

Conference of International Black Lutherans

Wittenberg, Germany

25-31 October 1999

A PERSPECTIVE ON ECUMENISM

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We stand at the threshold of a new century. I understand that this meeting takes this fact into consideration. As the new century dawns upon us with its fears and hopes, we are called in this meeting to assess our reactions and to visualize the meaning of the new. In dealing with the topic of ecumenism at this time of transition and change, I will first look to the past and highlight its salient features. Second, I will cast a brief look at Lutheran ecumenism. Third, I will deal with the challenge presented by what I call "the coming of the Third World". Fourthly, I will attempt to clarify the term "Ecumenism" for our use. Finally, I shall close with some concluding remarks.

I. It may be said that the modern Ecumenical Movement was a child of this century. (1) Its main aim may be said to have been to bring the various christian churches together and to engage them on the path to their unity.

The history of the Christian Church is replete with splinters into a variety of groups. Especially after the Reformation, one witnesses the formation of churches at a deafening speed. Churches were splintered and formed on the basis of clash of strong personalities, doctrinal disagreements, differences on

the interpretation of this or that text, etc. To many, these separations were^{justified} by what they understood as the search for Christian truth.

But at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, a new awareness of the need to bring the churches together, to enable them to explore their common root, and to help them consider their unity in Christ was born. In the course of time, this awareness took the form of movements that were spearheaded by churches and individuals who saw the need for the un[†]ity of the Christian Church.

We cannot go into the long history of the contributions made in the building of the Ecumenical Movement. One thing that can be said is that there were a variety of visions that characterized the movement. One cannot go into details here. It behooves us to mention only the most important of them. In this case, one speaks of streams that flowed into the Ecumenical Movement. Two of the main streams that profoundly shaped the movement were "Life and Work" and "Faith and Order". Originally, even though their paths criss-crossed sometimes, and that some of the church leaders were involved in both of the movements at some time or another, it ^ucould be said that the streams were rivals for most of their history. Even though church unity appeared in their separate agendas and shaped and guided their activities, they had different interpretations and conceptions of the paths to and the goal of unity.

After so many years of separate existence, though, they merged in 1948 to form the World Council of Churches (WCC). Even though they united to form one body, however, their initial concerns still cause waves in the Ecumenical Movement. They struggle to shape the movement in their own separate ways.

II. Lutheran ecumenism was a late comer on the world stage. There were of course towering Lutheran figures who were instrumental in shaping the early beginnings of the movement. But as churches, Lutherans concentrated mostly on the coming together of Lutheran churches. They were intent in the main on creating and maintaining Lutheran unity. In this regard, they looked askance at the efforts towards unity exercised by other churches. The enduring characteristic of Lutheran ecumenism was the emphasis on the purity of doctrine. Lutherans always emphasized that church unity can only be reached on the basis of a consensus on doctrine. There must be an agreement on the definition and understanding of the Gospel, before any rapprochement of the churches. Therefore, meticulous discussions on all aspects of doctrinal issues became a hallmark of Lutheran ecumenism. At its peak, there was a wide network of interconfessional dialogues with as many churches as possible. Committees were formed, meetings were organized, a special ecumenical office assigned, a unique institute founded, monies disbursed to accompany these doctrinal dialogues.

These dialogues were local, regional and international. The leading goal of these dialogues was to attain an agreement on the doctrinal issue at hand. Issues like justification by faith, baptism, eucharist and many others became objects of deep and intensive discussions. A wide array of experts were selected and assigned to participate in these discussions. Volumes were produced on the results of such dialogues.

(2) Printed copies of the results of such discussions were sent to churches for their reactions. The churches in their turn studied the results of the dialogues through their own committees of experts or their administrative organs *(and sent them back)* to the LWF ecumenical office in Geneva. LWF General Assemblies assessed the results of dialogues, the churches' reactions and gave further incentive to the dialogues.

