trying to get the Church to renounce its independence -- that is to say, its sole dependence on its Lord. It seeks to reduce the life of the Church to the common level, to integrate it with the life of the world, offering it in return a recognized place, certain rights and sometimes considerable privileges. It seeks to make use of the Church -- to enlist it as the champion of human causes, whether on the right or on the left. The Church has constantly succumbed to these temptations. It has agreed to recognize other lords besides its sole Lord. We need to be continually vigilant to make sure that the Church is not the Church of democracy, or of a class, or of the nation, but above all and exclusively the Church of Jesus Christ.<sup>15</sup>

This Oxford Conference was a great turning point in the work leading up to the formation of the World Council of Churches. The church in relation to the desired ecumenical movement must be defined. This was what they desired.

Singly, in their separate local contexts, the churches are particularly susceptible to these temptations, Oxford said. It considered the ecumenical movement to be a safeguard against this, for in its view the Church “is not, and can never be, the Church of a local community. The Church in any particular locality is part of a universal community and is known to be such.”

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<sup>13</sup>Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work (Stockholm, 1925); Continuation Committee of the Conference (1926-1930); Universal Christian Council for Life and Work (1930-1938); Oxford Conference on Church, Community and State (1937). [<http://www.interchurch-center.org/content/resources/researchlibrary/pdfs/LIFEWORk>]

<sup>14</sup>**One World** (August-September 1988): 6.

<sup>15</sup><http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/international/hist-e.html>

The Universal Church is not “built up from its constituent parts, like a federation of different states.” It is not “international,” but “ecumenical;” not the sum of its parts, but one body transcending borders through its historical unity given in Christ which it seeks to restore. The bond of ecumenical fellowship is therefore among members of a single body whose “source of unity is not the consenting movement of men’s wills, (but) Jesus Christ whose one life flows through the Body and subdues the many wills to His.”<sup>16</sup>

With this charge and note of caution, the Oxford Conference tried its best to maintain a biblical and Christ-centered focus and thrust. What one desires and what actually happens are two very different things. As this was true of other movements it was also true of the World Council of Churches Movement. The aims derived from the Oxford Conference were indeed biblical and noble. But sadly this was not what happened when the World Council of Churches was formed in 1948.

Most of the important organizational issues were resolved in order to hold the first meeting of the World Council of Churches in August 1941. The outbreak of World War II delayed it for seven long years. The first general secretary of the WCC was Willem A. Visser’t Hooft. He held this post until his retirement in 1966. What happened during and soon after the Second World War was significant. This work behind the scene will bring about the quick formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948, three years after the end of the Second World War. The ecumenical minded men were not sleeping during the war. They were very active. This is a brief record of what they did.

It was at that Conference that the first formal decision to form the WCC was taken. The plan was for the formation to take place quite soon after 1937, but war once again intervened. It has been said that the origins of the ecumenical movement were in common Christian efforts to avoid war. It failed to do this in the years before 1914, but the Christian youth movements and the missionary movement worked incessantly during and after the First World War to maintain contacts across the lines of battle and to help heal the wounds inflicted by war. The same happened in the period leading up to, during and after the Second World War, and such efforts have continued in various ways ever since: between East and West during the Cold War, and across the lines of war and enmity around the world in the period since 1945.<sup>17</sup>

During the Second World War, churches that participated in the Oxford Conference were greatly enthused. It impacted leaders of Protestant Churches from America, Great Britain, and some European Countries.

One of the most important sections of the Oxford Conference dealt with the Universal Church and the World of Nations. Its work had a great impact on the churches of Western Europe and the United States, where ecumenical councils created committees to consider its impact on the lives, ecumenical relationships and witness of the churches in the period leading up to and during the Second World War. In the USA in particular a Committee for a Just and Durable Peace was formed by the Federal Council of Churches under the chairmanship of John Foster

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

Dulles, a Christian layman who had been present at Oxford. That Committee organized a series of significant ecumenical world order conferences which were later credited with having prepared public opinion in that nation to accept full participation in a new United Nations. They developed a statement, “Six Pillars for Peace”, which offered significant correctives to the original Dunbarton Oaks draft of the UN Charter. The background papers on program circulated to you earlier describe their impact at the 1945 San Francisco Conference.<sup>18</sup>

Across the Atlantic Ocean, European countries including Great Britain, as it was known then, formed similar committees like those found in the United States. The unity among these European committees was rather loose. Leaders of the Provisional Committee of the World Council of Churches like Willem Visser’t Hooft helped to co-ordinate clandestine network between the German Christian Resistance and the churches and government in Allied powers.

