

Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity: an Evangelical Perspective

Rose Dowsett

Introduction

As we approach the centenary of the 1910 missionary gathering here in Edinburgh, it is important that we do not fall into the trap of revisionist history. It was indeed an historic event, but it is easy to invest it with significance beyond the truth. As we focus on mission and unity, and reflect on the Eighth Commission on Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity, it is important that we neither overstate nor understate the role Edinburgh 1910 played. While it is undoubtedly true that Edinburgh 1910 gave impetus to what came to be called the Ecumenical Movement, and in due course facilitated the formation of the World Council of Churches almost forty years later, it is absolutely not true that Edinburgh 1910 marked the start of interdenominational unity in the cause and practice of world mission, nor does the Ecumenical Movement represent more than one strand in the story of C.20th world mission and church history. Nor is the WCC the only or indeed the truest inheritor of 1910's legacy. In fact, had there not been already well-established and substantial evangelical interdenominational cooperation in world mission, it is doubtful whether Edinburgh 1910 could have happened in the form it did; and had not evangelicals continued to run with the baton of evangelisation in the spirit of 1910 it is highly likely that many parts of the world where there is now a vibrant church would still be untouched by the gospel. It is against this background that this chapter will sketch the outlines of evangelical cooperation in mission and unity before 1910, make some comments on 1910 itself from an evangelical perspective, and then describe a little of the evangelical global story since 1910.

Evangelical Mission in the 19th Century

The Evangelical Movement was birthed in, and nourished by, a series of spiritual revivals, and each wave of revival led to a fresh wave of mission, either domestic or overseas. The context of world exploration on the one hand and the new technologies of the industrial revolution on the other, along with the political instabilities of North America and much of Europe – France, Germany, Italy - lent wings of urgency as well as of exciting and expanding possibility to evangelicals at the close of the C.18th and the beginning of the C.19th. If James Cook could sail the world for commerce and

the sheer thrill of exploration, and capture the popular imagination in the process, then William Carey could go to Bengal, and Henry Martyn could go to India and Persia, and five American students sheltering under a haystack during a thunderstorm could pray and covenant to win people for Christ wherever he might choose to take them.

It was a group of evangelical Anglicans who came to be known as the Clapham Sect, led by William Wilberforce, who not only turned their concern for the evangelisation of Africa and India into the founding of the Church Missionary Society but also worked with gospel men and women from different denominations to bring about the abolition of the infamous slave trade in 1807 and the establishment of the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1804. At a time when divisions between Churchmen (i.e. Anglicans) and Nonconformists were often very deep, here were evangelicals engaged in a common cause where spiritual unity bridged structural chasms. This in turn paved the way for the establishing of City Missions, for example the London City Mission which began in 1835, both evangelical and interdenominational. Similarly, the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) was founded in 1844 as a distinctly evangelical and interdenominational ministry.

The revival of 1858-59 impacted both North America and Europe. Around one million new members joined American churches, and another million joined British churches. Some of these people had been spiritually dormant but with some previous church connection; but records suggest that the overwhelming majority were completely unchurched prior to their conversion. From 1873 onwards, the mission campaigns of DL Moody led to many more coming to Christian faith, and this wave of evangelical mission also spread to Germany, Sweden and Russia. As a direct result of these two waves of revival – the 1858/9 period and then from 1873 onwards - a growing number of mission agencies were born, focused on many different geographical areas of the world, and a growing tide of men and women flowed into world mission. A high proportion of them were evangelical, and many of them joined agencies which were interdenominational and often soon international as well. Others again were instrumental in starting mission agencies contained within their particular denominations, but which theologically and in the practice of mission were hard at that time to distinguish from evangelical societies.

Meanwhile, in 1846, just three years after the traumatic Disruption of the Church of Scotland, the Evangelical Alliance was formed. The two events were not unrelated. Many of those who had left the Church of Scotland on conscientious grounds nonetheless did so with very heavy hearts, and they wished to demonstrate solidarity with those of other denominations with whom they felt spiritual oneness transcending structural divisions. At the same time, there were others in other parts of Britain and in America who also shared a longing to express their unity in the gospel even though their respective denominations might be firmly separate. At first it was hoped to establish an international alliance, and there was extensive agreement on a doctrinal basis and on principles of relationship; but there was deep and painful disagreement over whether or not to admit to membership American slave owners. Reluctantly it was agreed that it was only possible at that stage to establish national alliances rather than a worldwide one. Because evangelicals were to be found across a variety of denominations, some of which were theologically quite mixed, initially the evangelical alliances drew together only likeminded individuals, and denominations, congregations and agencies did not affiliate; today there are both personal and corporate membership categories. But while this is a very different pattern of unity from that of the later WCC, it both then and subsequently built strong bonds of cooperation and friendship, with honesty about differences but also facilitating much common cause.

