

Introduction to the theme for the year 2010

During the past century reconciliation between Christians has taken on very different forms. Spiritual ecumenism has shown how important prayer is for Christian unity. Great energy has been put into theological research which has led to a large number of doctrinal accords. Practical cooperation between churches in the social field has given birth to fruitful initiatives. Alongside these major accomplishments, the question of mission has had a particular place. It is even generally held that the 1910 World Mission Conference in Edinburgh marked the beginnings of the modern ecumenical movement.

Mission and Unity

Not everyone naturally makes the link between missionary endeavour and the desire for Christian Unity. Yet surely the missionary commitment of the church must go hand in hand with its ecumenical commitment? Because of our baptism we are already one body and we are called to live in communion. God has made us brothers and sisters in Christ. Is not this the fundamental witness that we are called to?

Historically the fact that the question of Christian unity was often first raised by missionaries was for practical reasons. This was often simply so as to avoid unnecessary competition in the face of enormous human and material need. The territory to be evangelized was shared out and occasionally attempts were made to go further than having activities running in parallel to one another and to favour some common projects. Missionaries from different churches might for example combine their resources to undertake a new translation of the Bible and this cooperation in the service of the Word of God led to reflections on the divisions between Christians.

Without denying the rivalries that existed between missionaries sent by different churches, it should also be recognized that those who were first in the mission field were also the first to recognize the tragedy of Christian division. Europe had got used to divisions between churches but the scandal of disunity seemed dreadful to missionaries who were announcing the gospel to people who had known nothing of Christ until then. Of course the different church divisions which have marked Christian history did have theological reasons, but they were also marked by the context (historical, political, intellectual ...) which gave birth to them. Could it be justified to export these divisions to peoples who were discovering Christ?

In the midst their fresh beginnings the new local churches could hardly fail to notice the gap between the message of love which they wanted to live out and the actual separation between Christ's disciples. How can you make others understand the reconciliation offered in Jesus Christ if the baptised themselves ignore or fight one another? How could Christian groups who lived in mutual hostility preach one Lord, one faith and one baptism in a credible way?

There was, then no lack of ecumenical questions for the participants at the Edinburgh Conference of 1910.

The Edinburgh Mission Conference of 1910

The official delegates of Protestant mission societies from the different branches of Protestantism and Anglicanism, joined by an Orthodox guest, met during the summer of 1910 in the Scottish capital. The Conference which was not a decision-making gathering had no other aim than to help missionaries to forge a common spirit and coordinate their work.

Only those missionary societies working to announce the gospel in new places where Christ had not yet been made known were present. Thus those societies working in Latin America or the Middle East where the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox Churches had already been for a long time, were not invited.

In 1910 the Scottish ecclesial landscape was beginning to diversify and the Roman Catholic and Episcopal Churches once more enjoyed a more important role. Edinburgh was chosen as the place

for the meeting because of its intellectual and cultural vitality. The fame of its theologians and church leaders also encouraged this choice. Scottish Protestant churches were also particularly active in mission and had a reputation for paying attention to local cultures.

The Christian Churches in Scotland Today

To honour this important stage in the history of the ecumenical movement it was natural for the promoters of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity – The Faith and Order Commission and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity - to invite the Scottish churches to prepare the 2010 Week of Prayer at the same time as they were actively involved in preparing to celebrate the anniversary of the 1910 Conference on the theme “Witnessing to Christ today”. In response these churches suggested as the theme “You are witnesses of these things”. (Luke 24.48)

The Biblical Theme: You are Witnesses of These Things

In the ecumenical movement we have often meditated on Jesus' final discourse before his death. In this final testament the importance of the unity of Christ's disciples is emphasized: “That all may be one ... so that the world may believe.” (John 17.21)

This year the churches of Scotland have made the original choice of inviting us to listen to Christ's final discourse before his ascension, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.” (Luke 24.46-48). It is on these final words of Christ that we shall reflect each day.

During the 2010 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity we are invited to follow the whole of chapter 24 of Luke's gospel. Whether it be the terrified women at the tomb, the two discouraged disciples on the road to Emmaus or the eleven disciples overtaken by doubt and fear, all who together encounter the Risen Christ are sent on mission: “You are witness of these things”. This mission of the Church is given by Christ and cannot be appropriated by anyone. It is the community of those who have been reconciled with God and in God, and who can witness to the truth of the power of salvation in Jesus Christ.

We sense that Mary Magdalene, Peter or the two Emmaus disciples will not witness in the same way. Yet it will be the victory of Jesus over death that all will place at the heart of their witness. The personal encounter with the risen One has radically changed their lives and in its uniqueness for each one of them one thing becomes imperative: “You are witnesses of these things.” Their story will accentuate different things, sometimes dissent may arise between them about what faithfulness to Christ requires, and yet all will work to announce the Good News.

The Eight Days

During the 2010 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity we will reflect each day on chapter 24 of Luke's gospel stopping at the questions which it asks: Jesus' questions to his disciples; the questions the apostles ask of Christ.

Each of these questions allows us to highlight a particular way of witnessing to the Risen One.

Each of them invites us to think about our situation of church division and about how, concretely, we can remedy that. We are already witnesses and we need to become better witnesses. How?

by praising the One who gives us the gift of life and resurrection (Day 1);

by knowing how to share the story of our faith with others (Day 2);

by recognizing that God is at work in our lives (Day 3);

by giving thanks for the faith we have received (Day 4);

by confessing Christ's victory over all suffering (Day 5);

by seeking to always be more faithful to the Word of God (Day 6);

by growing in faith, hope and love (Day 7);

by offering hospitality and knowing how to receive it when it is offered to us (Day 8).

Global resources for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2010

Would our witness not be more faithful to the gospel of Christ in each of these eight aspects if we witnessed together?

Edinburgh 2010

The one hundredth anniversary of the Mission Conference which took place in the City a century earlier will be marked in June 2010 (www.edinburgh2010.org). The organisers want this meeting to be a time of thanksgiving for the progress in mission God has made possible. They have also given an important place to prayer, to offering to Christ the witness which churches will have to bear together during the 21st century.

This meeting should also allow those working in the mission field for a long time and representatives from more recent currents to share their perspectives. Members of different church traditions will also be able to discuss their mission practice.

The world has changed a lot since 1910 and once more mission must be thought about anew. Secularisation and de-Christianization, new means of communication, interconfessional relations, interreligious dialogue there are many issues to discuss. While everyone may agree on the need for Christ's disciples to witness to him, it is still difficult to arrive at a common understanding of what mission needs to be today. Within individual churches there is no lack of discussion. Would this discussion not benefit from being held by all of the churches together?

1910 ... 2010: Christians have at heart a similar sense of urgency: for our humanity wounded by division the gospel is not a luxury; the gospel cannot be proclaimed by discordant voices. In Christ, those filled with hatred can find the path of reconciliation. In Christ those whom everything divides can find the joy of living as brothers and sisters... You are witnesses of these things.

The preparation of the material for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2010

The initial work leading to the publication of this booklet was done by a Scottish ecumenical group brought together by Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS) at the invitation of the Catholic Bishops' conference. We particularly want to thank all of those who contributed:

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Major Alan Dixon (Salvation Army)

Rev. Carol Ford (Church of Scotland)

Rev. Willie McFadden (Roman Catholic Church)

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