In Great Britain a Peace Aims Group was formed, and in France, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia similar committees were created which, among other things, sought valiantly to maintain contact with and sustain the Confessing Church in Germany during the war. These committees were loosely linked during the war years through the World Alliance for International Friendship. In Geneva a headquarters of the Provisional Committee for the World Council of Churches was created from where General Secretary Willem Visser’t Hooft and close colleagues operated a clandestine information network between the Christian resistance in Germany and churches and governments in the Allied powers.<sup>19</sup>

Before the outbreak of the Second World War, the Federal Council of Churches of the United States proposed that the World Council of Churches convene a small international conference “to consider what action is open to churches and to individual Christians with a view to checking the drift towards war and to leading us nearer to the establishment of an effective international order.”<sup>20</sup>

Thirty leading Christian laymen and church leaders were called together in Geneva in July 1939. This meeting produced a document, “The Churches and the International Crisis”, which was sent to the churches and served as a basis for the ecumenical discussion on peace aims and international order in the following years. Visser’t Hooft comments that it was remarkable that already at that time an international conference spoke of “the responsibility of the whole of mankind for the whole earth”, saying, “all peoples have an interest in the wise use of the resources of individual countries and in the planning ahead for future generations”. The document also expressed the conviction that “the collective will of the community shall be used to secure the necessary changes in the interests of justice to the same extent that it is used to secure the protection of nations against violence”. Thus, even before the war turned in the direction of an Allied victory the churches had begun serious thinking about the shape a new

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

post-war order and institutions to safeguard it. This ecumenical work needed to be structured in the immediate post-war period.<sup>21</sup>

One year after the Second World War, in 1946, the Provisional Committee of the World Council of Churches met in February 1946. In that meeting, it was said that this meeting in 1939 was regarded as one of the early tasks performed by the World Council of Churches. With the world in great relief after surviving seven years of world war, it was primed to accept the peace that the World Council of Churches was offering. It had to begin with the churches. This was exactly what happened.

The time has come,” the Committee said, “to consider the responsibility of the World Council for a continuous service in the field of international affairs and the methods by which that service may best be rendered.” It decided to “create a Commission on International Affairs. The importance of such a Commission arises from the imperative necessity that the churches should bear their witness in the most united manner possible, to the significance of the Christian faith for the life of the nations, at a time when the political world is in chaos because of its failure to follow the teaching of our Lord.” Among the first tasks of the Commission would be to find the “best method of collaborating with the International Missionary Council with a view to joint action on the subject of Religious Liberty and other interests of common concern, ... (and) also consider the question of relationships with the World Alliance for International Friendship through the Churches and other bodies.” The Commission was “requested to arrange for an international conference of Church leaders and laymen... to consider ways in which the witness and work of the churches in the field of international affairs and world order can be made effective at this critical time”.

The Bishop of Chichester (George Bell) was asked to assume the chairmanship of the new Commission, but was too heavily burdened to accept the task. He proposed, and it was agreed, “that the American Commission on a Just and Durable Peace be asked to act on behalf of the Provisional Committee in arranging for an international conference of church leaders on problems of peace and war in the summer of 1946”. Again, it was John Foster Dulles who chaired that meeting convened in Cambridge. Visser’t Hooft and Walter van Kirk, the secretary of the American Commission, served as secretaries. Visser’t Hooft notes in his autobiography that, “It is interesting to note that Dulles took ... a position rather different from his position in later years. For he not only expressed his belief that the tension between East and West could be reduced, but also used the surprising phrase: ‘No political system is incompatible with Christianity’.” Dulles, chiefly known today as one of the chief architects of the ideology of the *Cold War*, changed his tune soon after, as was manifest in his famous debate at the 1948 First WCC Assembly in Amsterdam with Czech theologian Josef Hromadka, where he flatly condemned Communism as antithetical to Christianity. (Notably, the Assembly statement on this matter had more nuance, saying that “The churches should reject the ideologies of both

