



The Ecumenical Movement:
A History 1910 – 1948

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It is the tremendous legacy from the past that encourages us and gives hope in our ecumenical present and for the future. So, this paper, and the accompanying papers, are intended to help you in thinking about that legacy from the past.

The competitive confessionalism that has emerged from the fragmentation of the Reformation, being driven by the free-market economy where success validates the method, has reduced the churches to mutually competitive providers.

In contrast, ecumenism presents an alternative vision of inclusion, co-operation and unity.

In the West, the word 'ecumenical' began to come back into use in the early 19th C. as a result of the evangelical revival. It was used in the 1840s when the first explorations were being made which led to the formation of the Evangelical Alliance – an Alliance constituted at a conference held in London in 1846. It was formed by some 800 Europeans and North Americans to counter the political and spiritual revival of Roman Catholicism then in progress and, more positively, to co-ordinate various Protestant enterprises in missions, publishing and social reform. But the basis of the Alliance was called the 'ecumenical basis', and the conference report makes it clear that what was in mind was the spirit of unity felt among the delegates in spite of their national differences.

One significant seedbed for the ecumenical movement was the influence and role of people and activities related to education. Sunday Schools began in England in the late 18th century as a social response to the needs of children – to provide education for working children on their one day off each week from the factory. They were not an initiative in Christian nurturing, and they were not directly related to churches, but established by people of goodwill on a non-denominational basis. As the Sunday School movement spread to many parts of the world in the 19th century, local, national and global associations of Sunday Schools were formed, drawing in people from an increasing variety of Christian traditions. The movement was essentially lay led, and often faced ecclesiastical opposition – coming under suspicion and resistance. The non-denominational nature of early Sunday School work made it a natural for the formation of Sunday School associations on an inter-denominational basis. We therefore can see how early tentative ecumenical steps were being taken as members of these associations and delegates to World Sunday School Conventions encountered people from other churches. They learned to trust one another, even though they were different in church order or emphasised different aspects of doctrine. These early ecumenical encounters laid the foundations for meetings which later became starting points for the Missionary, Faith & Order and Life & Work movements.

If then, the Sunday School movement can be described as a seedbed of the ecumenical movement, the role of other education-related bodies, such as the Student Christian Movement (SCM), the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), is recognised as giving early ecumenical experience and inspiration to those who would become leaders in those movement that led to the formation of the World Council of Churches (WCC).

The first association known as the YMCA was founded in London in 1844 by 22-year-old George Williams to provide young men with a Christian atmosphere for spiritual and educational development, especially through Bible classes and prayer meetings. The movement rapidly spread to different countries of the British Empire, to North America, and also began to flourish on the European continent. Two of their main characteristics were mission at home and overseas and a will to move towards greater unity among Christians. In Paris, in 1855, the World Alliance of YMCAs was founded. It sought to unite young Christians of different churches and nations in a fellowship of evangelism and service. The YWCA was founded ten years later.

These lay movements were in a real, though incomplete, sense the pioneers of the ecumenical movement of the 20th Century. Through them 10,000s of young men and women found a Christian fellowship which transcended denominational barriers, which did things official churches could not do to meet their needs as migrants to great cities, young workers, or students in universities and colleges. The great service of these lay movements to the later ecumenical movement was that, spreading across the world as they did, largely by voluntary lay endeavours, they brought under their influence many young men and women not just as recipients of services, but as active, responsible participants. Thus, they gave back to the churches many mature, experienced young men and women who became leaders in the churches.

The World Student Christian Federation was established in 1895 at Vadstena Castle, Sweden, by students and student leaders from ten North American and European countries. It is a federation of national ecumenical student movements, most of which are called Student Christian Movement. Key founders included John Mott (USA) and Karl Fries (Sweden). There is a close historical connection between the WSCF and the YMCA and YWCA. Mott, for example, was a leader of the YMCA, and with the help of YMCA colleagues he developed the vision and strategies for forming an international federation of autonomous and self-directing ecumenical student movements. Much of the subsequent work of establishing and linking SCMs was done with the help of YMCAs and YWCAs.