The Case of the China Inland Mission

When James Hudson Taylor founded the China Inland Mission in 1865, he was of course greatly influenced by his own spiritual background and also by the patterns that were developing in Britain at that time. From its foundation, the CIM was interdenominational. Members could come from any Protestant church, provided that they could agree to the statement of faith in good conscience. Hudson Taylor was clear that there could be no unity in mission unless there was agreement on fundamental doctrine, even though there might be considerable diversity of conviction on secondary matters. There was no distinction between ordained and unordained, and both were welcome and equal in standing. What mattered was godly character, a clear sense of calling from God, a passion to see Chinese come to faith in Jesus Christ, and unity based on a shared commitment to the authority of Scripture. Missionaries were not employees but members of the mission, with mutual responsibility and

accountability and ownership, in ministry and in praying for the financial and other resources with which to fulfil it. Women, both married and single, were equally missionaries with the men, and could engage in pioneer evangelism on their own if so gifted. There was a strong emphasis on pioneer evangelism: when CIM started, there were huge areas of inland China where there was no Christian witness of any kind at all, and never had been. Converts were to be gathered into congregations, taught, and themselves trained in evangelism to reach and lead their own people. Since CIM people came from different backgrounds of church polity, church order must be treated as a secondary issue with willingness to fit in with whatever might have been established rather than insisting on replicating what was familiar from home. The mission was field-directed rather than having decisions made by Boards in the countries from which missionaries came, so that policy and practice was decided by those who had direct experience of the context.

These principles made it possible for CIM not only to be interdenominational but very soon international as well. Evangelicals from different countries and different denominations had more in common than they had distinctives to divide them. Further, as many other agencies also arrived in China, both denominational and interdenominational, and from a range of countries, Hudson Taylor was a prime mover in establishing regular consultations and conferences between them all. Reports from these inter-agency conferences appear regularly in *China's Millions*, the magazine of the CIM, and before such material was published annually in the China Handbook *China's Millions* (for example, in 1888) listed all British, European and North American missions working in China with details of personnel, areas of work, church statistics, etc. The CIM, like many other evangelical agencies of the period, was also profoundly holistic as well as passionately evangelistic; for example, Hudson Taylor was one of the group of missionary leaders who bombarded the British Government and the British press about the evils of the opium trade until the Government was finally shamed into action.

In 1875 the Keswick Convention began its annual meetings in the Lake District of north-west England, for the deepening of the spiritual life, and under the banner of 'All one in Christ Jesus'. For more than twenty years, Hudson Taylor was a regular visitor and speaker whenever he was in England, and by the mid 1880s consecration

for foreign missionary service was a strong part of Keswick's ministry. In 1889, Hudson Taylor was invited by DL Moody to attend a similar conference on the Canada-America border, as a result of which North Americans began to join CIM in ever-increasing numbers. Among those present was Robert Wilder, who with John Mott the previous year had founded the Student Volunteer Movement, which in its turn would be an important contributor to the vision for Edinburgh 1910. Reporting shortly afterwards on his trip at a CIM conference in Mildmay, London, Hudson Taylor said: "...one felt what a wealth of love and grace there is in the great Church – greater, perhaps, than one had ever conceived before – that, after all, all the wide world over, no matter whether in Africa, in India, in China, or in America, in Canada, in Scotland, or in England, all the Lord's children are children of one Father, all bound to one great central heart, and that they are indeed *one* in Christ Jesus. It is so glorious to realise that the Church is one. It is not uniformity that we want, but real manifested heart unity."¹ (

The Fatal Flaw of Edinburgh 1910

At the beginning of the C.19th, few Protestant denominational leaders were much interested in world mission, which is one important reason why so many mission initiatives began despite rather than because of denominational structures. By the end of the C.19th the picture had changed, and many denominational leaders were very interested in the Christianisation of the world – it fitted very comfortably with European imperialism - and most Protestant denominations had their own agencies, in some cases such as the Anglican Church multiple agencies with different geographical remits. Further, where earlier in the century the majority of missionaries were working in pioneer situations, by the end of the century there were established churches in many new countries, many of then linked by a very strong umbilical cord to a mother denomination somewhere in the West.