In my opinion, this was a will-o-the-wisp. This can be said on the basis of three observations: first, the discussions were almost always based on the doctrinal concepts of the Reformation period. They were guided by the concern to dig and bring up the pure Luthern doctrines enunciated during this era. All the doctrines must go to Luther and his 'faithful' interpreters. Luther research thus got a very big boost. A backward look to the past thus dominated the discussions. Secondly, such discussions flourished at a time when doctrines had lost their validity. In the West especially, to churches and church goers - leave alone the vast majority of the population who were considered church members of the state churches by virtue of their birth in the nation - church doctrines had no

practical value at all. With rapid industrialization and other modern developments, people in general and church members in particular had lost all concern about church doctrines. At a time when even God was proclaimed dead, church doctrines became downright irrelevant. Conducted in such an atmosphere, the hot pursuit of doctrinal dialogues in the view of extracting pure doctrines became almost unreal. It ignored the real world of life, not only of their societies at large, but even of church life itself. Doctrinal dialogues became the arena exclusively reserved to expert theologians. Thirdly, however, there was an important element that cannot be ignored. Lutheran churches themselves did not reach a consensus on the doctrines they considered pure. The example of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) is a case in point. Both locally and internationally, this church and its followers abroad expressed its vocal differences in doctrine with the LWF. There were also cases in the dialogues where differences among Lutherans were much more pronounced and causes for strong polemics than between them and their partners. There are some examples of dialogues where some Lutheran members manifest their opposition by refraining openly from signing the dialogue documents. The point I am making here is that whatever problems faced by its ecumenical engagement, Lutheran ecumenism was by and large dominated by its exclusive concern for the achievement of consensus or agreement on doctrine. All other concerns were for all intents and purposes excluded.

III. What I refer to as "the coming of the Third World" shook the Ecumenical Movement to its roots. There were a number of factors that gave rise to this. In the first place, it was recognized in the sixties that the weight of the Christian population was shifting from the West to the Third World. Up to this time, the majority of the membership of the worldwide Christian Church lived in the West. Gradually, however, the western Church became a minority. The churches of Africa, Asia, and Latin America were growing at a very fast rate. Secondly, these churches formed part of a vast array of poor, oppressed and non-white population of the world. Thirdly, local theologies that attempted to interpret the Gospel from their own particular perspective mushroomed everywhere. Theologies of liberation sprung up in force. African, hispanic, Asian, Chicano, Black and other theologies erupted like volcanoes everywhere. One overarching characteristic of these theologies was to take their local experiences into consideration in their attempt to understand the Gospel. Questions about poverty/riches, development/underdevelopment, justice/oppression, became very special debating points in the understanding of the Gospel. There were very powerful voices that emerged in almost all corners of the world who articulated very eloquently their new understanding. In the ecumenical arena, the Jamaican Philip Potter who became the general secretary of the WCC epitomized the new voices in a most powerful way. As the voices became very vocal and powerful, however, not only the Ecumenical Movement but the West as a whole was disturbed and it felt threatened. The overall impact

of these new theologies was to pose as a challenge to the very way of understanding the Gospel and to question the western theological domination.

Western theologians, states and politicians were deeply threatened by the challenges coming out of the South. They saw that these theologies, if left unchecked and uncontrolled would have a very powerful impact not only on the churches but on their societies as well. They would help if not spearhead a movement for a new world order which would be favourable to the poor of the world. These theologies and their advocates were thus accused variously of heresy, subversion or communism. Many were hunted directly or indirectly. Many proponents of such theologies even died in their hundreds. Many others were persecuted. What begun as a promising reformation of the Christian Church was thus swallowed up into a vortex of polemics and opposition. (3)

“The coming of the Thrid World” did not leave Lutheranism untouched. It had a strong impact on it at least over a decade. The strong voices raised within Lutheranism shook it undeniably. They forced it to consider the situation of the real world, to take seriously the condition of the poor and the oppressed in it and to relate it to the Gospel. As a result of this impact, studies in theology were launched which deviated sharply from the standard Lutheran practice of doing theology. The studies of the “identity of the Church and its service to the whole human being” led by the then department of theology were an attempt at responding to the calls of doing theology in a new key. The whole discussion became extremely controversial and polemical. Finally, however, after a long

struggle, traditional Lutheran theologizing won the day. Third World concerns were shelved to other departments and theology was left to be conducted in its usual and traditional manner. Except for a few marginal voices that raise their voices here and there, now and then - a good example is the CIBL Harare conference - Lutheran ecumenical theology has by and large done away with the dissenting voices.