The WSCF was a primary pioneer of the modern missionary and ecumenical movement. It encouraged and inspired students in the late 19th C. and early 20th C. to engage actively in the work of spreading the gospel by committed discipleship. It provided a forum for students to meet and work closely with those of other national and denominational backgrounds. Its ecumenical vision and commitment emphasised the importance of mutual communication, co-operation and challenge with the mainline churches. The WSCF worked for unity in the church and in the world. SCMs helped a generation of students to understand and experience a quality of Christian discipleship and to grow in a profound awareness of the oikoumene.

In these, and other, ways – many interesting, some abortive – attempts were being made to bridge the divisions between the churches.

But it is generally agreed that the modern ecumenical movement, as it is now known, dates from the International Missionary Conference that was held in Edinburgh in 1910. It is there that we look at the roots of this unique expression of the ecumenical movement - where it all began. It is there that we reconnect with the deep roots which nourish so much of the harvesting of the fruits of the ecumenical movement today.

THE INTERNATIONAL MISSIONARY CONFERENCE

In the 18th and 19th Centuries, missionaries went out to many parts of the world to spread the Christian faith. But they also took their culture – and they took their divisions.

In his famous seven-minute speech at the Conference, one of the three delegates from China, Cheng Ching Yi, made the celebrated declaration:

You have sent to us missionaries who have made Jesus Christ known to us, and we thank you for this. But you have also brought to us your divisions; we ask you to preach the Gospel and to let Jesus Christ himself rise up in the hearts of our people by the action of his Holy Spirit adapted to their needs, adapted also to the dispositions of our peoples, so that there will be a Church of Christ in Japan, the Church in China, in India, etc. Deliver us from all “isms” by which you have affected the preaching of the Gospel amongst us.

Working together in such movements as YMCA, YWCA, SCM (WSCF), brought people to realise that whatever their own denominational background, they had much more in common with other Christians than they had been led to suppose, and it seemed intolerable to them that they should set out to serve Christ and his mission in the world without being able to conduct themselves as friends and fellow-workers.

The convening of a world missionary conference in Edinburgh in 1910 was a decisive organisational step. It was not to be a large missionary demonstration organised by, and mainly for, the missionary supporters in one country with delegations from elsewhere. Rather, it was to be 'a conference for study and counsel' on the critical issues facing the missionary outreach of the churches.

It was not by any manner or means a conference of missionaries and mission enthusiasts: the churches' leaders were there to discuss the Church's mission. Though the constituent bodies were missionary societies, the personalities were significant church leaders. For example, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, seven Diocesan Bishops, the Moderators and Presidents of all the main churches in the British Isles were present as delegates appointed by the British organising executive. Archbishop Randall Davidson (Canterbury) addressed the Conference: never before had an Archbishop addressed in public an audience containing many members of other churches. He could not have been present had not the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) rescinded its refusal to attend, largely as the result of Bishop Charles Gore's influence. For Gore, knowing something of the SCM, wrote to the SPG that the proposed conference was not on an un-denominational basis, but on a new basis which meant no compromise of essential principle.

In retrospect, Edinburgh 1910 was plagued with limitations that would have made it unacceptable today: most of the 1200 participants were British and American, certainly male, overwhelmingly Evangelical and Protestant, with very few participants from continental Europe, only some from Australia, and seventeen from the so-called mission territories, though none from the Pacific region. There was no representation from Latin America, and there were no Roman Catholics, Orthodox, or representatives from the then nascent Pentecostal movement. Archbishop Davidson and the Anglican Communion agreed on Anglican participation, including his own, on one condition: that the scope of mission at Edinburgh 1910 not be extended to proselytising Roman Catholics and Orthodox, who were already and equally Christian. Mission, as understood in Edinburgh, was to be to the non-Christian world; this was certainly the view of missionary Bishop Charles Brent, one of the most important Anglicans at the conference. This condition set by the Anglicans meant that there were some missionary societies that would not attend. This was why there were no missionaries from Latin America, who felt terribly excluded, because their understanding of mission was directed towards Roman Catholics. The Anglican addition to Edinburgh meant that it was no longer a gathering of missionary societies, but that it had a clear ecclesial dimension to it that insisted on the link between mission and Church. Anglican ecumenical interests broadened the ecumenical scope of the conference.