There were cultural, political, and philosophical reasons for this change, as well as more specifically religious ones. For America, once the Civil War was out of the way, growing wealth and confidence allied to the pioneer entrepreneurial spirit so marked in American culture, made conquering the world for religion as well as for commerce

¹ *China's Millions*, July 1889, p. 113.

a natural goal. For Europe, and most especially for Britain, the growing confidence in Western civilisation, in 'progress' along evolutionary lines, and the concomitant relentless development of high imperialism, similarly confirmed the assumption in church leaders that all the world must be brought under the umbrella of Christendom, and indeed could speedily be so. This was not necessarily a matter of evangelisation as that had been widely understood fifty years before, but much closer to the concepts that followed the Constantinian Settlement of the C.4th, albeit with the crucial difference of uneasy acceptance of Protestant denominational pluralism.

Allied to this were two developments in the Anglican Church. Because of the territorial expansion of the British Empire in particular, the Anglican Church in 1910 was of course regarded as a critical player. But in the second half of the 19th century, partly in reaction to Evangelicalism, the Anglican Church had changed in two significant ways. On the one hand, there was the High Church Anglo-Catholic wing, growing in dominance in the leadership of the Church, especially at the Episcopal level. On the other, there was the growing acceptance of the so-called Higher Criticism and theological liberalism. Both of these had critical relevance for world mission as it had largely been understood and practised in the 19th century. The liberals were anti-conversionist in general, and increasingly saw the role of mission as social improvement, education and westernisation. Many elements of historic Christianity, including anything that smacked of supernaturalism, were now repudiated as primitive and outgrown. The Anglo-Catholics were happy to endorse mission among 'the heathen', but fiercely opposed to it in traditional parts of Christendom, such as Latin America or Europe; their highly sacramentalist view of baptism (also linked to a highly sacramentalist view of the episcopacy), whether Roman Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant, meant that in countries where a high rate of infant baptism still prevailed conversionist mission was deeply offensive and must at all costs be condemned. Proselytism is understandably a very sensitive subject, and raises profound questions as to our beliefs about what makes a person truly a Christian.

Where earlier conferences had largely been dominated by field missionaries and the leaders of mission agencies and mission councils, gradually there was a shift to include denominational leaders, and then for them to take an increasingly influential

role. For the organisers of 1910, the most coveted prize in this British Empire dominated world was the leadership of the Anglican Church. And at this time the senior leadership of the Anglican Church was largely Anglo-Catholic or at least High Church, and therefore opposed to mission in territory regarded as Christianised. This included Europe, America (except among native Indians), and most controversially Latin America, with further arguments about some of the Middle East with long Orthodox histories.

It is difficult to know how much evangelical mission leaders were aware in advance of 1910 of the fierce controversy that took place, the implacable conditions laid down by the Anglo-Catholic leaders of the Church of England, and the concessions that were then made. Certainly some who attended were deeply troubled. Further several of the Commission Reports show considerable signs of strain, and in some cases of outright evangelical dissociation. What is beyond doubt is that while Edinburgh 1910 has come to be regarded as a milestone in the development of unity in mission, it in fact led to a far more significant parting of the ways in global mission. Further it reinforced the concept of Christendom in a way that has proved deeply damaging – see for example the huge losses from the churches of Europe since 1910. And it reinforced the equally damaging and unbiblical belief that mission was what the West did to the rest of the world, rather than mission being at the core of the DNA of the church wherever it may be; this almost certainly delayed the development of the mission movement from the global south by decades, and also for a long time hindered the churches from the global south from taking responsibility for the ongoing evangelisation of their own people groups.

The Recommendations of Commission 8

In summing up the extensive research and consultation that went into the making of the Report on Co-operation and Unity, a number of points were firmly asserted: that evangelisation was non-negotiable, and urgent; that attempts up to this point to develop only one united church in each mission field had so far proved unsuccessful, even among those who professed a wish to see it; that some advocated at least a single federation of churches in any given area, with full mutual recognition, including intercommunion, while retaining domestically distinctives of order, practice and doctrine; that others could not accept that such a federation could work without

violation of conscience, but they supported respectful consultation and prayer which might lead disparate bodies closer, and which would enhance recognition of spiritual unity even if structural unity were not possible; and that many of the problems of disunity on the mission field could not be resolved there until and unless they were resolved in the home countries.

