

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

Cautious Affirmation and New Direction: A First Assessment of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order

Introduction

ANY ASSESSMENT OF THE Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order at Santiago de Compostela in 1993 must be made in the light of the intended aim of a World Conference. Ever since the 1920s Faith and Order has been patiently nurturing an agenda in relation to its mandate to call the churches 'to the goal of visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ in order that the world may believe'.¹ At periodic intervals World Conferences have been called to give account to official delegates of the Churches of the work accomplished to that end, to note where difficulties remain and to chart new areas of study for the period ahead. The Fifth World Conference was in one sense at a disadvantage. The long thirty-year period since Montreal was a time of great change in terms of the broadening of the community reflecting, the shift from comparative to convergence methodology and the setting of the work of church unity within the broader perspective of the renewal of the human community. The thirty-year period since Montreal was immensely productive both in the plethora of bilateral talks and in the work of the Faith and Order Commission itself. It was impossible for a single World Conference to give adequate account of all of this. Certainly a period as long as thirty years ought not to be allowed to elapse before the next Conference.

The need to focus thirty years' work into a single Conference necessarily meant that some very significant work of that period went unrecognized. The series of texts on confessing the faith around the world could have shown that regionalization is not new to Faith and Order; more stress on the fruits of the Community of Women and Men in the Church Study would have given greater credibility to the notion of the Church as compelling sign of wholeness in the midst of the world's brokenness; and the work on the authority of Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church would have complemented what was put before the delegates in Santiago.

Nevertheless, there was a distinct advantage in 'harvesting' the three studies on the apostolic faith, on baptism, eucharist and ministry, and on church and world. Held together within a framework of the Church as communion the official delegates had before them a portraiture of the visible unity of the Church as a communion in faith, life (sacramental life) and witness. Thus, indirectly, a somewhat tired and flagging ecumenical movement was receiving an answer to the question – where are we going? We are going 'towards a communion in faith, life and witness'.

Cautious affirmation

Perhaps the most significant thing about the Conference was the firm, if cautious, affirmation given to this goal reflected in the Conference message: 'We say to the churches: there is no turning back from the goal of visible unity'.² Here the message was simply echoing what was said by many speakers. It was strongly expressed by Cardinal Edward Cassidy, who pledged the irrevocable commitment of the Roman Catholic Church to the search for visible unity.³ It was there in the official message of His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, the message from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the message from the Archbishop of Canterbury. There were, however, challenges to this overall affirmation. Bishop Joshua from the Church of North India, speaking from the experience of a united church, gave an unexpected and depressing picture of litigations and dissensions, a high price to pay for structural unity.⁴ Yet his insistence on the need for eucharistic communion and what he called the establishment of structures of mutual accountability left some people asking whether the difference is in fact so great. Another important reflection came from the impressive figure of the Reverend Ji Tai of the China Christian Council. She said that the discussions of Santiago were basically irrelevant to the post-denominational situation in her country. Faith and Order will need in the future to develop this conversation, particularly within its work on united and uniting churches.

It was, however, not a picture of visible unity as a tightly structured, monolithic, uniform unity that was affirmed in Santiago. Rather, it was a unity interpreted by the concept of *koinonia*. The Conference received the main insights of the doctrine of the Church as communion with its trinitarian basis, its clear christological centre and pneumatological dynamic. The advantage of understanding the Church as communion is that it sees the Church clearly in the context of the reality of God's design for the whole of creation and keeps the Church looking to God and to the creation and thereby centred on worship and on mission. As one commentator on Santiago has written:

Koinonia focuses more on our given oneness in Christ than on our existing separations, more on relationships among Christians than on institutional structures . . . it affirms diversity as constitutive of Christian unity . . . it defines the intersection of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of Christian life . . . and it is not a static concept but one that helps us conceive of unity as a deepening and expanding quality of life together.⁵

In spite of some warnings that the notion of *koinonia* is too all-embracing and has served its purpose, it is hard to contemplate the ecumenical movement relinquishing the goal of visible unity reinterpreted by *koinonia*. It is now too well established within individual church traditions and in the bilateral dialogues; and it is being more and more used in the programmes of other parts of the World Council of Churches, where significant insights into *koinonia* are

emerging from engaging in mission, in the search for JPIC (Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation), and in spirituality and renewal. Moreover, the notion of *koinonia* provides a promising context for re-examining some of the old, seemingly intractable, issues which remain on Faith and Order's agenda, such as apostolicity and succession and the ordination of women to the priesthood. Further, *koinonia* has the advantage of holding together what we know we have already been given in Christ and what we shall, by God's grace, become.