But Anglicans imposed another severe limitation: it was on the insistence of Bishop Gore that, both in the main sessions and in the eight commissions (one of which he chaired with great distinction), 'doctrine or church polity' should not be discussed.

Nevertheless, Edinburgh was a staggering achievement! It was the first conference to have had delegates from such a wide range of churches. Furthermore, there was an insight, a surprise, something new; something would spread beyond the limited language, cultures, and churches that were present in Edinburgh – something that would 'catch' the imagination of the Christian world. From Edinburgh, wrote historian Kenneth Scott Latourette in 1953, "...many new movements towards Christian unity took their origin. Edinburgh 1910 was one of the great landmarks in the history of the Church".

It had been with an awareness of the dynamic nature of the world situation in the first decade of a new century, with a sense of the new vitality of Islam, and of the critical need for Christian unity, as well as the urgency of the Church's mission, that an international committee met at Oxford in July 1908 to plan a World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh. They planned not only a conference but also a programme of study in preparation for it, so that before the 1,249 members gathered in the Assembly Hall of the United Church of Scotland, they had received the reports of the work of eight international commissions -containing material collected on a vast scale and presented by commission chairmen who had worked at the preparation for nearly two years.

It was this careful preparation under the leadership of outstanding men, together with the prayerful spirit in which the conference met and worked on the material that contributed to its great success. Other factors were the full, official participation of the Church of England, the chairmanship of John Mott and the work and mind of J. H. Oldham as its secretary.

So, something certainly happened in those June days in Edinburgh 1910. The conference had as its goal the evangelization of the world, within a generation! Its chairman identified the conference as the "decisive hour of evangelisation". The one act of the conference was to set up a "continuation committee" for ongoing cooperation, which in 1921 became the International Missionary Council. This was the greatest achievement of that Conference: the bringing into existence of the first permanent instrument of international Christian co-operation outside the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, that achievement was, in itself, something of a miracle, especially because of the long-standing mutual suspicion that existed between missionary organisations and their jealous safeguarding of their own autonomy. But the step was taken, unexpectedly, and thereby the new ecumenical era of the Church's history had begun.

Despite the severe limitation imposed on its agenda – not to take up ecclesiastical or doctrinal questions in dispute – many became aware that Christ's mission demanded a renewed and united church. To Bishop Brent, Anglican Bishop in the Philippines, it meant a determination to work to bring church leaders together to discuss those things that Edinburgh omitted. The great insight of that conference was that the mission of the Church was threatened - and indeed contradicted - by the churches' division from one another, often expressed in competition, controversy, and hostility.

The historian, Diarmaid MacCulloch, has written:

All the historic bitterness which we have seen develop over nineteen centuries came to seem less relevant once Western Christianity moved out of its European homeland and started trying to convince non-Europeans of its value. It became increasingly difficult to explain to a sceptical Hindu why religious bodies which talked constantly to the oneness of the church and of the love of Christ should remain at permanent loggerheads over whether a bishop or a presbytery should govern Christ's church.

So, the quest for unity began as corollary to mission.

THREE MOVEMENTS

Three streams of the modern ecumenical movement flowed from the vision of the Edinburgh Conference. Two were born of Edinburgh: the International Missionary Council, and Faith and Order. A third stream emerged after the First World War - the Life and Work movement which sought Christian unity through the mutual quest for justice and peace. The first had its roots in the Protestant missionary societies, the third in the Swedish Lutheran Church through its primate, Archbishop Nathan Söderblom. Faith and Order has decidedly Anglican beginnings. All three movements would eventually coalesce into the World Council of Churches – two in 1948 and the other in 1961 when the International Missionary Council joined the WCC and became its Commission on World Mission and Evangelism.