But, the Commission recommended, there were certain steps that could be taken to strengthen mutual respect and understanding, and which might perhaps lead to greater visible unity in the future. First, everyone should observe comity agreements, whereby no denomination or agency would begin work in an area where another was already at work; if there were absolutely pressing reasons to break this undertaking, then the incoming mission must consult those already there, and work complementarily not in competition. Secondly, joint conferences had a key role to play in encouraging unity as people from different groups came to know each other personally and let go of some of their prejudices and stereotypes. Thirdly, missions should look for every possible way in which to undertake joint action, for example in the capital-costly areas of educational institutions, theological training and producing Christian literature. Fourth, all should pray and look out for those individuals especially gifted as ‘apostles of unity’, and also look at achieving unity primarily as a spiritual and moral issue rather than an organisational one. Fifthly, the home bases of missionary societies must learn to work together. It is worth noting in passing that many of the evangelical missions were already actively pursuing each of these five recommended actions, even though there was certainly scope for much further development.

Lastly, a Continuation Committee should be established to co-ordinate international co-operation, to ensure that there would be future gatherings such as Edinburgh 1910, and to work towards the formation of a permanent International Missionary Committee. We need to note carefully the ‘three principles which seem to form the necessary basis on which any constructive work on the part of an International Committee could be solidly built.

- (a) It should from the beginning be precluded from handling matters which are concerned with the doctrinal or ecclesiastical differences of the various denominations.

- (b) This being assured, it would be desirable that it should be as widely representative as possible.
- (c) Yet it should be a purely consultative and advisory association, exercising no authority but such as would accrue to it through the intrinsic value of the services that it may be able to render’.

This was later taken up as a formal proposal by Sir Andrew Fraser, father-in-law to JH Oldham, secretary to the conference. The proposal states “That a continuation committee of the World Missionary Conference be appointed, international and representative in character, to carry out, on the lines of the Conference itself, which are interdenominational and do not involve the idea of organic or ecclesiastical union, the following duties...”² The proposal was carried, and led to the formation of the continuation committee, then the International Missionary Council (delayed because of the First World War), which in turn was one of the three streams which led to the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948 whose early vision was certainly well beyond being a purely consultative and advisory association with no agenda of organic or ecclesiastical union.

The proposal was problematic for evangelicals. On the one hand, they had plenty of experience of working interdenominationally in mission both in the West and in the mission fields of Africa, Asia and Latin America. On the other hand, especially in the light of the growing power of liberalism within the mainline denominations, many evangelicals were acutely aware of the inadequacy of unity on pragmatic rather than doctrinal grounds. If there were no fundamental agreement on the nature of the gospel, the uniqueness of Christ and his atoning death, and on the authority of Scripture, there could not be any kind of unity that meant anything at all, even if there could of course be respect and courtesy. The desire for visible unity, as indeed the Lord himself had prayed, was strong, emotive and seductive. But if it were to be at the expense of clear agreement that people everywhere, including within Christendom, needed decisive conversion to Christ, then the price was too high.

² World Missionary Conference, 1910, *Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity*, Report of Commission VIII, Edinburgh & London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier; New York, Chicago and Toronto: Fleming H. Revell, 1910, pp. 202-04.

What Happened Next?

All movements are birthed in a context, and it is arguable that after two disastrous, wildly destructive world wars, and in the face of the spread of Communism, Europeans in general, not just the churches, were desperate to find some transcendental unity, and to support the establishing of organisations that would give mutual strength to resist enemies (especially Marxism with its global ambitions) and to promote peace. The United Nations was formally launched in October 1945 (it had informal antecedents) and in many respects the WCC's concerns mirrored it. It was this political chaos quite as much as more spiritual considerations that gave special impetus to the WCC to focus so much on unity. From an evangelical perspective, WCC's preoccupation with unity, and the pressure during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s for organic union between denominations, and its focus on political and social issues, meant that evangelism was marginalised. Remember, 1910's concern for unity was specifically in the context of world mission and evangelisation. On the other hand, evangelical reaction was so to focus on the urgency of evangelism that for a while it lost some of its historic holism, on which it had an impeccable record, and retreated to a rather pietistic form of faith.