The ecumenical goal of Christians making common confession of the faith, united in baptism, eucharist and ministry, was not marginalized. The Section Reports affirm what has been achieved and clarified, and what still needs to be done. The Message urges honest facing of obstacles within the faith that unites us with no compromise or obscuring of problems. Addressing the obstacles is the 'specific task' of Faith and Order and the task remains essential to the ecumenical movement. There was no suggestion here that the era of theological dialogue is over or should be brought to an end and, in the very way the Conference began to approach some of the difficult issues, there was promise that new breakthroughs will come, for example on a baptismal ecclesiology, eucharistic presidency, the ordination of women, the ministry of oversight, apostolicity and the primatial office. The Conference did not suggest weariness with an outworn agenda but rather saw renewal in building on what has been done 'in the context of the notion and reality of *koinonia*'. In all of this the Conference was not merely taking note of what was placed before it but making significant creative contributions to what needs to be done in the immediate future.

This is seen clearly in the Section on becoming a communion in faith. The churches have not responded to the work of Faith and Order in this area with anything like the enthusiasm of response to BEM (the Lima Document on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry). The Standing Commission will need to take up the recommendation for Study Guide material, or perhaps consider how to encourage each region to provide relevant and earthed local materials. What was fresh was the way the question of the unity of faith and the necessary multiplicity of expressions was handled. The nine regional preparatory consultations, as well as the breadth of the community reflecting in Santiago, gave meaning to the words 'that God's revelation in Christ . . . requires that it find expression in a variety of linguistic, cultural and theological forms'. Such diversity is nothing other than blessing. But the Conference was also clear that 'some attempts to express the apostolic faith prove to be inconsistent with the truth of the Gospel'.⁶ Some of the most exciting pointers for the future lie in developing the work on apostolic faith by letting the debate go free in the different cultural contexts. By encouraging work on gospel and culture (in inter-unit co-operation) the picture of the unity that is God's gift and our calling will be enriched and we could learn from one another as context speaks to context about the truth of the gospel grounded in holy scripture and set forth in the Catholic creeds. It will need creative imagination to work this out in practice. But some clues are there in the new energy released in the regions in the

preparatory regional consultations. Here the warning of Elizabeth Templeton of the awful gulf between the concerns of the outside world and the Christian obsession with its own inner faith and life will need to be always in mind:

I think we have not yet articulated in a way which is convincing to the outside world why it matters two pence whether you believe in the *filioque*, or whether you think that churches need bishops, or can admit women to the apostolic succession of clerical priesthood. These fine points must be explained through the prism of everyday experience.⁷

Here is a challenge to Faith and Order. Any development of work on the apostolic faith must not simply be concerned with our common confession in inner-church jargon but of making that life-giving confession intelligible in the ordinariness and the messiness of everyday life.

The World Conference, through its Message and Section Reports, did affirm, if cautiously, the Faith and Order picture of visible unity as a communion in faith and sacramental life. It harvested work done on the elements of visible unity (faith, baptism, eucharist, ministry) and it gave significant indications for renewing this work with insights from different ecclesial traditions and cultural contexts. Much of this may find its proper place in a new study on ecclesiology, founded on the notion of *koinonia*. It is certainly fair to read Santiago as encouraging Faith and Order to continue the patient work it has been doing since 1927, while incorporating the new perspectives and emphases contributed by the World Conference itself.

New direction

‘There was nothing new at Santiago’: that was the judgement of at least one participant. That can hardly be supported. There was both newness in agenda set and newness in method required. Two new agenda items in particular stand out. The first is the call which came in a number of plenary presentations, in the Message and in each of the Section Reports for work on what is variously called ‘structures serving unity’,⁸ ‘structures of mutual accountability’,⁹ ‘structures for common decision-making’.¹⁰

It was not surprising that the Section looking at the multiple expressions of the one faith and struggling with ‘legitimate diversities’ and ‘illegitimate expressions’ should have felt the need to move to consider ‘structures serving unity’. The more we emphasize the inculturation of the gospel the more we are faced with the challenge to keep in unity what is confessed in the various contexts around the world and what has been confessed by the faithful through the ages. Structures are necessary to keep the churches mutually accountable in unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity.