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

communism and laissez-faire capitalism and should draw men from the false assumption that these extremes are the only alternatives.”)<sup>22</sup>

### **Initial Problems within the WCC**

Many of the difficulties which gave rise to the WCC have ceased to be a problem today. Although they are not erased completely even after more than fifty years of existence, the members of the World Council of Churches are more united today than ever before. Some of the initial problems are listed below:

(1) There was not a full realization of a worldwide extension implied in the term “ecumenical.” The “missionary expansion which led to Edinburgh had unsavoury associations with colonialism is an oft-told story; and parallels can be traced between the dependent situation of so-called ‘younger’ churches and that of their countries.”<sup>23</sup> People who gathered at Lausanne were primarily from Europe and USA. Only 17 out of the 400 were from outside of Europe and USA. The hope was that the WCC would be “genuinely representative of indigenous leadership” could be quickly realized.

Progress was also hindered by logistical problems such as travel and communication. Members from third world countries had to communicate in English (which may be their second or third language) since it was the language of the leaders from the USA and European countries. This is no longer so today. Many of the members in the World Council of Churches come from Third World Countries. In later years, a problem that arose was the preoccupation of the WCC with the concerns of the “Third World.”

(2) The WCC was an endeavour of the churches. However, many who attended the Stockholm Life and Work conference believed that the WCC movement would be safer in the hands of an independent minority within the churches. This overcomes the constricting limits of any official inter-church cooperation. The WCC was not run that way though.

These critics did not win the day; nevertheless, their criticisms served a useful purpose in reminding the leaders of the movement that the official often tends to be static, and that a movement soon ceases to move unless it is quickened by the inspiration which comes rather from groups and individuals than from the main body.<sup>24</sup>

The inherent power of the church lies in the hands of the majority that has taken root. Democracy will win the day in the years ahead. Getting the masses to listen and the leaders of the church to fall in line, no matter the doctrinal differences must eventually be achieved. The ecumenical leaders need to be elected into office. To do that, they must behave like the politicians of the world and be popular with the electorate. New leaders elected into office must sing the tune of the majority. In this way the ecumenical movement is guaranteed success, and it did succeed!

(3) There is a misconception that the WCC is a Protestant Organization. It is true that the majority of churches that made up the ecumenical movement came from within the Protestant camp.

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>**One World** (August-September 1988): 7.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 8.

But that does not mean that the WCC was all Protestant. The Orthodox churches were represented by 40 delegates at the WCC's First Assembly, coming from the Greek speaking churches, the USA and the Russian Exarchate (the province ruled by the exarch who is the civil and military governor of a province of the Byzantine Empire i.e. in the now Orthodox Eastern Church). By the Third Assembly (1961), all the Orthodox churches in the world became WCC members.

The joining of the Orthodox churches with the WCC was not without its difficulties. A month before the first WCC conference in Amsterdam, a consultation of Orthodox leaders met in Moscow discouraging its members from participating in the ecumenical movement. Some of the reasons for the objection were (1) it concentrated too much on social and political issues; (2) it was alleged to be seeking a creation of an "Ecumenical Church"; and (3) it was falling into the temptation rejected by Christ in the wilderness.<sup>25</sup>

As early as the 1920's the Orthodox churches were very wary of the Western Christians. This was due to the members of the Orthodox churches in Western countries becoming Protestants. This was what a 1920's encyclical said, "So many troubles and sufferings are caused by other Christians and great hatred and enmity are aroused, with such insignificant results, by this tendency of some to proselytize and entice the followers of other Christian confessions."<sup>26</sup>

The Roman Catholic Church (whose membership exceeds that of all WCC churches combined together) was not represented at all until the ratification of the Vatican II Council in the mid 1960's. The reason was that in June 1948, the Holy See announced that no Roman Catholic was permitted to attend the Amsterdam Assembly even when several of them were invited as observers. This is the testimony of Cardinal Walter Kasper.