John Mott had been right to see the strategic importance of discipling students and mobilising them for the cause of world mission. Following the First World War, the Student Volunteer Movement, whose energy had been so decisive in the decades previously, gradually fizzled out and the World Student Christian Federation that had grown out of it, supported by Mott's vision and enthusiasm, turned its back on its evangelical roots and embraced instead theological liberalism. In their (right) concern for post-war social reconstruction, and in the cultural mood of the day, they turned their backs on evangelisation as Mott had understood it, and many mocked as obscurantist those who continued to take the Bible seriously.

Many evangelicals struggled in this new and hostile climate. Some retreated into highly separatist fundamentalism, while others were just confused. A high proportion of the most able evangelicals for several generations had in fact gone overseas in mission, and there was an acute lack of evangelical leaders in the churches 'back home', and even fewer evangelical scholars able to challenge the liberal theologians on their own turf. The Evangelical Movement was at its lowest ebb since the days of

Wesley. Out of this difficult context, it was the young men of the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union who insisted that they could not merge with the Student Christian Movement because the SCM was not willing to put the atonement of Christ at the centre of its belief and actions. For them (and the resultant Christian Union movement) this was the very heart of gospel faithfulness. In other words, the grounds once again for evangelicals refusing structural unity were doctrinal. Without agreement here there could be no possibility of unity of purpose, practice and mission.

In successive decades, as the Evangelical Movement once again grew, these same issues of the centrality of the Cross of Christ, of the need therefore for personal conversion, and the place of Scripture as authority, repeatedly were decisive as to where there could be unity in mission. It was not that evangelicals were saying that nobody outside their own ranks could be a genuine Christian, nor were they saying that there were no circumstances in which they could join with others from other parts of the Christian family for particular reasons. Indeed many evangelicals have always chosen to be members of denominations that are not themselves exclusively evangelical, for example a local parish church, while others have chosen when moving location to transfer to another denomination in order to remain within an evangelical congregation. Since evangelicals do not believe the church to be co-terminous with the visible structure but rather with the community of all those born by the Spirit into the Body of Christ, ultimately known only to God, there is a God-sourced spiritual unity between believers that cannot be achieved by creating structures and organisations. This distinction between the visible and invisible church is of course not a new concept, but rather one adopted by Augustine and other Early Church Fathers as they observed the growing problems of disunity on the one hand and of nominalism and laxity on the other. Nonetheless, visible structures, be they of congregations or of mission agencies or of networks, are important as the physical expression of the spiritual communities – the invisible realities - into which we are called. And where those entities have a deeply shared commitment to fundamental gospel truths, alliances and federations naturally follow.

C.20th advance

Latourette, that amazingly prolific church historian, dubbed the C.19th ‘The Great Century’ in respect of Christian mission. In those terms, the C.20th would need to be called ‘The Even Greater Century’, for, especially in the second half of the century the church became global on a scale our forefathers could only dream about.

Evangelicals have played a very large part in the intentional spread of the Christian message in that period, with a strong record of pioneering among previously unevangelised people groups, so that where as recently as 1950 perhaps as many as 75% of those who called themselves Christians (of all streams) lived in the First World, i.e. Europe, North America etc, today probably 62% or more of the world’s Christians (all streams) are to be found in the global south: Asia, Africa and Latin America. In many cases, churches are now strongly established and themselves engaged in mission, where fifty years ago there were no known believers or only a tiny fledgling church. A high proportion of the churches of the global south, despite the historic dominance of Roman Catholicism in Latin America in particular, are evangelical, evangelical-charismatic, or Pentecostal. Further, to add to the complexity, many in the ancient churches in the global south are nonetheless evangelical in spirituality. In many cases, evangelicals are networked together through national and regional evangelical alliances, in turn affiliated to the World Evangelical Alliance (established in 1951) which at present represents some 420 million members, linking denominations, congregations, individuals and agencies, in a common vision and task. Through its conferences, Commissions and Task Forces, WEA fosters fellowship, understanding, and co-operation, and facilitates joint action by a significant portion of the global church on issues as diverse as caring for refugees, working for justice for the disempowered, and co-ordinated mission to the unevangelised.