In calling for this work the Conference was picking up on the response of many churches to the paragraph in the BEM text on the need for personal, collegial and communal structures at every level of the Church’s life. It was noticeable that many in the Conference found convincing the suggestions

thrown out by Metropolitan John of Pergamon: if we are to ascribe 'full catholicity to each local church and at the same time seek ways of safeguarding the oneness of the Church on the universal level', then we need 'the right understanding of two things: the synodal system and the ministry of primacy'. If it adopts a *communio* ecclesiology, the ecumenical movement cannot avoid these two issues.¹¹ These reflections led to a call for a clear and courageous examination of the vocation of the Roman See.

Faith and Order has material it can resurrect from the old comparative study *How does the Church teach authoritatively today?*¹² It also has the opportunity of learning from the experiences of those who already have found ways of mutual accountability in working for justice and peace and the integrity of creation. Ecumenical structures, local, regional and the World Council itself, will have a contribution from experience to make to this new agenda.

Any new study must seek not simply to describe structures but to explore the process by which the whole people of God, led by the Spirit, forms a common mind. Decisions have to be made at the appropriate level: subsidiarity is a crucial notion. So too is the concept of open reception, that lengthy process by which the community tests out together fresh insights. This is potentially an exciting agenda, though threatening as each church gets involved in scrutinizing and explaining its own bonds, its own structures of leadership, authority and decision-making, and its own use of power. It will call for renewal and reformation if we are to become Christians taking counsel together and witnessing together to a common faith and life.

This exploration would find a natural place within new work on ecclesiology for it would help to complete the portraiture of the visible unity we seek: a communion in faith, sacramental life and bonded communion. 'Unity today calls for structures of mutual accountability.'

A second clear call for a new agenda came again in many of the plenary presentations, in the Message and in Section Four as it reflected on visible unity as a communion in witness. As Section Four's Report says, 'We are called to be together in witness and the reverse is also true: common witness fosters *koinonia*'. The word 'fosters' was carefully chosen, avoiding the impression, sometimes given, that *koinonia* is somehow created by joint witness. The *koinonia* of which the Message speaks is gift given, created in the life and love of God. It was Archbishop Desmond Tutu who made it impossible to drive a wedge between the Faith and Order agenda and that of Christian life and work - 'apartheid is too strong for a divided Church'.

We have to get on together with the business of redeeming the world, in the sense of making it a more human environment with room for love, for compassion, for joy, laughter, peace, prosperity, sharing and caring. From our experience in South Africa in fighting apartheid there can be no question at all that a united Church is a far more effective agent for justice and peace against oppression and injustice.¹³

What was new in Faith and Order was the emphasis upon what was called 'moral community'. This was described as a defining mark of *koinonia* and

central to our understanding of ecclesiology. Hence it is very properly a Faith and Order concern for the future. The co-operative work done in preparation for the World Conference between Faith and Order and Unit III which issued in the publication *Costly unity* is a promising start, and it was given affirmation and new direction in Santiago.¹⁴ *Costly unity* now needs to be criticized both in the light of developing understanding of the notion of *koinonia* and also in the light of the questions raised by those working on the future of ecumenical social thought, some of whom met immediately before the World Conference.¹⁵

There is evidence that the bilateral dialogues also are extending their work in this field. The Second Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC II) wrote in its text *The Church as communion* that ‘one of the constitutive elements essential for visible unity of the Church is . . . acceptance of the same basic moral values, the sharing of the view of humanity created in the image of God’.¹⁶ That dialogue has recently published a major contribution in this area, *Life in Christ: morals, communion and the Church*. A life of unity entails developing common moral teaching and action. The moral task is to discern how fundamental and eternal values may be expressed in a world that is subject to continuous change. We shall not go far down this necessary avenue of exploration without being struck once more by the need for common structures of reflection and decision-making through which we can be helped to develop common moral teaching and practice. There could hardly be a more exciting and relevant agenda for Faith and Order to engage in, helped by the insights of other parts of the World Council and the wider ecumenical movement. Once and for all, I hope, the accusation that there is a dichotomy between the visible unity of the Church and the struggle for justice, between Faith and Order and JPIC, was ruled out of court. Such a dichotomy is in the strong words of the Moderator of the Central Committee, Archbishop Aram Keshishian, ‘an ecumenical heresy’.¹⁷ It is certainly not a part of Faith and Order’s own thinking. It was one lovely sentence of the paper of Metropolitan George Kodhr that pointed to the inextricable link between the agenda of what had been called ‘moral community’ and the classical sacramental marks of visible unity and eucharist.

