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The Lausanne Story (originally published in 1987)

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A Word from the Honorary Chairman

On the tenth and final day of the 1974 International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne, Switzerland, I was more convinced than ever that the world Church was stronger in more countries than perhaps ever before in the history of the Christian faith.

Lausanne burst upon us with unexpected significance and power. It became an awakening experience for those who attended and for thousands in many countries who read about it. The Lausanne Covenant adopted by the participants was almost a new charter for churches everywhere.

At Lausanne we saw new possibilities for cooperation. We sensed that for the first time in history there was a chance of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ to the whole world in a relatively short time. We repented of our mistakes and failures and stood rebuked that nearly two billion people had never heard of Jesus Christ.

We left Lausanne with a renewed zeal and a new commitment to the cause of world evangelization. Since Lausanne ‘74, many events have taken place to indicate that we may be on the verge of either a world holocaust or a worldwide spiritual awakening—perhaps both! World evangelization is now a possibility before the end of this century. The world in which we live, however, is totally different from the world at the beginning of this century. Theologians, as the century started, called it “the Christian century.” The dreams of these well-meaning theologians were shattered by World War I, and even more so by World War II.

But the Gospel has not changed. Christ has not changed. The power of the Spirit to transform lives has not changed. Man’s desperate need for God has not changed. Our Lord’s great commission to go into all the world and preach the Gospel has not changed. Christ’s promise to be with us until the end of the age has not changed.

Since the Lausanne Congress in 1974, Christians increasingly have been called upon to provide leadership in areas where they were a small minority or almost did not exist before. Evangelism has taken on a new meaning. It is a time of great opportunity, but also a time of great responsibility. We are stewards of our Christian heritage. We must evangelize at all costs while there is yet time. World problems of poverty, overpopulation and the threat of nuclear war mount by the hour. The world is in desperate need of the Gospel, now!

The Lausanne movement, led by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, plays a major part in encouraging evangelism and social concern everywhere, and in building bridges of cooperation for the whole Church to take the whole Gospel to the whole world. Since 1974, “the spirit of

Lausanne” has spread widely. The movement has involved leaders from many countries who are dedicated to working together for the cause of world evangelization.

The Lausanne Committee is sponsoring a second International Congress on World Evangelization in Singapore in 1989. There have been many congresses on evangelism and for evangelists since 1974. It was our privilege to sponsor two international conferences for itinerant evangelists in Amsterdam in 1983 and 1986. Amsterdam ‘83 and ‘86 were training schools for evangelists who are doing God’s work in difficult places around the world. In contrast, the two Lausanne congresses are targeted for decision makers and leaders in world evangelization. God spoke mightily in Lausanne, and I believe He will speak again in Singapore.

My prayer is that this bold adventure that we started together in 1974 will continue to be used by God to fan the evangelistic fire of the whole Church until the day of our Lord’s return.

—Dr. Billy Graham, Honorary Chairman

Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOKLET

The purpose of this booklet is to introduce you to the Lausanne movement and the forthcoming 1989 International Congress on World Evangelization so that you may better pray, study, plan and participate in the task of world evangelization. It has been published in over 25 languages. It tells the thrilling story of what God has been doing through the centuries, and more particularly, is doing in the world today.

It describes the Lausanne movement and the spirit of Lausanne—a moving of the Spirit of God throughout the churches of the world to take the Gospel to the whole world. It looks forward to the gathering of over 4,000 people in the Asian city of Singapore in July 1989 for a second International Congress on World Evangelization. It presents the Lausanne Covenant, a broad statement of intent under which Christians from every expression of the Church can come together to pray, study, plan and work together for a world in which Christ’s peace reigns.

THE LAUSANNE MOVEMENT

Lausanne is a city in Switzerland where a historic meeting of the Church took place in 1974. This first International Congress on World Evangelization, the most broadly representative meeting of the Church ever held, came to be known as “Lausanne ‘74.” There were 2,700 participants, plus another 1,000 observers and staff. As we shall see in the pages that follow, it had a unique place in the ongoing history of God at work through his Church in the world. This first International Congress on World Evangelization produced an historic document—The Lausanne Covenant (see pages 14 and 26).