At Edinburgh a 'Continuation Committee' was mooted from early in the conference and decided on at the end. The secretary was J.H. Oldham (a Scottish Presbyterian), and the chairman was John R. Mott (an American Methodist).

Soon World War I broke out! The greatest achievement of Oldham's work was rescuing missionaries in enemy territory. This brought him into continuous contact with governments; it also meant that governments had an opportunity to deal with one body, rather than many denominational missionary bodies.

For a large part of the period of post-war recovery, the main work was to build an effective instrument of co-operation. The Continuation Committee was dissolved, and the International Missionary Council (IMC) took its place in 1921. It brought together for study and common action the foreign missionary societies and national Christian councils that existed. A National Missionary Council was formed in Australia in 1926 and became affiliated with the IMC. The most important feature of the IMC – then the only world-wide co-operative organisation between the churches – was the way in which it pursued the opportunities afforded by the strength of acting together. At significant points they were ahead of governments in thinking about the needs of new nations and the responsibilities of governments towards them. Their officers, especially Oldham, knew the key people in many spheres of public life. The chief concern of the IMC was with mission policy in an age of accelerating change, and they called on the advice and co-operation of Christians who were able and willing to help. Statesmen, economists, sociologists, high officials in the International Labour Office, industrialists and trade unionists, were all brought in to advise. When the IMC opposed government policies or government inertia, they knew the facts, and in taking action were extremely well informed.

In 1928, the IMC held in Jerusalem one of its most important council meetings. Education was a major topic of mission policy – the provision of general education and religious education. A decision was taken to create a department of social and industrial research.

However, the chief topic was 'the Christian message', to be considered in contrast with other religions. All the subjects were prepared for by the writing of papers and by regional study. Among the papers was one by Rufus Jones, an American Quaker, on "Secularism" and its challenge to the Christian faith: what use was it for Christian missionaries to bend their energies to refuting the errors of ancient religions and proclaiming the supremacy of the gospel, while they disregarded the growth of an attitude of mind deriving from the West and spreading rapidly over Asia, which centred on human thought in this world and on the possibilities of human satisfaction without a relationship with any divine order?

Nobody was more forcibly struck by these issues than Oldham, and for a period after the Council meeting, he devoted a large part of his intellectual energies to reading and thinking round the vast range of problems opened up. Edinburgh 1910 had after its title the words "To consider missionary problems in relation to the non-Christian world". One of the Commissions was called "Unoccupied Fields". The assumption of every speaker was the unquestioned presence of a secure base of Christianity in the West, and the presence 'over there' of a large field of operations for mission, a field mainly occupied by other religions. That picture of a mission conceived in terms of geographical expansion, seen after Jerusalem, seemed to be standing on its head. Without realising it, Edinburgh had been the beginning at least of the emergence of a different centre for Christianity, away from Europe and North America, to the younger churches of Asia and Africa. At Edinburgh, representatives from Asia, for instance, had made a tremendous contribution far beyond their numbers. If what was now being said was true, then the greatest challenges to Christianity were emerging in the West. There was no 'base' anymore, except in the Church itself and in the Church everywhere.

Jerusalem left a tangled and, in some ways, embittered situation concerning the nature of the Christian message.

There were two sharply divided camps: on the one hand, those who saw in other Religions much that a Christian might retain; on the other hand, those who saw a radical and complete break between Christianity and any other religion. The drafting of the statement from the conference fell mostly to William Temple and this, centring on the assertion "Our message is Jesus Christ", won complete assent. But afterwards the breaches opened even more widely.

To sum up: mission was no longer to geographical areas of the world. 'World' began to assume a new meaning. 'The Church in the world' meant not only the church on the map, but the church in a world of people and institutions – political, economic, social – which had become autonomous, a law to themselves. The era of domination of every area of life by the ecclesiastical institution was long since over, and with it the crippling restriction on human freedom and creativity. From a relationship of domination, the church passed through successive stages to one of dwindling and often ineffectual contact with large areas of the life of society, especially those areas that were new. This problem had been seen by many outstanding writers and thinkers, but it took the ecumenical movement, with its essential task of understanding anew the doctrine of the Church, to throw into perspective the importance of the laity as the presence of the Church in the secular life of society.