We do not approach the world together in a joint planned effort. It is rather identity of being in the eucharist, which is a sign of our common faith, that forms in us the same face with identical features and enables us to present that same face to the world.¹⁸

Method reconsidered

Throughout the Conference there was much talk about the need for work on hermeneutics and for new methodology. There was some unclarity about precisely what was being talked about. Certainly it would include biblical hermeneutics, looking again at the work of Montreal and at the later work on the authority of Scriptures in the light of more recent scholarship.

The ‘buzz word’ of the Conference was ‘contextuality’. There was no doubt that the nine regional consultations turned the Fifth World Conference from

event to process, during which the need to listen to and exchange the perspectives of the different contexts became more and more loudly called for. It was the General Secretary, Dr Konrad Raiser, who said to the Conference that the real ecumenical action is less in church-to-church dialogues than in new forms of Christian solidarity emerging through local struggles for justice.¹⁹ There is no doubt that an emphasis on contextuality, or regionalization, is needed if we are to begin to understand something of the richness that blossoms in the soil of unity. The Latin American Consultation had already called for a deconstruction of the classical Faith and Order method, stressing the need to begin with the experience of Christians gathered together in base communities to read the Scriptures and to act in service together. This experience indeed renders profound truths about a life of unity. But what is the relation of these truths to those discovered through going back together to the Scripture and tradition? Our work must surely take account of continuity from the apostolic community until now by looking at history, events, experience and liturgy for that inner meaning, that 'nerve centre' that makes us apostolic. But, if it is not possible to form doctrine from perpetual newness, it is equally impossible to form doctrine today by simple restating old categories without explication in relation to that perpetual newness.²⁰ The matter is even more complex than the call to 'contextualization' sometimes appears to suggest, for within each context the various ecclesial traditions exist side by side and loyalties to context jostle in some with loyalties to ecclesial tradition. This is precisely why there can be no simplistic way of substituting what is called the contextual for the convergence-consensus method. It was in fact the younger theologians who in the end seemed to get it right.²¹ Their message put it succinctly and clearly. It was a message given in the context of gratitude that the grandmother was taking her grandchildren with her, inviting them to react to her eighty years of work. Their advice was to enter into a new dialogue between comparative, convergence-consensus and contextual theologies. Study, they said, how contextual theologies can be ecumenical theologies, how one contextual theology speaks to another. "Theological reflection within the one ecumenical movement finds its context both in the tradition of the faith of the Church and in the struggle of hungry people for daily bread." The younger theologians counselled that 'the differing methodological approaches are not opposing, mutually exclusive, options'.

It may have come as a surprise that the younger theologians laid emphasis on a return to a comparative methodology. But if Faith and Order is to take up work on structures of authority, or on moral community, each tradition will need to examine its own life and presuppositions before explaining them to others, learning to receive from others and then discovering a common view and a common ethic. This, together with an intentional effort to facilitate the contextualization or regionalization, will be an important challenge for Faith and Order. At the very least, the regional discussions leading up to Santiago must be mirrored in the process which takes place after Santiago. In this the enlisting of the support of Plenary and Standing Commission members will be crucial.

A missed opportunity?

The theme of *koinonia* led many speakers to affirm the degree of communion that we know (and knew in worship in Santiago) already exists between us. There were many generalized calls for churches to make that already existing communion more visible and not to allow ourselves to slip backwards. The Message speaks in general terms about the concrete challenges before the churches. But the challenges were not articulated with the sharpness of the earlier pithy Canberra Statement. I am not the only one to regret that there was no 'bold and urgent call for the churches "to receive" the work done by their official representatives over the 30 year period'.²² It was implicit. There may have been fear of simply repeating the message of the earlier Assembly. Nevertheless unless all the churches draw the consequences from this work and change their lives accordingly, the documents will collect dust on the library shelves. There was one challenge, the one with which Father Jean Tillard finished his concluding address, echoing what his All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch had written to the Conference:

Why not find inspiration from that prophetic act of bringing together the leaders of all religions to Assisi – why not consider a gathering of all the major leaders in the churches – perhaps in Jerusalem – simply to sing the creed together? That would be a wonderful expression of the degree of unity already present and of its origins . . .²³

However, the Conference 'did not shame our timidity and ecclesial self-centredness': that was certainly a major weakness.

Conclusion

Santiago expressed cautious affirmation of the goal of visible unity interpreted by *koinonia*, encouragement to continue the ecumenical understanding of the marks of unity delineated in Lausanne. There was hope that seemingly intractable problems may look different when revisited in the light of *koinonia*. At least two new agenda items enriched the portraiture: the bonds of conciliar belonging and the sign of moral community. There were new methods drawing in new participants from more traditions and more cultures. In its inclusion of women and younger theologians Faith and Order has shown it does not see itself as a preserve for a few western, traditional, male theologians. It will seek to enlarge the circle of reflection and interpretation and respond to the new insights and challenges which thus arise.