At the overwhelming recommendation of the participants, a committee was appointed to continue the spirit of Lausanne. Later this continuation committee became known as the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (LCWE). This committee was chartered to carry forward the tremendous momentum and inspiration that came from the Lausanne Congress. It was charged with the task of leading a movement, rather than constructing a worldwide organization. Its 75 members have been drawn from churchmen and women all over the world, and during the ensuing years its work has been mightily blessed by new and exciting efforts towards sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with people everywhere. Follow-on congresses on evangelism have been held in numerous countries of the world. New efforts of cooperation between churches and mission agencies have developed. We have seen the world through new eyes, understanding that there are over two billion people who have yet to hear the name of Jesus Christ. We have directed our attention to the Lord’s command to take the Gospel to all peoples even as we have attempted to appraise our own lives and repent of those things which have kept us from not only sharing the Gospel but living the Gospel.

God at Work in Church History

“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost,” Matthew 28:19.

Nearly 2,000 years have passed since those words were spoken. How has this Great Commission been carried out through by generations who have lived before us? Christ’s command to evangelize the world is central to the Christian faith. The first group of Christians had no missionary organizations, no institutions, no funds, no colleges—but with the odds of a hostile world and a powerful Roman state arrayed against them, these few disciples, mightily empowered by the Spirit, went forth and preached everywhere. When they died, the number of followers of Jesus had already multiplied and carried the torch of the Gospel further into the darkness. The first generations of Christians were mocked and martyred but had enormous success. In 313 A.D. even the Roman emperor himself was baptized, and eventually Christianity became the religion of the Empire which at that time stretched from the Red Sea to the North Sea and from the Alps to the Sahara Desert.

By the end of the Second Century, Christianity became a state religion in Mesopotamia, at the beginning of the Fourth Century in Armenia and Georgia. Christianity entered Ethiopia early in the Fourth Century, the land of the Franks towards the close of the fifth century, in England and Scotland in the Sixth Century, in the Seventh the Balkans, in the Ninth the Scandinavian countries and in the Tenth Bulgaria and Russia. As early as the year 180 A.D. the Gospel of Jesus Christ reached India, and in 635 A.D. Christian missionaries arrived in China. But then there was a long pause. As late as the Fifteenth Century missionaries arrived in the new world, the North American continent. In the same century missionary work began once again in India and in the Sixteenth Century in South America, the Philippines and Japan. In the fifteenth Century, the Protestant Reformation under the leadership of Luther and Calvin rose up against departures from biblical Christianity in the Roman Church. This in itself was a missionary event, carried out by enlightened clergy and nobility. However, for 200 years the Protestant movement remained purely a European and North American internal matter. Only in the Eighteenth Century did the Protestants make their first serious attempts to organize missionary work.

Toward the end of the Eighteenth Century, European Christians became increasingly aware of the Lord’s Great Commission, and a number of missionary societies were founded. The expansion of Protestant missions in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries was clearly connected with revivals which at that time swept across Europe and North America. “The evangelization of the world in our generation” became the watchword for many evangelicals in the last decade of the Nineteenth Century.

In order to coordinate the missionary undertaking, national interdenominational conferences were held in some countries, the first of them probably the one held in New York in 1854, followed by a similar one in London the same year and in 1860 in Liverpool. Later other international missionary gatherings were organized, aiming at the coordination advance of missionary strategy. The most significant of these conferences was the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh, Scotland in June 1910. This conference can rightly be considered the predecessor of the “Lausanne movement” of our time.

Historical Meetings of the Church

The history of the Church is marked by many such major councils and meetings. Some of the most outstanding of these were:

Apostolic Council	Jerusalem	30s? A.D.	Endorsed Gentile mission with no bondage to law
First Ecumenical Council	Nicea	325 A.D.	Affirmed deity of Christ
Second Ecumenical Council	Constantinople	381 A.D.	Affirmed Holy Trinity, full reality of Christ’s humanity. Produced the Nicene Creed.
Third Ecumenical Council	Ephesus	431	Affirmed unity of Christ’s person.