Evangelical Student Movements and the Lausanne Movement

In our story, students have played a very significant role in world mission since the C.19th. The C.20th was no exception, and one of the great contributions of the Inter Varsity Fellowship (now the UCCF in Britain) and its sister movements was to inspire large numbers of young graduates into mission service. Many of them were involved in pioneer evangelism and church planting, while others helped establish secondary and tertiary education, medical services, and other professions, alongside intentional witness to the gospel. In 1947, representatives of ten national evangelical student

movements formed the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students; today there are affiliated movements in 150 countries, discipling about a third of a million students. Not only do these movements engage in local mission among the student population, but they have also produced many fine church and mission agency leaders, theologians, Bible translators, and Christian professionals to bear witness to Christ in their societies. Since their spiritual formation at a very crucial stage of their lives happens within an interdenominational setting, with a strong training element in relation to global mission, IFES people have had a strategic role in developing deep bonds of friendship and co-operation between different parts of the world church.

This was a significant contributory factor in the convening in 1974 of the Lausanne Congress and of its outcomes. Called initially by Billy Graham, supported by John Stott, a leading evangelical Anglican minister, to consider how evangelicals from around the world could work together for the evangelisation of the world, the Congress was to birth the ongoing Lausanne Movement. John Stott had close association with IFES, and as a result many of the representatives from the global south in particular were from that background, and it was their passionate input that probably marked the transition of the evangelical role in world mission from being a primarily First World endeavour to being a global teamwork of equals. The Lausanne Covenant remains to this day one of the most formative documents on the nature of mission to have been written in the whole of the century. While affirming familiar evangelical foundational doctrine, it also recaptured the holistic nature of biblical evangelism. This had been a strong feature of C.18th and C.19th Evangelicalism, but had been sometimes eclipsed between Edinburgh 1910 and Lausanne 1974. The Lausanne Movement has remained an important strand in fostering evangelical unity in mission to this day. There has also been some significant interface between evangelicals from Lausanne, WEA and IFES, and WCC aligned personnel, working together on projects such as the Gospel and Culture initiative, which has been mutually beneficial.

In turn, the co-operative movements of Lausanne and IFES and WEA have contributed greatly to the development of national and regional alliances of churches and agencies, and of mission movements such as the COMIBAM stretching across Latin America and helping churches and individuals from that continent take their

place as senders as well as receivers of mission. There are parallel continental and regional movements in Africa and Asia. Among them, the Indian Mission Association probably represents the largest national cross-cultural evangelical missionary force in the world numbering some 50,000. Today we truly see in the goodness of God a world church engaged in world mission. The Global South's missionary movements are overwhelmingly evangelical, charismatic and Pentecostal. This poses a special challenge to the ancient churches, whose life was shaped in the north, and in the long-ago past. From a southern perspective, the churches of the north are largely seen as lacking in spiritual life and fervour, in denial of the supernatural dimension of authentic Christian faith, captive to materialism and secular culture, and in dire need of re-evangelisation. Will we be purely defensive, or will we have the humility to listen and learn? Paternalism may be more alive and well among us than we would like to admit.

Some areas where Evangelicals need to repent

It would be naïve and dishonest to imply that evangelicals have always been united. Sadly, far from it. The very fact that structural unity is not our highest priority can of course make it easier rather than harder for new groups to begin, and some established ones to split. In our fallenness, even amongst the Lord's people (and this is true far beyond the boundaries of Evangelicalism) there is a temptation to seek power and control, to fall out with our fellow Christians, to insist on our own rightness and on doing things in our own distinctive way.

In particular, I am ashamed of what happened in 1989 and following, when the USSR broke down. There is no way to defend the mad rush of countless different denominations and agencies and local congregations to set up their own brand of work in Russia and in the former Communist bloc. It was ugly and divisive, and I accept that the Orthodox Church had persevered at great cost through the previous sixty years. At the very least, it deserved greater respect. At the same time, as a matter of accuracy, while many of those groups were evangelical, many were not, and certainly by no means were all of them from the north. And some of those who went to Russia and the other countries did go at the pleading of national Christians who were not themselves Orthodox, and who also had suffered. I believe that some of what happened in relation to Russia and the former Soviet territories highlights some areas

where evangelicals remain divided, specifically in the appropriate and biblical methodologies of mission and evangelism. This was in fact a matter of quite sharp divergence among some of those who attended the second Lausanne Congress in Manila in 1989.