The Catholic Church abstained at the beginning. The encyclical letters *Satis cognitum* of Leo XIII (1896) and *Mortalium animos* of Pius XI (1928) even condemned the ecumenical dialogue which seemed to relativise the claim of the Catholic Church to be the true Church of Jesus Christ. Yet Pius XII already paved the way to a more open attitude, albeit with caution, in an Instruction of the Holy Office of 1949. However, only the initiative of Pope John XXIII (+1963) and the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) brought a shift. The conciliar Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio* stated that the ecumenical movement was a sign of the work of the Holy Spirit in our time (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 1), opening the way for the ecumenical movement and highlighting the importance of dialogue with separated brothers and sisters and with separated churches and church communities (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 4; 9; 11; 14; 18; 19; 21-23).

Pope Paul VI made the idea of dialogue central in his inaugural encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* (1963). This line was taken up in a Document of the then Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity entitled *Reflections and Suggestions Concerning Ecumenical Dialogue* (1970), later in

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

the *Ecumenical Directory* (1993) and finally in the great, important and even prophetic ecumenical encyclical of John Paul II *Ut unum sint* (1995).<sup>27</sup>

But times have changed much since then. On January 21 1996, Pope John Paul made this prayer in Italian, but translated here into English. In it he made overtures in prayer to all a sundry to unite together as one body in Christ. He even made this appeal through the Virgin Mary!

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. We are in the ‘Week of Prayer for Christian Unity’ and I gladly take this opportunity to call the attention of all believers to the ecumenical commitment that marked the Second Vatican Council. This commitment was particularly evident in the Decree *Unitatis redintegratio*.

The Council rightly defined the division among Christians as a ‘scandal’ that ‘openly contradicts the will of Christ’ (*Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 1). In fact, through the gift of the Spirit, Jesus made his disciples one body, of which he himself is the Head. The Council Fathers felt the need to beg pardon of God and of their brethren for the sins committed against unity, and together they promised forgiveness for the sins of others (*Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 7). They urged Catholics ‘to take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism’ (*Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 4), so that the imperfect communion which already exists between the Churches and Ecclesial Communities might soon be brought to its fullness. Above all, the Council asks us to cultivate an authentic “spiritual ecumenism”, which consists in a continuous effort of prayer and conversion (*Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 8).

2. Another conciliar Decree, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, dedicated to the Eastern-rite Churches in full communion with the Apostolic See, is not in opposition to this spirit but, on the contrary, strengthens it. With this Decree, the Council wanted to honour ‘the Eastern Churches’ institutions... liturgical rites, ecclesiastical traditions and ordering of Christian life’ (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, n. 1), declaring that they, like the Churches of the West, ‘have the right and duty to govern themselves according to their own special disciplines’ (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, n. 5). Their ancient tradition is a real treasure for the whole Church, as was apparent at the same Council in the significant contribution made precisely by Eastern Catholics. How can we forget the deep impression made by Maximos IV, Melkite Patriarch of Antioch, when he passionately invited the Council Fathers to ‘keep a place for the Absent, that is, our Orthodox brethren, while waiting for full communion? With *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* it was made clear that the longed-for goal of full unity must not lead to a dull uniformity, but rather to the integration of all legitimate diversity in an organic communion, of which the Successor of Peter is called to be the servant and guarantor.

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<sup>27</sup>[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/card-kasper-docs/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_20030227\\_ecumenica\\_l-dialogue\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/card-kasper-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20030227_ecumenica_l-dialogue_en.html).