Fourth Ecumenical Council	Chaldecon	451	Affirmed Christ as one Person, two natures.
Fourth Lateran Council	Rome	1215	Fixed transubstantiation and auricular confession.
Council of Constance	Constance	1414ff	Asserted authority of General Councils but also condemned Huss.
Diet of Worms	Worms	1521	Luther's protest for a "conscience bound to God's Word."
Diet of Augsburg	Augsburg	1530	Augsburg Confession and Reformed Confessions
Council of Trent	Trent	1545ff	Established Roman Catholic dogmas with some reforms.
Hampton Court Conference	London	1604	Arranged for the first widely used common language translation of the Bible—the "King James Version".
Westminster Assembly	London	1643ff	Produced the Westminster Confession and Catechisms
Evangelical Alliance	London	1846	Founding meeting, initiating evangelical cooperation in many fields
Vatican I	Rome	1869f	Declared Papal infallibility.
Edinburgh Missionary Conference	Edinburgh	1910	First representative missionary conference, also leading to the formation of the World Council of Churches.
Ecumenical Assembly	Amsterdam	1948	Established the World Council of Churches by merging of Faith & Order and Work & Life.
Ecumenical Assembly	New Delhi	1961	Incorporated International Missionary Council into World Council of Churches.
Vatican II	Rome	1962ff	Roman Catholic reforms, including encouragement of study of the Bible.
Congress on World Evangelism	Berlin	1966	Established evangelical theological foundation for world evangelization.
International Congress on World Evangelism	Lausanne	1974	Set the agenda for evangelical Christians in the task of world evangelization. Produced the Lausanne Covenant.

The Lausanne '74 Congress was a major milestone in the history of the worldwide spread of the church. Christians around the world are praying that the second International Congress on World Evangelization will have an even greater impact.

LAUSANNE '74

The International Congress on World Evangelization

In the fall of 1966, some 1200 delegates from over 100 countries attended a World Congress on Evangelism in Berlin convened by Dr. Billy Graham. The theme, "One Race, One Gospel, One Task," gave clear direction to the congress—it was time to unite for world evangelism. The event put the evangelicals back in touch with their historical roots. They emerged from the congress with a positive message of Christ's salvation for a hurting world. Berlin was followed by regional evangelism conferences in Singapore (1968), Minneapolis (1969), Bogota (1969) and Amsterdam (1971). These gatherings provided continuity between the Berlin Congress and the first International Congress on World Evangelization (LCOWE) in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1974.

The eight years that separated these conferences (!) however, were anything but stable. New forms of evangelism began to appear, with a growing emphasis on demonstrating the Gospel as well as proclaiming it. Worldwide movements which emphasized the work of the Holy Spirit were making a significant contribution to church renewal. In this climate Dr. Billy Graham sensed it was time for another, even more significant and more representative gathering. He wrote to evangelical leaders around the world and asked: "Is there a need for another world congress on evangelization?" Nearly all responded affirmatively and enthusiastically. There was a feeling, however, that this congress should not be a repeat of Berlin 1966. Rather, it should be a working congress dealing with practical issues and strategies, spelling out the what, why and the how of world evangelization. The theme for the 1974 International Congress on World Evangelization was "LET THE EARTH HEAR HIS VOICE." Bishop A. Jack Dain of the Anglican Church in Sydney, Australia, who served as Executive Chairman of LCOWE summed up the distinction between Berlin and Lausanne in an interview prior to the Congress:

Lausanne is a Congress on evangelization, not a Congress on evangelism. Berlin was the first of many congresses on evangelism. But I think now the present thought in the minds of many leaders around the world is that we need not only to think of evangelism, that is, the proclamation of the Gospel, but the whole task given to us by the risen Christ. This, I think more aptly, is called evangelization.

We are now seeking to draw together a widely representative group of church leaders to take a new look at the world in which we live, and the areas of those outside the reach of the Gospel.

The 2,700 participants who came to Lausanne represented over 150 nations, and from a wide diversity of denominational backgrounds. Approximately 50 percent were from Two-Thirds World countries. Counting observers, news media, and guests, over 4,000 Christians attended the congress. Lausanne brought together some of the world's finest Christian minds and committed believers. Among the participants were women, lay persons, evangelists, missionaries, pastors, theologians and communicators. Time magazine said the congress was a "formidable forum, probably the widest ranging meeting of Christians ever held."

THE PURPOSE OF LAUSANNE

The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (LCWE) sets the policy and gives direction and guidance to the Lausanne movement. The committee consists of 75 members who volunteer their time, are elected to two year terms, and are eligible for reelection twice, or a total of three consecutive terms. The committee ordinarily meets every two years. The work of the Committee is stated in its purpose, objectives and goals:

Purpose:

The purpose of the Lausanne Committee is to further the evangelization of the world by building bridges of understanding and cooperation among Christian leaders everywhere to mobilize the whole church to proclaim the whole Gospel to the whole world.

Objectives:

1. Biblical evangelization among all peoples, including those unreached people groups where the church has not yet taken root indigenously.
2. Spiritual renewal as a foundation to world evangelization.
3. Build networks of relationships and cooperation among those committed to evangelizing the world.
4. Measure the progress of world evangelization so that prayer and other resources are effectively mobilized.