The second stream came to be known as the Life and Work movement. It sought to address the practical problem of applying Christian principles in social and international life. It sought to find out how Christians could assist one another in bringing their faith to bear on the general life of society – in politics, industry, education, international relations, etc. There had, of course, been various antecedents preparing the way for this: for example, the 19th Century Christian Socialist Movement. But 'Life and Work' had one supreme architect and inspirer, Nathan Söderblom (1866-1931), a man who clearly saw and was firmly held by the dawning vision of the whole church in the whole world.

He was the son of a Swedish Lutheran Pastor. During his early years he lived not far from the Arctic Circle. As a young man he served as a Pastor of the Swedish Church in Paris. He was Professor of the History of Religions at Uppsala and then at Leipzig. He became Archbishop of Uppsala in 1914. He was a person with broad international experience and spoke five languages fluently. He also was a very significant ecumenical leader, passionately concerned about Christian unity and the witness of the Church to social justice.

In 1925, the first World Conference on the Life and Work of the Churches met at Stockholm, with Söderblom as chairman. At this conference, leaders of the churches began to explore together the responsibility of Christians for the great social questions of peace and justice. The Orthodox were there in force – their first appearance at such a world conference with official representatives of other churches – and they made a substantial contribution. Söderblom wrote to the Vatican inviting full participation: his letter was acknowledged, though with no mention of the invitation. The British were perhaps the best prepared delegation – due to their conference in Birmingham in 1924: it was known as COPEC (Conference on Politics, Economics and Citizenship), presided over by William Temple. Christian social thinking was by this time permeating the churches in Britain. The Germans also were well represented at Stockholm. The 'younger' churches were scarcely represented.

In addressing the Conference, Söderblom said:

In the region of moral and social questions we desire all Christians to begin at once to act together as if they were one body in one visible fellowship. This could be done by all alike without any injury to theological principle.

The idea was captured in the slogan: "Doctrine divides; Service unites".

However, as the Life and Work Movement expanded, there were many tensions. There was a deep-rooted and long-standing division among Christians between those who held that the task of the church is to save people out of the present evil world and prepare them for an eternal destiny, and those who held that the task of the church included the transformation of this world. Inevitably, this divergence came out in the Life and Work Movement from the beginning.

Stockholm 1925 may not have produced immediate tangible results, but it helped Christians of different traditions to understand one another, and it brought together into personal relations church leaders who had been in hostile camps during the war and were still suspicious of one another. The Conference laid down certain general principles: for example, the free and full development of the human personality as a supreme value above property or profit, and it declared for a 'Christian Internationalism'. But the question was: how are such general principles to be carried out in practical politics, and who was going to be responsible for carrying them out?

The Movement had its headquarters in Geneva. Quite early, it set up a study department and took up, in succession, important topics of the day and got them discussed in individual churches. But apart from the Roman Catholic Church, other churches did not make official pronouncements, and the work of thinking about the church in society was left to able individuals and unofficial groups, some of which were highly influential. They met in the ecumenical movement!

The third stream was known as Faith and Order. The initiator in the movement was an American Episcopalian, Charles Harold Brent (1862-1929), who was Bishop of the Philippines and later of Western New York. The 1910 Conference meant for him a determination to work to bring church leaders together to discuss just those things that Edinburgh had omitted. Returning to the USA, he persuaded the Episcopal Church to support a move to hold a world conference on faith and order – to which should be invited "all Christian communions throughout the world which confess our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour". But churches are not institutions that rush recklessly into action when they get a big idea: 17 years were to elapse before the first world conference. Between the idea and its achievement in 1927, much of the work of persuasion and clarification fell to a layman, an episcopalian lawyer in New York, Robert Gardiner. But it was Brent who was the driving force behind the first world conference of the Faith and Order Movement. It was held in Lausanne, in August 1927; and when the 400 representatives from 127 Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant Churches gathered, Brent pleaded that they would "keep the purpose of unity firmly in our hearts", and he declared that it was only by practising unity that we will gain unity.