3. May the Blessed Virgin, Mother of unity, make us feel the force of the Lord's voice repeating to his disciples: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock" (Rev 3:20), as the theme of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity appropriately recalls. The Lord Jesus is calling everyone to a courageous and profound review of life and urges us to deepen our ecumenical fervour and longing, as the third millennium swiftly approaches. May the Mother of Christ and of the Church obtain for all the baptized promptness and fidelity in responding to the Redeemer's ardent appeal.<sup>28</sup>

This overture from the Roman Catholic Church to all Protestant churches including the Greek Orthodox Church is very revealing. This change of heart and mind from the largest "Christian" church in the world with more than 1 billion members speaks very loudly to the listening world. If the hand of peace is stretched out for all to take, how will those who reject this hand of peace be perceived by the world? This master stroke has turned the tables on the conservatives and fundamentalists. They will look like hard-hearted and unforgiving people who behave in a very unchristian manner. The peer pressure to conform is very, very great indeed. It is therefore not a surprise to the discerning that fundamentalism will continue to shrink and retreat further and further into oblivion. But Biblical fundamentalism will not die for sure. The Lord will always have His remnant.

But the writing is on the wall. When such a large church like the Roman Catholic joins the ecumenical movement, they do not join as mere members but as leader of the entire body. Being the largest group they will take the throne of the ecumenical kingdom as the number one member to spearhead the ecumenical agenda.

(4) There existed the tedious work of correspondence and holding the ecumenical movement together. The gathering of the delegates to the conferences requires a humongous amount of letter writing. To prepare for one of Edinburgh's eight sections, John R. Mott is said to have written personal letters with specific questions to 600 people. Also the preparatory materials for the 1937 Oxford Life and Work conference filled seven volumes (arousing complaints in some quarters that getting the conference ready was making it impossible to do the work the movement had been formed for in the first place).

There was something more dynamic and common amongst the churches that held the WCC conferences together despite the enormous and tedious task of getting them all together to meet in a conference. This came about in the form of lay leadership. When the layman gets involved in the ecumenical movement, the leadership will sooner or later follow. The lay leaders will be willing to lay aside doctrinal differences. Opposing points of views can be readily erased and with love and world peace as the motivation, antagonism toward one another need not arise at all. Two of such lay leaders which did much to accelerate the formation and progress of the WCC were John R. Mott and Joseph H. Oldham. Like most ecumenical leaders they rose from the ranks of ecumenism since their student days where they were involved in student Christian movements.

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<sup>28</sup><http://www.cin.org/jp960121.html>. From **Catholic Information Network**, Vatican II Called Catholics to Active Role in Ecumenism by Pope John Paul II on the occasion of Sunday Angelus, January 21, 1996.

Thus in 1937, at a conference in Oxford, Oldham made it plain and clear when he said, “if the Christian witness is to be borne in social and political life it must be through the action of the multitude of Christian men and women who are actively engaged from day to day in the conduct of administration, industry and the affairs of the public and common life.”<sup>29</sup> Mott had the rare ability to enlist to his service outstanding men for the enterprise with which he was concerned. He calls these people “men and women with first class minds.

(5) War guilt motivated Christendom to unite and gather. In the early days of the ecumenical movement, it was slow going. It was also very badly disrupted by the happenings in the world. Churches intending to grow together were separated by the two World Wars.

The difference in the ecumenical effect of the two world wars was marked. The issue of “war guilt” made the attempt to rebuild fellowship with Christians in Germany after World War I long and painful. During World War II, the Geneva office of the WCC – in – process - of - formation enabled churches to maintain and even deepen contacts, and after the war this facilitated reconciliation with the German churches. And the ongoing concern for the victims of the war laid the foundations on which the programmes of the newly constituted WCC could build immediately after Amsterdam.<sup>30</sup>

Like all movements, the WCC was not without its many difficulties. But despite its problems which were of world proportions, it came to fruition in 1948. Today it has worldwide links all over the world in publication, parachurch groups, seminaries and Bible Colleges, churches, and even in nations as national councils. It has succeeded beyond her wildest dreams. In less than sixty years, the tentacles of this WCC is global.

### **Objectives of the WCC –**

Immediate Objective – Unite All Protestant Churches

Intermediate Objective – Unite Protestant Churches with the Roman Catholic Church

Distant Objective – Unite Protestant and Roman Catholic Church with All Religions

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<sup>29</sup>**One World** (August-September 1988): 9.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.