Goals:

The unique role of the Lausanne movement is to help bring Christian leaders together to develop and communicate global strategies for world evangelization in cooperation with all who embrace the Lausanne Covenant. This desire translates into the following specific goals:

1. Promote cooperative evangelistic efforts based on the Lausanne Covenant, which testifies to the biblical teachings for evangelization.
2. Promote and publish studies of biblical theology and strategies of evangelization.
3. Stimulate united and specific strategic praying for world evangelization.
4. Encourage stewardship of the Church's resources, and stimulate sacrificial giving for world evangelization.
5. Share information about the progress of evangelization in different parts of the world.
6. Sponsor or encourage meetings at all levels of Christian leaders to pray, plan, and work together for world evangelization.
7. Commission those persons of vision and experience to share with an enlarged Christian community significant insights and useful models in evangelization.
8. Provide opportunities for evangelicals to engage in joint action, and thus widen and enhance their common ministries for evangelization.
9. Encourage and support the research and development of the ministries of women and youth for world evangelization.
10. Intercede sympathetically for the liberty of those fellow believers who bear their evangelistic witness under conditions of oppression and persecution.

Finances:

The Lausanne movement is supported by a wide range of Christians, local churches and Christian agencies. It has no major source of income except these varied contributors. Part of the genius of the movement is the hundreds of individuals and organizations who give of their time and resources to align their programs with the direction of the movement.

THE PEOPLE OF LAUSANNE

The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization is not a power structure but a committee which acts as a catalyst, enabling but not directing. It provides service for the cause of world evangelization, offering expertise in the fields of evangelism, theology, mass communication, as well as planning regional and functional congresses and conferences. Over the past two decades we have seen the dawning of a whole new era of cooperation in world evangelization. It is our firm belief that God has brought into existence the ministry of LCWE to help foster this cooperation and hold high the vision of completing the task of world evangelization. Lausanne is a response to a new kind of world, one in which instantaneous global communication is possible. In this "Communication Age" Christians are able to reach out to one another across barriers of distance, time and ecclesiastical differences. Lausanne provides bridges across which cooperation and understanding can move.

It is important to understand that Lausanne is a movement. It is not an organization of churches, it is not an organization which one "joins." It seeks to reach out and bring together Christians of like

mind who have a strong desire to see the good news of Jesus Christ shared with their neighbors, their country and the whole world. It gains its strength by its singular purpose that every man and woman in the world should have an opportunity to say “yes” to Jesus Christ.

Here it is helpful to distinguish between the Lausanne movement and the “Ecumenical Movement.” The Ecumenical Movement seeks to bring Christians and churches together with a minimum of few denominational distinctives for the purpose of unity. The Lausanne movement allows Christians and churches to maintain their denominational distinctives, while bringing them together for the singular purpose of world evangelization. Thus Lausanne draws people from many different denominations.

The Lausanne Committee is chaired by Dr. Leighton Ford, whose evangelistic ministry has spanned the world. Dr. Ford also chairs a 15 member Executive Committee which acts on behalf of LCWE between its bi-yearly meetings.

An ongoing support staff is headed by International Director Rev. Thomas Wang, whose 30 years of ministry with Chinese peoples all over the world gives him a special expertise in overseeing such a worldwide movement. His office is in Singapore.

Rev. Wang is supported by a small staff of highly qualified men and women from different countries of the world.

Four working groups supplement the work of LCWE:

The *Theology Working Group* considers various issues that are important to world evangelization and initiates further study of such issues as approved by the LCWE. This group uses consultations and gatherings to call together theologians, anthropologists, linguists, missionaries and others to study these important issues. Their work includes analyzing various contemporary movements and trends which are related to the mission of the Church.

The *Strategy Working Group* provides communication and motivational links between practicing missionaries, evangelists, churches and Christian organizations in an attempt to help them develop strategies for evangelization. It gathers information about what these individuals and organizations are doing, the needs they have—along with their dreams and visions—and stores this information in such a way that it can be made available to those who can be helped by it. Like the Theology Working Group, the Strategy Working Group holds various consultations and gatherings to bring together individuals with expertise and experience in specific areas of mission and evangelism, so that they may learn from one another and corporately work together.

The *Intercession Advisory Group* emphasizes the importance of prayer to world evangelism. Its sole purpose is to encourage global prayer support. One of its main goals is to establish a worldwide network of individuals, churches and organizations who are committed to praying for world evangelization. This group promotes an annual World Day of Prayer (Pentecost Sunday), which is being increasingly observed around the world.