From the outset, the Faith and Order Movement was based on four fundamental principles: (i) Its main work is to draw churches out of isolation into conference, in which none is to be asked to be disloyal to or to compromise its convictions, but to seek to explain them to others while seeking to understand their point of view... (ii) its conferences are to be conferences of delegates officially appointed by the churches; (iii) invitations to take part in these conferences are to be issued to "all Christian bodies throughout the world which accept the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour"; (iv) only churches themselves are competent to take actual steps towards reunion by entering into negotiations with one another.

Although the Roman Catholic Church stood aloof, the Orthodox Churches of the East were represented. A liaison was thus affected between Eastern and Western churches, and a way was opened for a better understanding of Eastern Orthodoxy by Western Christianity, already begun by Western contact with the Russians theologians who had settled in the West after the Bolshevik Revolution.

Another striking feature of the Lausanne Conference was the quality of the delegates. The churches sent some of their most eminent leaders: for example, the Church of England was represented by Bishop Gore and Bishop Headlam, two of its most outstanding leaders. Further, there was a remarkable combination of outspoken frankness about the differences between the churches with a sense of underlying unity.

It enabled the separated churches to go to work directly on the questions of doctrine and authority underlying their divisions. At Lausanne, the representatives of the churches became aware of the central aspects of Christian faith that they could affirm together. They also identified questions which divide the churches and on which they needed to reach agreement if the churches were to be one as Jesus Christ willed. For example, agreement was needed on baptism, eucharist, ministry, and understanding the nature of the Church. These items formed the agenda for Faith & Order's work throughout the 20th century. In other words, it was a ground-breaking and an agenda-setting event!

Everyone felt that an enterprise had been started which must be carried further. So, when the Conference concluded on 21st August 1927, a Continuation Committee was established.

Historians agree that after Lausanne there was a widespread sense that the participating churches might be able to clear up the matters that divide them and be a united church in the ensuing decades.

CHURCH UNIONS

This was not so unimaginable as it might now appear. Church Unions were actually coming into existence:

There was the union of the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church

Three branches of Methodism in England had united

Four groups of Canadian Churches had formed the United Church of Canada

The Scheme of Church Union in South India was steadily taking shape and led to the formation of the Church of South India in 1947

Conversations for the purpose of church union had been taking place in Australia for a couple of decades. Back in Edinburgh 1910, Bishop Arthur Pain of the Anglican Diocese of Gippsland had reported on the serious conversations that were taking place in this country – although he felt that the difficulties around the faith and ordering of the families of churches were too great to overcome.

There were also conversations in England between the Church of England and the Free Churches with a view to a possible reunion. That was a direct result of the 1920 Lambeth Conference's "Appeal to All Christian People":

The vision which rises before us is that of a Church, genuinely Catholic, loyal to all Truth, and gathering into its fellowship all 'who profess and call themselves Christians', within whose visible unity all the treasures of faith and order, bequeathed as a heritage by the past to the present, shall be possessed in common, and made serviceable to the whole Body of Christ.

In 1920 there had been another extraordinarily significant appeal: the Encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarch, addressed Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere. It was a clear ecumenical invitation. It affirmed that churches "should no more consider one another as strangers and foreigners, but as relatives, and as being a part of the household of Christ and fellow-heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promise of God in Christ". Rapprochement and cooperation between the churches did not have to wait until doctrinal differences were overcome.

The Encyclical, very notably, spoke of the formation of a League () of Churches. This can be taken in an organisational sense (cf. the League of Nations), but also in a relational sense – thereby widening the notion of the relationship between members of a single church so as to apply it to the relationships between several churches.

In preparing for Stockholm in 1925, Söderblom thought of that event not as an end in itself, but that it should lead to the establishment of a permanent body, which he called “an Ecumenical Council of Churches”. Indeed, he had first mentioned the idea in 1919. But by 1925 he felt the time was not appropriate.