It would also be naïve and dishonest to suggest that disunity is a western problem. In cultures influenced by Confucianism, loyalty to the top leader in a particular hierarchy is extremely important; and rival hierarchies, each with their own top leader, abound. Have you ever tried getting Korean leaders, mostly all Presbyterian, to co-operate, let alone unite? In cultures where tribal or ethnic identity has been paramount, churches too frequently reflect tribal and ethnic lines rather than the new reconciled humanity in Christ. And there may be very bad blood between those tribes.

In one Asian country where I lived, some 40 imported distinct Baptist denominations had been joined by a further forty home-grown, nationally-originated Baptist denominations. It's head-scratching stuff to imagine how one could be Baptist in 80 different ways – and some of them were definitely weird! I'm not defending it, simply illustrating that Asians and Africans and Latin Americans are quite as capable as Europeans or North Americans of being divisive. It is not accurate to say the plethora of denominations is all the fault of western missions. Nor is it simply a Protestant issue. There are some intriguing examples of break-away groups from the ancient churches, too.

Evangelicals have sometimes been unnecessarily confrontational in relations with those of other faiths, and where this is the case we must repent. We need to learn greater wisdom in listening, and in affirming those aspects of a culture which are commendable and reflect common grace. At the same time, evangelicals cannot endorse the belief (and practice) among many Ecumenists that all religions are equally valid, or that there is salvation by any other means than through the person and work of Jesus Christ. For this reason, however important it may be to work for justice and peace and care of the environment, ultimately authentic Christian mission must include explicit evangelism with the longing that men and women, boys and girls, should be converted to committed faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

What of the future?

Of the ultimate future we can be assured: that wonderful vision in Revelation 5 and 7 of uncountable throngs drawn from every tribe and tongue and nation, gathered in perfect harmony and unity to worship the Lamb of God.

In the meantime, what should we work and pray for? I personally do not believe we should deduce from the New Testament that the church is supposed to be one monolithic organisation, with every local congregation or community of Christian people under one structural umbrella. The unity of the New Testament churches had more to do with unity in apostolic doctrine, shared purpose and the one-ness of harmony as a result than it had to do with any central human organisation to which all must conform and submit. Despite the high hopes of some, even the Ecumenical Movement has not been the catalyst for more than a small handful of denominational unions, and I think the weight of church history is against many mergers in the future. In fact, new denominations are being created all the time, far faster than any mergers. Some mission agencies have merged – and others have been formed. Some have become most wonderfully international, others remain mono-cultural. Globalisation and migration bring Christian people from around the world to different places – and bring also amazing crowds of people from unevangelised backgrounds within reach of the gospel.

The ancient churches must come to terms with the collapse of Christendom, in Europe and beyond, and the impossibility of holding on to a pattern of territorial hegemony. Indeed, those very churches, in the face of massive migration of recent decades and especially of very recent years, have been happy to establish churches of their own outside their own territory, initially to serve their own diaspora, but then drawing in local people, too, from a very different background. In this way, the ancient churches are themselves adding to the complex mosaic of Christian pluralism all over the world.

In my view, structural unity – which remember was explicitly rejected by 1910 – is less likely today than at any point in the past hundred years. It challenges us all, whatever our tradition, to ask what kind of unity we are really seeking. Evangelicals are better placed than most streams of the church to live with the realities of

denominational pluralism, which is sure to be the pattern of the C.21st. We have, after all, a history of more than 200 hundred years of evangelical co-operation across denominations in the cause of mission, and have been content to respect considerable diversity of conviction and practice and culture in many areas of church and Christian life. But, wherever we stand, and whatever our convictions about the nature of unity, let us be sure that it is unity for mission, witness and world evangelisation (which was of course the context within which our Lord spoke of it in John 17), and that our understanding of that mission and evangelism flows from the teaching of Christ and of the biblical apostolic testimony. This without a doubt is the abiding message of Edinburgh 1910.

I do not know where we are in relation to the close of history, though surely nearer than we were. But this I know, that we live in privileged and wonderful days, where we see a global church and men and women and children of countless people groups bearing witness to Jesus Christ in their communities. The church is very diverse – and maybe the Lord who delighted to create tens of thousands of different kinds of butterflies is less troubled by diversity than we are. Let us celebrate that, and while we wait for the return of the King commit ourselves that the whole world, in each generation, might hear and see the gospel, and come to worship the one and only living God.