The *Communications Working Group* helps develop strategies and plans for communicating to various Lausanne constituencies. It provides valuable input toward the process of gathering and disseminating information pertaining to events, opportunities and needs related to world evangelization.

A small number of men and women have been designated as Lausanne Senior Associates. They are people who have a well established ministry, which combined with their special expertise, helps them to move through the world helping others. Their travel is sponsored and paid for by the LCWE.

In addition, there are formal and informal “Lausanne Committees” in countries and regions of the world, men and women whose sole purpose in coming together is to further the task of world evangelization. New ‘89 Congress Country Committees are being formed in preparation for a second major congress to be held in Singapore in July, 1989.

The Lausanne movement has drawn Christian leaders from all over the world and many different communions and expressions of the Church. Anglicans, Baptists, Assemblies of God, Lutherans,

Methodist, Presbyterians—many others all are represented. The names of LCWE members and International Advisory Council are listed on the last page.

BETWEEN THE CONGRESSES

It is virtually impossible to ascertain all the evangelistic activities that have been generated as a direct result of Lausanne initiatives. Since the '74 Lausanne Congress the "Spirit of Lausanne" has become regionalized in every continent.

In Europe alone, it is estimated that within two years after LCOWE at least 25 new organizations or missions were started.

In August of 1976, over 1,600 Chinese-speaking representatives from six continents gathered in Hong Kong for the Chinese Congress on World Evangelization (CCOWE).

An All-India Congress on Mission and Evangelization (AICOME) was held in Devlali, India, in January of 1977, with over 400 Christian leaders present.

In November of 1978, 350 Christian leaders from more than 20 Asian countries came to Singapore for the Asian Leadership Conference on Evangelism (ALCOE).

An international consultation on World Evangelization (COWE) was held in Pattaya, Thailand, in 1980. It involved 650 participants from 87 countries. Seventeen major groupings of unreached people had been identified for specific strategies of evangelization. New directions for the Lausanne movement were set.

In July of 1981 more than 8,000 pastors, evangelists, and church leaders gathered from across the United States for the American Festival of Evangelism, which included addresses by outstanding Christian leaders, and about 200 seminars on evangelism, discipling and ministry.

In April of 1982, some 200 Latin American Christians representing 23 countries gathered in Panama City, Panama for the Consultation of Evangelicals in Latin American (CONELA) and formed a fraternity representing 98 evangelical denominations.

In September of 1984, more than 600 pastors, evangelists, educators, and other leaders met in Kingston, Jamaica, for the Congress on the Evangelization of the Caribbean (CONECAR 84).

National congresses have been held in Nigeria, Kenya, Guatemala, Ghana, Norway, Canada, Brazil, Venezuela, Germany, Korea and Japan.

In 1984 a World Prayer Assembly was held in Seoul, Korea. Thousands came to pray for the evangelization of the world in one of the largest prayer meetings ever held.

The Lausanne Committee also brought together 350 younger leaders met in Singapore in June of 1987 to discuss their role in the future of world evangelization. A meeting of over 2,500 younger leaders is planned in the USA for July 1988.

Christians living in the Twentieth Century have unique opportunities for world evangelization. Advanced computer and communications technology, along with modern methods of transportation, make it possible for Christians from around the world to exchange ideas, plan, pray, and work together. While nothing can take the place of unyielding dependence on the Holy Spirit along with personal commitment and involvement, the developments of this age have made the possibility of world evangelization more realistic for the Christian church.

Around the world, communication happens best when people are brought together face-to-face. Fellowship is based on trust, and we have to meet one another to develop trust. Uniting under the umbrella of the Lausanne Covenant, tens of thousands of Christians have had the opportunity to pray, plan and work together for world evangelization.

THE 1989 CONGRESS

A second International Congress on World Evangelization is planned for July 11-20, 1989 in the city of Singapore. The theme of the Congress is "Proclaim Christ the Lord: The Hope of Our World."

An effort is being made to have participants from all 223 countries and territories of the world. Over 4,000 participants and observers will be supported by staff, media and others. There is a strong desire that the participants from all these countries have demonstrated their great concern for world evangelization. There will be many leaders who are official leaders within denominations, but equally important there will be men and women who have demonstrated their leadership by their life and witness.

The Congress has been endorsed by an International Advisory Committee made up of 112 Christian leaders from all the regions of the world.