IV. After such a sweeping overview of the Ecumenical Movement, I would now like to turn to the main contribution of my lecture. I would like to attempt to present my personal view of what the Ecumenical Movement should be about. In doing so, I would like to start by going back to the original meaning of the word "ecumenical" (oikumene) which comes out of the word "oikos", house, home. The term has to do with the world: geographic, political, cultural and religious. It encompasses all facets of life that render life livable. It brings within its orbit all people and the entire earth with the goal of making them fit to live.

Let me mention in passing that that the term "ecumenical" has gradually come to refer to the activities of the churches with regard to their unity. (4) In the course of time, it became wholly absorbed in the reference to a specific form of church activity. In other words, it excluded the world. Even though there were some voices within it that called for reference to the world, like the "life and work" movement, ecumenism by and large was confined within the limits of the Church. In most cases, it ignored the rest of the world to concentrate on its

own internal affairs. If the world caught its attention once in a while, the Church dealt with it through its appropriate departments. Ecumenical theology, however, was exclusively Church confined. It was to remain untouched by the pains and cries of the disinherited world.

My conviction is that no ecumenism worth its name can be conducted without constant reference to the world. The Church and Christians cannot live without the world. The Church and its members are in the world. Consequently, they are impacted by the world. The Church has to have its eyes and ears open to the world.

To return to the word "ecumenical", "oikumene", the inhabited world (5) is based on the word "oikos". "Oikumene", the inhabited earth, has thus an intimate connection with the home. As Julio de Santa Ana has pointed out, "it derives from the Greek word oikos, which means, house, home, a place where one lives, a space of domestic life, where people find a basic wellbeing. Tied to the term "oikos", the word "oikia" refers to the place where family life takes place, the space where it is possible to build a community." (6)

For our purposes then, "ecumenical" has to do with the activity of creating the home, the world fit for habitation. Ecumenical activity consists in bringing about the world where one can experience fully the meaning of the home, community, proper administration of resources, in short, a place where justice rules.

In contrast to this vision of the "habitable world", the real world in which we live is an inhabitable one. All the factors that make it inhabitable are found in great abundance. For the majority of the world's population, the world is far from habitable. Poverty that enslaves families including their children, diseases that result from inadequate living conditions, malnutrition, unmanaged dirt, polluted environment, unhealthy working conditions, hunger, wars that devastate entire communities killing them by their hundreds even by their thousands; displacing them from their homes and rendering them refugees in strange lands; crimes that disturb the lives of the innocent, deliberate miscarriages of injustices that make homes unlivable and forcing people to migrate. Suffering imposed by powers that be is the lot of millions of people in our world today. In my opinion, this nature of the uninhabitable world should be the concern of ecumenism and ecumenists.

As we look at our Black world, witnesses of its stark inhabitability are in evidence everywhere. Civil wars, coup d'états, diseases, some of them incurable and communicable, affecting people in their millions, inhabitable ghettos were decent housing, education, prospects for a hope of a normal life are in short supply. The wholeness, support, sustainability and community that are indispensable building blocks and marks of the oikos are missing in large measures. Internecine wars, ethnic cleansing, genocides, intertribal conflicts characterize our world today.