Santiago did, as one experienced commentator has said, prove that World Conferences can still be held, maintaining a focused agenda, in quite modest circumstances, given the dedication of staff, the generosity of the host community and the mutual commitment of the participants. This World Conference did succeed to some extent in bringing before the official delegates of the churches the fruits of thirty years' work. The Conference did evaluate and suggest new directions. In all of this the aim was fulfilled. And, as one veteran

from Montreal put it, 'The Fifth World Conference did not end in chaos'. But neither did it end in euphoria or self-congratulation. There were major faults in the design of the programme, not least the lack of time provided for plenary response. Additional papers were added at the last moment of planning in order to give balance between traditions, between men and women, and between cultures. Measures were taken to allow considered, prepared reflection on these rather than instant reactions. These measures rebounded, giving some feeling of tight control and stifled reaction. There was a lack of sensitivity to some who needed, and should have been afforded, greater recognition. There were mistaken judgements over placing Bible study within worship, the result perhaps of not knowing one another sufficiently well to understand in advance what hurt this would cause. And, once rules of debate were established for the smooth conduct of affairs, it became impossible as the Conference drew to its close to revise a text which all could sign.

In spite of all this there was in Santiago de Compostela a real foretaste of that communion about which we spoke, experienced most deeply as we worshipped together. There was a genuine delight, so it seemed, of being together and an intention to remain together in spite of differences. Without looking back at Santiago through rose-tinted spectacles it may not be too much to claim that the Fifth World Conference will come to be seen as having helped the ecumenical movement to continue in a more hopeful and focused direction. That is what at least one Baptist theologian suggests in this flight of his imagination:

I came away from Santiago with a wild irrelevant dream that one day the botofumeiro will in mid-stream break loose from its mounting, crash through the cathedral wall and soar triumphantly into orbit. An eschatological vision perhaps, but I do believe that, grace being stronger than gravity, this swing in the hopeful direction is even now more pronounced than in the other.²⁴

Mary Tanner

NOTES

¹ Faith and Order By-Laws.

² Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, Santiago de Compostela 1993, *Message, Section reports, Discussion paper, Faith and Order paper no 164* (WCC Publications, 1993).

³ 'The future of the Ecumenical Movement: address by His Eminence, Edward Idris Cardinal Cassidy, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity'.*

⁴ S. B. Joshua, 'Future of the Ecumenical Movement – from the perspective of a member of a United Church'.*

⁵ Michael Kinnamon, 'Report from the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order' (unpublished).

⁶ Cf n 2 above, para 16, p 17.

⁷ Elizabeth Templeton, 'Towards the realisation of common life'.*

⁸ Cf n 2 above, para 23, p 18.

⁹ Cf n 2 above, para 31, p 29.

¹⁰ Cf n 2 above, para 23, p 18.

¹¹ Metropolitan John of Pergamon, 'The Church as communion'.*

¹² *How does the Church teach authoritatively today?* Faith and Order Paper 91 (WCC, 1979).

¹³ The Most Reverend Desmond Tutu, 'Towards *koinonia* in faith, life and witness'.

¹⁴ *Costly unity* (WCC, 1993).

¹⁵ 'The future of ecumenical social thought', report of an informal discussion of Church leaders, theologians, social ethicists and laity (Berlin 1992).

¹⁶ *The Church as communion*, an Agreed Statement of the Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, ARCIC II (ACC, 1991).

¹⁷ Archbishop Aram Keshishian, 'Challenges facing Faith and Order'.*

¹⁸ Metropolitan George Khodr, '*Koinonia* in witness'.*

¹⁹ Konrad Raiser, 'The Future of the World Council of Churches and the role of Faith and Order within the Ecumenical Movement'.*

²⁰ Mary Tanner, 'The task of the Fifth World Conference in the perspective of the future'.*

²¹ 'The future of the Ecumenical Movement': Report of the younger theologians (and other participants in the Conference).*

²² Michael Kinnamon, 'Report from the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order' (unpublished).

²³ Jean Tillard, 'The future of Faith and Order'.*

²⁴ Keith Clements, 'Faith and Order pilgrims', *The Tablet*, 28 August 1993.

* These papers to be published in the full report of the Fifth World Conference.