The purpose of the Congress is to both celebrate what God is doing in the world and to think, pray and plan together about how the Church can be more effective in the ongoing task of proclaiming the Gospel to the world and living the Gospel before the world. We desire to embolden Christians everywhere to share their faith and life with all who will hear.

The Congress is not an end in itself. Rather, it is part of an ongoing process. It is anticipated that the majority of the participants will be invited by July 1988 so that they can take part in a year of preparation. Every country is urged to form a '89 Convening Committee to make recommendations to an International Participant Selection Committee, and to prepare participants as they go to the Congress and to receive their reports as they return.

This is a congress for Christian leaders particularly concerned with evangelism. Participants and observers to the Congress are being invited from a broad range of Christian leaders. From the beginning the Planning Committee has stated its strong desire to see a major representation by women. Thus, it is planned that at least 25 percent of the participants will be women. Younger leaders will play an important part. Pastors, missionaries, theologians, evangelists, and a vast array of Christian workers concerned with evangelism will be present. A significant number of the participants will be laity.

Funding for the Congress is coming from individual Christians and churches from all over the world. It is recognized that there will be those who will need financial assistance in traveling a long distance and spending ten days in a foreign city. At the same time every effort will be made to have the Church in each country provide finances for its participants.

Part of the Process—Not an End in Itself

In 1974 those who came together were just beginning to know one another. But between 1974 and 1989 many new streams of evangelization have been fed by the Lausanne movement. These will flow together as a mighty stream in 1989. Between '74 and '89 whole new efforts designed to lovingly communicate the good news of Jesus Christ have been organized toward Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, secularists, tribal religions, and many others. Thousands of unreached people groups in most countries of the world have been identified, and efforts are underway to reach them.

A new spirit of cooperation pervades Christians everywhere. Short wave radio broadcasters have banded together for more effective coverage. Expatriate Chinese churches around the world have come together under the Chinese Coordinating Centre of World Evangelism.

Different organizations have focused on countrywide efforts to bring the whole Gospel to a whole nation. The Jesus film has been translated into over a hundred languages and is graphically portraying the story of Jesus and his love. The Church is growing rapidly in some of the difficult places of the world. Christians living in lands where governments have not appreciated nor understood the basic message of the Gospel have demonstrated their compassion and love for people and their willingness to be outstanding citizens of their countries. Sometimes they have had to demonstrate their love with their lives.

It is in this new world, this new time, that the next International Congress is set. There is a new understanding of the need to carry the Gospel to the heart of the cities as the world rapidly becomes urban. The Church is renewing her commitment to be salt and light in the world and to communicate the Gospel not only by word and sign, but also by deed.

The program planning committee is designing the congress to give every opportunity for one part of the Church to strengthen another, for every individual to return to his or her country newly empowered to build bridges of understanding and cooperation in world evangelization.

World Council of Churches: Who Are We?

History

The WCC was constituted at the first general assembly (Amsterdam) on 23 August 1948. It became the most visible international expression of varied streams of ecumenical life in the 20th century. Two of these streams - Life and Work (L&W) and Faith and Order (F&O) - merged at the first assembly. A third stream - the missionary movement, as organized in the International Missionary Council (IMC) - was integrated with the WCC at the 1961 third assembly (New Delhi). And a fourth stream - Christian education - entered through the WCC's 1971 merger with the World Council of Christian Education, whose roots went back to the 18th century Sunday School movement. Six presidents and the honorary president of the WCC elected at the first assembly in Amsterdam in 1948.

In 1920, the Ecuemncial Patriarchate of Constantinople became the first church to appeal publicly for a permanent organ of fellowship and co-operation of "all the churches" - a "League of Churches" (Koinonia ton Ekklesion) similar to the proposal after the first world war for a League of Nations (Koinonia ton Ethnon). Also calling for the same in the 1920s were church leaders such as Archbishop Nathan Söderblom (Sweden), a founder of L&W (1925), and J.H. Oldham (UK), a founder of the IMC (1921).

In July 1937, on the eve of the world conferences of L&W at Oxford and of F&O at Edinburgh, representatives of the two movements met in London. They decided to bring the two movements together and to set up a fully representative assembly of the willing churches. The proposed new organization "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". Also involved should be laypeople who hold "posts of responsibility and influence in the secular world", and "a first-class intelligence staff". S. McCrea Cavert (USA) suggested the name "World Council of Churches".