V. As we look towards another century, what are the prospects? The view of so-called experts is bleak indeed concerning Africa. In his book *Preparing for the Twentieth Century*, Paul Kennedy assesses the prospects that lay ahead for the people of the world as they face the 21st century. We cannot go into detail with regard to his analysis. We only point out that from his perspective, Africa and the Black World with it, is a loser. It will become out of step with its time. While the rest of the world's population has hope, the prospects for Africa are bleak indeed. The general view is that Africa does not have the human resources and capacity to overcome its debilitating situation. (7)

We have to recognize the fact that there are many negative factors in our world that may force us to consider stepping in fear into the next century. The situations in which we live do not lend themselves to optimistic visions. In the light of the present, it is easier to make bleak predictions of the near future than to think positively about it.

It is with the possibility of such a vision in the background that I would like to consider the task of ecumenism and ecumenists. If the task of ecumenism consists in creating a home, a habitable world, a space conducive to human life, the task of ecumenists consists in becoming actors in the bringing about of this habitable world. There are a few elements that need to be considered in this role.

1. Be signs of hope. In this bleak vision, hope is in short supply, most of the time. Overweighed and overwhelmed by the situation in which they slowly

die, people are tempted, even forced, to give up their struggle to survive. Tomorrow seems to be a repetition of yesterday, and even worse, in some cases, without prospects of newness or change.

But even in the bleakest of situations, God and God's creation and people demonstrate amazing possibilities for re-creation and life. There are fantastic capacities for survival. It is the task of ecumenists, first of all, to dare be present in these events. By sharing in the situation and being present with the people, ecumenists can become signs of hope. Secondly, they can see through the bleak situation and affirm God's positive action. They can peak and lift up in the midst of ruins signs of life. That, just like the small sprouting root forces itself through the earth against all odds, God does re-create creation out of the ashes. Resources for re-creating aborted situations are there for those who have eyes to see. Living signs of hope are indispensable in the creation of a habitable world.

2. There is the need for compassionate action. In this regard, for the Church and its people, there are no more rewarding and at the same time more painful exercises than going back to their Founder. Jesus had compassion on the crowd, for they had nothing to eat (Mark 8:2). This wisdom of reading the human condition, making it one's own, and taking action to change it was Jesus' way. The life and teaching that were characterized by love were always open to the pains and cries of humankind. This compassionate action was about creating a new community that is formed and offers hope to its

environment. It witnessed to the fact that re-creation was possible in God's world.

3. We need to reach out ~~to~~ ^{for} others. Our world is marked by pluralism. There are plenty of ethnic and religious divisions. In some places, this pluralism can be a great asset. It can be a lively expression of the healthy variety of people's resources. Sadly enough, it can also be a source of endless enmity and destruction. Ecumenists have to be able to create bridges among differences, be they ethnic or religious. They have to be able to open up lines of communication and common action in the building together of a habitable world. This can be done both individually and communally, alone and in organized groups.

Facing the new is always taxing. It is the case especially when one has only tools of the past which did not work most of the time. We also observe that they did not fail totally. There were elements and signs of progress here and there. But since we have survived in a way that surprises us, God will also accompany us in a more amazing way into the new century. In the course of the creation of the new, we shall see that we are not alone, that God's presence will accompany us in the process of the creation and sustenance of an oikumene, a habitable world.

NOTES

1. A HISTORY OF THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT 1517-1948, vol. I, edited by Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill (Geneva: WCC, 1953)
2. GROWTH IN AGREEMENT, edited by Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer (Geneva: WCC, 1984)
3. For a fuller discussion, see Yacob Tesfai, LIBERATION AND ORTHODOXY, The Promise and Failures of Interconfessional Dialogues (NY: Orbis Books, 1996)
4. William Adolf Visser't Hooft, "The word 'ecumenical' - its history and use" In A HISTORY OF THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT, vol. 1, pp. 735-744.
5. Konrad Raiser, ECUMENISM IN TRANSITION, A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement? (Geneva: WCC, 1991), pp. 84ff.
6. Julio H. de Santa Ana, OECUMENISME ET LIBERATION (Paris: Les Editions de Cerf, 1993), pp. 9ff. my translation.
7. Paul Kennedy, PREPARING FOR THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY (London: Fontana Press, 1994), pp. 211ff.