THE PRE-WAR CONFERENCES

However, ten years later things were changing. There was another series of ecumenical conferences just before World War II. Much had gone on in various localities.

Two conferences were held in Britain. But in anticipation of those conferences, meetings of both Life and Work and Faith and Order took place in 1936, and both approved the appointment of a committee “to review the work of ecumenical cooperation since the Stockholm and Lausanne conferences and to make recommendations to the Oxford and Edinburgh conferences regarding the future policy, organisation and work of the ecumenical movement”. The meeting of this committee took place in Westfield College, London in July 1937. The idea of a league or council of churches was not new. There was a readiness to take two radical decisions: to bring together Life and Work and Faith and Order and to set up a fully representative assembly of the churches, and it was emphasised that the impending two world conferences provided a unique opportunity for making this new departure. In the discussion, it was generally agreed that a more comprehensive organisation should be created, but questions were raised about its scope – and consequently, the report, which was adopted unanimously at that meeting, contained the following description of the proposed WCC:

The new organization which is proposed shall have no power to legislate for the churches or to commit them to action without their consent; but if it is to be effective, it must deserve and win the respect of the churches in such measure that the people of greatest influence in the life of the churches may be willing to give time and thought to its work.

Further, the witness which the Church in the modern world is called to give is such that in certain spheres the predominant voice in the utterance of it must be that of lay people holding posts of responsibility and influence in the secular world.

The great question then was whether the two world conferences would accept what seemed to many a very daring proposal.

These two significant ecumenical conferences were held in the summer of 1937. They were held deliberately in close proximity – both in terms of time and place – because both were to address the important question of whether to support the proposal for the creation of a WCC.

Life and Work. Oxford, July 1937. Söderblom had died in 1931, and his place of leadership had been taken by George Bell, Anglican Bishop of Chichester. There was a three-year period of preparation for this conference. The subject was “Church, Community and State”. From the Conference, it was said:

“The first duty of the Church, and its greatest service to the world, is that it be in very deed the Church – confessing the true faith, committed to the fulfilment of the will of Christ, its only Lord, and united in him in a fellowship of love and service”. The conference was anxious “to facilitate the more effective action of the Christian Church in the modern world” and wished to create a world council of churches for that purpose”.

Faith and Order. Edinburgh, August 1937. There were representatives of 123 churches. Temple described the plan for a world council of churches as providing “the ecumenical movement as a whole with a more effective means of self-expression”. He went on, “if the new organization were to win the confidence of the churches, it would do something to provide a voice for non-Roman Christendom”, and added that “it seemed to be a step towards the *koinonia ton ekklesion* which the Ecumenical Patriarch long ago expressed a desire to see”.

But final decision from Faith & Order regarding approval of the plan for a world ecumenical body was given conditionally. The Edinburgh Conference wanted the incorporation of a number of guarantees:

It was resolved: "To give approval to the completed plan only if the following guarantees be incorporated:

That the World Council's Commission on F&O shall, in the first instance, be the Continuation Committee appointed by this conference.

Further appointments to the Commission be members of the churches.

The work of the Commission shall be carried on under the general care of the Theological Secretariat appointed by the Commission ... The Council shall make adequate financial provision for the work of the Commission.

The work of the Commission shall always proceed in accordance with the basis on which this Conference was called and conducted.

The World Council shall consist of official representatives of the Churches participating.

These 1937 conferences had positive outcomes. They led the way to the WCC, which would draw the participants in the ecumenical movement more closely and permanently together, and also coordinate the various prongs in the movement.

The constitution for a WCC was drafted in 1938, and Faith & Order finally gave approval

The International Missionary Council held its Fourth World Conference in Madras in 1938, with 470 delegates, half of whom were from the 'younger' churches (Asia, Africa, Latin America). However, the question of joining with the other two movements to form a WCC was not a possibility at that time.