Both Oxford and Edinburgh accepted the proposal and each appointed seven members to a Committee of 14, which met in Utrecht in May 1938. It, in turn, created a provisional committee responsible for the WCC "in process of formation". William Temple (archbishop of York, later of Canterbury) was named chairman, and W.A. Visser 't Hooft (the Netherlands) general secretary. The provisional committee established a solid foundation for the WCC by resolving constitutional questions concerning its basis, authority and structure. In October-November 1938, it sent out formal invitations to 196 churches, and Temple wrote a personal letter to the Vatican secretary of state.

At Tambaram (India) in 1938 the IMC expressed interest in the WCC plan but decided to continue as a separate body. A number of missionary societies in its constituency did not want to come under the control of the churches, and there was fear that the churches of North America and Europe would not give to the younger churches elsewhere the place they deserved. Nevertheless, the IMC helped facilitate the eventual entrance of these churches into the WCC, "associated" with it in 1948, and eventually integrated in 1961.

In 1939 the provisional committee planned the first WCC general assembly for August 1941, but the world war intervened, and the period of formation lasted for another decade. Between 1940 and 1946, the provisional committee could not function normally through its responsible committees, but its members and others did gather in the USA, England and Switzerland. Under the leadership of Visser 't Hooft in Geneva during the war, several activities contributed to the supra-national witness of the

church: chaplaincy service, work among prisoners of war, assistance to Jews and other refugees, relay of information to the churches, and the preparation through contact with Christian leaders on all sides for post-war reconciliation and interchurch aid.

After the war the provisional committee met in Geneva (1946) and at Buck Hills, Pennsylvania (1947). The committee could affirm that the tragic war experience increased the churches' determination to manifest their fellowship of reconciliation. By 1948, 90 churches had accepted the invitation to join the WCC.

Second thoughts on representation and WCC membership resulted in careful regard for numerical size and adequate confessional and geographical representation. The principal membership requirement was agreement with the basis upon which the council would be formed; other requirements specified the autonomy of a church, its stability and appropriate size and its good relationship to other churches. Although some favored a council composed primarily of national councils of churches or of world confessional families (e.g. Lutherans, Orthodox, Baptists), the argument prevailed that the WCC should be in direct contact with national churches and thus would comprise, for example, the Methodist Church of Great Britain, the Methodist Episcopal Church, USA, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, etc. World confessional bodies, national councils of churches and international ecumenical bodies could be invited to send representatives to the first assembly but would have non-voting observer status.

When the inaugural assembly convened on 22 August 1948, its 147 churches from 44 countries represented in some way all confessional families within the Christian world, except the Roman Catholic Church. On the next day the assembly accepted the constitution of the WCC, and the newly organized fellowship of churches issued its message:

"Christ has made us his own, and he is not divided. In seeking him we find one another. Here at Amsterdam we have committed ourselves afresh to him, and have covenanted with one another in constituting the World Council of Churches. We intend to stay together."

Amsterdam defined the WCC tasks in a general way in its constitution and more specifically in its decisions concerning policies, programs and budget. The assembly authorized the WCC to make common pronouncements to the churches and to the world, but clearly defined the nature and limits of such pronouncements.

Basis

The 1948 inaugural assembly declared: "The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior". Soon this formulation gave rise to questions, and requests for a clearer definition of the Christ-centeredness of the churches' common calling, a more explicit expression of the Trinitarian faith and a specific reference to the holy scriptures. The result was the re-formulation, adopted by the third assembly (New Delhi 1961), which still stands: "a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

Less than a confession of Christian faith and more than a formula, the basis serves as a point of reference for WCC members, a source or ground of coherence. Since the WCC is not itself a church, it passes no judgment upon the sincerity or firmness with which member churches accept the basis or upon the seriousness with which they take their membership. Thus, the basis itself comes under William Temple's formula: "Any authority the Council will have consists in the weight which it carries with the churches by its own wisdom."

Nature and Purpose

In 1948 the member churches understood that the WCC was not a church above them, certainly not the church universal or incipient "world church". They understood the council to be an instrument

whereby the churches bear witness together in their common allegiance to Jesus Christ, search for that unity which Christ wills for his one and only church, and co-operate in matters which require common statements and actions. The assembly acknowledged Visser 't Hooft's description of the WCC: "an emergency solution, a stage on the road,... a fellowship which seeks to express that unity in Christ already given to us and to prepare the way for a much fuller and much deeper expression of that unity".

What was not clear in 1948 was what this spiritual nature of the fellowship implied for the member churches' understanding of the nature and limits of the WCC or of their own relation as churches to other members. In short, did membership of a church in the WCC have any consequences for the "self-understanding" or ecclesiological position of that church?

To clarify positions, the WCC central committee in 1950 adopted the Toronto statement on "The Church, the Churches, and the World Council of Churches". It was forged in "a debate of considerable intensity" (Visser 't Hooft), even though its contents "defined a starting point, and not the way or the goal" (Lesslie Newbigin). According to this statement, the WCC "is not and must never become a super-church". It does not negotiate union between churches. It "cannot and should not be based on any one particular conception of the church". Membership does not "imply that a church treats its own conception of the church as merely relative" or accepts a "specific doctrine concerning the nature of church unity". Nevertheless, the common witness of the members "must be based on the common recognition that Christ is the divine head of the body", which, "on the basis of the New Testament", is the one church of Christ. Membership of the church of Christ "is more inclusive" than the membership in one's own church body, but membership of the World Council "does not imply that each church must regard the other member churches as churches in the true and full sense of the word". Yet common WCC membership implies in practice that the churches "should recognize their solidarity with each other, render assistance to each other in case of need, and refrain from such actions as are incompatible with brotherly relationships".

Over the years since the Toronto statement was adopted, the issues it addresses have remained on the agenda of the WCC, with continued attention being given especially by its Faith and Order commission to "the nature of the unity we seek". WCC assemblies have made major statements about the unity of the church – for the first time in New Delhi in 1961, subsequently in Nairobi (1975) and Canberra (1991). But active efforts to amend or replace the Toronto statement itself have not been fruitful. Indeed, many Orthodox churches have cited the Toronto statement as a *sine qua non* of their membership of the World Council of Churches.

At the same time, an examination of how the functions and purposes of the WCC have evolved - as reflected both in statements and in fact – suggests that the strict "ecclesiological neutrality" of the WCC as advanced in those sections of the Toronto statement which say "what the WCC is not" is only part of the story.

For example, the statement in the constitution regarding the purpose of the WCC has developed from the 1948 formulation, "to carry out the work of the world movements for Faith and Order and Life and Work"; to the much more specific language of Nairobi (1975), which speaks of calling "the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship expressed in worship and in the common life of Christ, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe"; to the even more detailed formulation adopted by the Harare assembly (1998):



Plenary session on churches in solidarity with women at the WCC's seventh assembly in Canberra, Australia, in 1991.

“The primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches is to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe”. It would be difficult to see this change as fitting in easily with Toronto’s conclusion that “membership does not imply the acceptance of a specific doctrine concerning the nature of church unity”. It is of course another question whether this indicates that the churches now take for granted what they might not so readily have assumed in 1950 or that those who represent their churches at WCC assemblies have a different understanding of the church from that of their constituents back home.

It is perhaps not surprising that an “emergency solution” of 1950, crafted in the nervousness of an infant taking its first steps, would not do justice to the collective ecumenical and missionary experience of the churches in six continents after fifty years.

The extensive process of study and consultation “Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches” (CUV), launched in 1989 and culminating in the policy document under this title adopted by the Central Committee in 1997, treats the Toronto statement as “foundational for any common understanding of the WCC” (para. 1.12). It then goes on to note how reflection and discussion over succeeding years have deepened this understanding. At the same time, it observes that “for many people the understanding of the WCC as a living fellowship of churches has emerged more vividly through specific initiatives to engage the churches in reflecting and acting at the local level” (para. 1.15). In addition, the long chapter on “The Self-Understanding of the World Council of Churches” in the CUV statement picks up the idea of the World Council as an “ecclesiological challenge” to its member churches, noting that while different churches may understand the use of the word “fellowship” in the Council’s basis in different ways, the term does at least suggest “that the Council is more than a mere functional association of churches set up to organize activities in areas of common interest” (para. 3.2). The text also outlines some shared understandings of what it means for a church to be a member of the WCC (para. 3.7).

The Central Committee commended the CUV text to the WCC member churches “to encourage and help them to evaluate their own ecumenical commitments and practice” (Preface); and the eighth assembly acknowledged it as the “framework and point of reference” for the WCC’s work in the years ahead. These actions underscore that the issues about the identity of the WCC which were raised in Toronto remain alive in the churches - to the extent that they must continue to be a subject of discussion; indeed, says the CUV text: “it is of the essence of the churches’ fellowship within the ecumenical movement that they continue to wrestle with these differences in a spirit of mutual understanding, commitment and accountability” (Preface).