At the time when the plans for the World Council were under way, the IMC was not willing to give up its independence and become part of it. The Missionary Council had in its constituency a number of missionary societies which did not want to come under the control of the churches. There was also the concern that the churches of Europe and North America might dominate the new Council to such an extent that the younger churches from other continents would not have the place they deserved. It was also not yet clear whether assistance to the churches in their task of mission and evangelism would be among the principal functions of the World Council.

However, close relations between the IMC and the WCC were advocated by some: the WCC symbolized "the existence of a universal fellowship of Christians really living and active in spite of our ecclesiastical divisions", while the IMC stood for the evangelization of the world and had therefore something of priceless value to bring into the whole Christian ecumenical movement. The IMC conference expressed its interest in the plan for the WCC but decided that the distinctive service and organization of the IMC should be maintained.

The plans for a 'World Council of Churches in Formation' were for it to be realised in 1941. But war interrupted. During the war years, contact was maintained between church leaders in the allied countries and in the Nazi-occupied territories, largely through the courageous ingenuity of George Bell (1883-1958) – he was also a good friend of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

When war ended, preparations for the WCC inauguration went ahead rapidly.

THE FIRST ASSEMBLY OF THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

Amsterdam, August 1948. Delegates came from 147 churches from 44 countries, ready to participate in the establishment of the World Council. All confessional families except the Roman Catholics were represented. A number of Roman Catholics had been invited to attend as observers, but they could not accept the invitation because in June the Holy Office had issued a *Monitum* to the effect that no Roman Catholic would receive permission to attend.

The Orthodox churches of the four ancient Patriarchates of Alexander, Antioch, Constantinople and Jerusalem, the Church of Greece, the Orthodox Church of USA, and the Russian Exarchate in Western Europe were represented. Other Orthodox churches, however, decided to refrain from participation in the World Council "in its present form".

There were 22 delegates from Asian churches; but very few churches of Africa and Latin America were as yet ready to join the Council.

There were eight delegates from five churches in Australia (Anglican, Churches of Christ, Congregational, Methodist, Presbyterian) including: John Garrett, Alan Walker, and Howard Mowll.

The pioneer generation was represented by John R. Mott and J.H. Oldham, whose prediction, made in 1920, had at last come true.

In the message of the WCC's First Assembly are these words: "Here at Amsterdam we have committed ourselves afresh to Him, and have covenanted with one another in constituting this World Council of Churches. We intend to stay together". These oft-quoted words captured the mood which impregnated the vote of the Assembly at its first plenary meeting. It was an action not merely to create another ecclesiastical organisation, but to seal a covenant.

The basic conviction of churches when they formed the WCC: "The whole Church with the whole Gospel to the whole person in the whole world".

The Assembly message also said:

We are divided from one another not only in matters of faith, order and tradition, but also by pride of nation, class and race. But Christ has made us His own, and He is not divided. In seeking Him we find one another.

It is difficult to tell how many Australians were there. It seems there were at least four; but it may have been several more. The Official Handbook has 24 names under the heading of "South Africans and Australasian", but as most have London addresses, it becomes increasingly difficult.

Although the Bishop of Cremona, Msgr Donomelli, a personal friend of Pope Pius X, sent a letter of support to the Conference.

Although the Russian Orthodox Archbishop Nicolai of Japan was consulted. The notion that there was a sole Orthodox participant lacks any documentary evidence.

Latourette, Kenneth Scott, *A History of Christianity Volume II: Reformation to the Present*, London, Harper & Row, 1953, p.1344

see also MacCulloch, Diarmaid, *A History of Christianity*, London, Allen Lane Penguin Books, 2009, pp. 954-6

However, this was the third ecumenical body established in Australia, the first two being concerned with education: the Melbourne College of Divinity in 1910, and the Australian Council of Christian Education in 1922.

Report on the Second World Conference on Faith and Order, Oxford, New York City, 1937, p.3

Visser 't Hooft, The Genesis and Formation of the World Council of Churches, Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1987, pp.18-20.

Ibid., p .40

Ibid., p. 43

Ibid., p. 44

Edinburgh Report, Op.cit., pp. 271-2

Visser 't Hooft, Op.cit., pp. 56 & 57

Ibid., pp. 63-4